The Aesthetic Dimension of Care:
Arts and the Pandemic*

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Political and ethical dimensions are crucial to the sociomateriality of care. As Puig de la Bellacasa pointed out the "matter of care" confers a solid ethical attachment to the analysis of socio-technical assemblages. However, the new paradigm of care is not only pertinent to political and ethical dimensions, it also embodies an aesthetic dimension that has been insufficiently explored in the extant literature. An aesthetic of care underlines how care produces perceptions and emotions (good or bad) both to those who give, and those who receive care. Analysing an arts festival organised in Bergamo during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, this article shows the potential of an aesthetic of care to disentangle the complex intersections of the political, the ethical and the aesthetic in organised actions. In so doing, we propose to analyse caring as a practice, an open-ended flow of mutual affect that constantly stimulates bodies and senses, and moreover, that an aesthetic of care necessarily consists of sensory ethical practice that implies aesthesis and poiesis.

Keywords: care practices; care ethics; matter of care; bodies; sociomateriality; arts festival; Covid-19; aesthetic practices.

The Aesthetic Dimension of Care: Arts and the Pandemic

In recent years, social science has been increasingly attentive to the paradigm of care. Born as a discourse about ethics, it soon reverberated in Philosophy and Political Science, before arriving in Science and Technology Studies, Sociology, Management and Organisation Studies. Care, taken here as the sociomaterial practice of care, allows for the focus on situated negotiations about the practical dimension of ethics, as a matter of situated knowing (Gherardi & Rodeschini 2016). The political and ethical dimensions are crucial elements highlighted in the sociomateriality of care. Such a framework helps emphasise a key element of interest in the work and organisation debate, namely, taking charge of the care of someone or something. As Mol and colleagues put it, a focus on care is needed because: "There is not only a domain to salvage but also, and more importantly, a mode, a style, a way of working" (Mol et al. 2010, p. 7).

The innovation of introducing the paradigm of care to the social sciences does not, however, have to be limited to political and ethical dimensions. By drawing on specific artistic occurrences during the Covid-19 pandemic, we show how care can not only be mobilised to occupy aesthetic dimensions, but also the potential of an aesthetic of care to interpret the entanglement of political, ethical and aesthetic characteristics of organised actions. It is still easy to recall images and experiences of people singing or playing music from their balconies during the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic. Such instances were commonly understood as ways to make isolation less intense, or to show some solidarity with those around them who were suffering. We argue that these examples, as well as more specific artistic interventions in elderly facilities during the lockdown, demonstrate the aesthetic dimension of care.

In presenting the aesthetic dimension of care and its relevance, this article is organised thus: first, the concept of care ethics and its genealogy within social and political science is explored through the extant scholarship. We then show how care ethics has been utilised in the literature to focus on care practices. Following this we present and discuss the concept of aesthetic care, developing an argument that if care is an ongoing practice, then an aesthetic of care must be intrinsically attached to aesthetic practices. The remaining sections outline our methodology which consisted of lengthy unstructured interviews and participant observations with additional data from local and regional news sources. This leads neatly to an extensive description and analysis of the case which illustrates the aesthetic dimension of care. Finally, we suggest ways in which a focus on the aesthetic dimension of care can offer meaningful insights and greater nuance to employing the care paradigm in the study of work and organisations.

Care ethics

Reflections on the concept of care ethics emerged from feminist psychological and philosophical studies in the early 1980s. In a broad sense, the concept of care ethics refers to a relational ethical perspective about social and political problems, based on contextual understandings of persons and actions entangled in relationships and situated in their environment. According to Engster and Hamington (2015), there is no universally accepted definition of care ethics, but rather a general endorsement by several scholars that it can be distilled down into five principal themes: relational approaches to morality, responsiveness to the other, the capacity of reading its specific context, the feminist dictum "personal is political" and the impact of emotions as positive elements able to affect people and create empathetic connections.

Besides the individuation of these themes in the care ethics debate, Engster and Hamington (2015) also highlight its evolutionary trajectory. Since the 1980s, the debate about care ethics has evolved from personal perspectives to more social and political ones. In this respect, most scholars associate the birth of care ethics with Carol Gilligan (1982). For Gilligan, care ethics emerge from women's discourses, which tend to avoid abstract moral

principles and instead try to base their moral judgments on the context. In 1984 Noddings, pushed the boundaries further, consolidating care ethics as a new ethical theory. While Gilligan's work belongs mainly to moral psychology, Noddings (1984; 2002; 2010; 2012; 2013) elaborates a broader philosophical definition of care ethics by constructing a phenomenology of care. At the centre of this, Noddings (1984) stresses the caregiver's ability to respond in a reactive way to the stimuli of the person they are caring for. By the early 1990s, philosophical and psychological care ethics had transitioned to political theory (Engster & Hamington 2015), a period in which feminist scholars concentrated on theorising and defending the ethics of care (see Ruddick 1989; Held 1993; 2006; Tronto 1993), from accusations of personalisation and being grounded in essentialist characteristics.

Joan Tronto (1993) contributed enormously to expanding the ethics of care into political theory, explaining how care work has been politically devalued despite its fundamental role in society. Her work emphasises how privileged members of society retain their elite status precisely through the devaluation of care work. According to Tronto (1993), women, people of colour and people of low socioeconomic status disproportionally carry the burden of care jobs. Consequently, both their social position, and hence political power, diminishes when caring work is devalued. In *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993), Tronto describes the four phases that characterise care: (i) the recognition of assistance that "taking care" implies; (ii) the capacity of taking responsibility for a need; (iii) the practice of a direct act of taking care; and (iv) "welcoming care", as a response to the action of care and completion of the feedback cycle (Tronto 1993, pp. 105–108). Tronto draws a framework of care as a political ideal and offers some valuable indications for structuring the ethics of care as a tool for political analysis. The most critical and recognised definition of care she offers is that:

> […] everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Fisher and Tronto 1991, p. 40; Tronto 1993, p. 103)

In the early 2000s, care ethics permeated the fields of education, political psychology and social science more broadly (Engster & Hamington 2015). Marilyn Friedman and Angela Boltecare (2007) highlight how care ethics have contributed much to contemporary feminist thought, opening new reflections on issues like social welfare programs, disability policies, health care practices, and international relations. In all these fields, care ethics are characterised by relational ontology, whereby humans are considered as relational beings. As Barnes et al. (2015) point out:

> [w]e do not start out as autonomous individuals who have to seek to make relationship with the others. Rather, our survival from birth is dependent on the care we receive from the others. (p. 3)

In recent years, feminist scholars have continued to investigate the radical implications of an ethics of care and its understanding of human beings and the world (see Barnes et al. 2015; Hamington 2004; Kittay & Feder 2003; Pettersen 2008; Tronto 1998; 1999; 2013; 2020; Walker 2003; 2006). According to Engster and Hamington (2015), care ethics were turned into a coherent and robust political theory in the last 15 years. In particular, Noddings (2002), who in overcoming her earlier doubts about the opportunity of developing care ethics into a political theory, delineated a broad-ranging explanation of social policies deep-rooted in care ethics. After almost 30 years of gestation and development, "care ethics has emerged as an important alternative to politics-as-usual and just in time to help us reconsider some of the new and pressing issues confronting us in our diverse and globalised world" (Engster & Hamington 2015, p. 6).

Noticeably, care ethics has also impacted social studies of health and related fields. In particular, it has been received by Social Studies of Science and Technology (Science

Technology Studies), which focuses on the entanglement of science, technology and society. For example, in "Logic of care," Annemarie Mol (2008) compares the logic of choice with the logic of care in health provision. She explains how within the logic of choice, 'disease' is a strange exception as good health is always taken for granted. By contrast, the logic of care, which everyone may need in their life, is based on the corporeality and fragility of life. Using an example of an advertisement for a blood sugar monitor that labours on the metaphor of care as commercial transition, Mol argues that care is neither product nor trade between customers, but an ongoing process in which professionals and patients jointly interact and act again.

Drawing on Mol, Gherardi and Rodeschini (2016) care is a situated knowing that a group of professionals enact while attending to their everyday tasks. Analysing a case of artificial nutrition in an Italian nursing home, they suggest a practice-based approach that interprets care as a matter of concern for those producing care and society at large. In this way, they frame care as an emergent process participated in by humans (more or less able-bodied), tools, technologies, rules, and "non-humans" and "more than humans" connected within sociomaterial relationships.

The potential controversy that care ethics arises is considered in what Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2011) framed as a "matter of care" in Science Technology Studies.

Echoing the concept of "matter of concern" highlighted by Bruno Latour in analysing socio-technical assemblages, de la Bellacasa adds an even stronger ethical claim, replacing it with the matter of care. From this perspective, analysing a socio-technical assemblage using the concept of care demands showing labours of the everyday maintenance of life and concentrating on neglected things. De la Bellacasa suggests a "possibility of translating ethico-political caring into our ways of thinking and representing things" (2011, p. 86).

Care aesthetics

In an article entitled 'Towards an Aesthetics of Care', James Thompson (2015) considers the concept of care in the context of the arts. Drawing on his experience of caring for a colleague injured in a massacre in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Thompson speculates an aesthetic of care that could provide a productive orientation for community-based performance work. Following the ethics of feminist care, Thompson argues that the relationships that emerge in many art projects can represent forms of emotional solidarity that offer antidotes for a neglectful society. In rejecting the individualistic and atomistic ontology of liberalism, Thompson sees autonomy as illusory, a concept that feeds the myth of society as one of free, equal and independent individuals. In this respect an ethics of care is not opposed to ethics of justice, but rather blurs the boundaries between the private and public spheres and argues for the values of trust, solidarity and empathy. The ethics of care for Thompson, invites the search for justice within a practice that develops a more just world within human relationships.

The translation of an ethical perspective of care into an aesthetic one, derives from the exploration of how the sensory and the affective are realised in human relationships, and how they can be fostered in art projects. Thompson states: "An 'aesthetics of care' is then about a set of values realised in a relational process that emphasise engagements between individuals or groups over time" (Thompson 2015, p. 437). Discussing how the aesthetics of care can be part of artistic and theatre projects, he underlines the notion that there is no distinction between process and outcome in this perspective, because both can arouse emotional solidarity between people. An aesthetics of care is a sensory ethical practice that demands attention and listening to others in every moment of the relationship. In fact, in applying these concepts to the performance, Thompson speaks of the aesthetics of care in the preparation, execution and the exhibition of the artistic act.

In a more recent contribution Thompson (2020) argues that two statements can define a model of aesthetics of care. The first harnesses the claim that reciprocal acts of caring have a sensory, manufactured quality, that could be called aesthetics. The second, asserts that artistic processes can be caring or uncaring, depending on their capacity to produce or strengthen social relations between groups and communities. Expanding the concept of interdependency fostered by Eva Kittay (2015) and Judith Butler's (2015) accounts, Thompson claims the necessity of recognising our dependency on others and admits the inequalities it produces. Outlining three aesthetics of care in community-based or applied theatre practices, Thompson looks at moments of care aesthetics in practices where the arts can promote and create "inter-human relations with deeply embedded mutual care" (Thompson 2020, p. 2019).

Drawing on theatre literature, Thompson's reflections and insights resonate with organisational aesthetics in two ways. First, it can be linked to the phenomenological, sociological and philosophical traditions that underline the centrality of the body and affect on social practices (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 1964, 1968), work and organisation (Strati 1999), and second, care aesthetics cannot be disentangled from aesthetic practices. In this way, Thompson's reflection echoes with recent debates in the New Sociology of Art and aesthetics practices derived from Actor-Network Theory (Callon 1984; Callon & Latour 1981, Latour 2007; Mattozzi & Parolin 2021; Author & Author 2021).

We claim that these conceptual roots can, and should, enrich the reflection on the aesthetics of care to expand on Thompson's proposal to develop a more nuanced theoretical framework for studying work and organisation.

Caring as a way to focus on bodies

Thompson's conceptualisation of care aesthetics stresses the role of bodies, senses, and other feelings. In discussion about the role of corporeality in work and organisation, scholars commonly refer to the phenomenological tradition (Strati, 1999; Yakhlef, 2010), and in particular to the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964, 1968). The latter asserts that being and having a body is the *sine qua non* condition of the human experience. Indeed, because we experience and learn about the world only through our bodies, our corporeal dimensions are inevitably the mutual and shared characteristics that enable human beings to partake in the knowledge of experiencing.

To illustrate this more clearly, the tradition of practice theory has extensively focused on the body's dimension as a source for sensorial mediations and sensitive knowledge (see Gherardi 2009; 2019; Yakhlef 2010; Nicolini 2012; Parolin & Mattozzi 2013; Schatzki 1996; Schatzki et al. 2001; Strati 2007). The body is thus a key lens at the centre of practice research, describing and analysing how the senses are relevant in perceiving the practice and the world on which it is inscribed. As Parolin and Mattozzi state: "feeling, seeing and perceiving are themselves ways to act in the world, and, at the same time, inscriptions of the world on the body" (Parolin & Mattozzi 2013, p. 293).

The debate on sensitive and embodied knowledge has been similarly central to the field of organisational aesthetics (Gagliardi 2006; Strati 2010; 2019; Taylor & Hansen 2005) as a discourse on how people and workers rely on their senses in working practice. For example, Antonio Strati (2007) describes knowledge as perceived, judged, produced, and reproduced with and through the senses. According to Strati, sensible knowledge occurs in the visual, olfactory, auditory, gustatory, and tactile areas in contact with emotions. Encounters with the world through the senses produce a kind of knowledge that is not easy to express in words given that sensible and tacit knowledge is grounded in experiences with sensorial faculties. For Polanyi (1958), each body incarnates this type of knowledge, which is pre-reflective, and thus precedes language and reflections on the experience. In this sense, human beings embody knowledge-producing processes activated through their relationship with the world.

In its sensorial, affective, and aesthetic dimensions, care produces perceptions and emotions (good or bad) in those who receive care and those who give care. This means caring demands to be considered as an open-ended flow of mutual affect that constantly stimulates the body and the senses. Therefore, if Thompson's indication to focus on the role of senses in 'aesthetics of care' as a set of values realised in a relational process is to be taken seriously, ways must be found to describe them. In this respect, we claim that existing phenomenological traditions and authors working with Practice Studies, offer a vocabulary for describing the nuances of these relationships. Furthermore, in connecting Thompson's idea with these traditions, we suggest that an 'aesthetics of care' not only produces an activation of senses and affects, but also elicits shared "tacit knowledge" that helps to reorient toward the "intimate way they connect people with each other in mutually supportive communities" (Thompson 2020, p. 229).

Caring as aesthetic practice

With regard to the second point of contact with Thompson's proposal, we note that as care is an ongoing practice, an aesthetics of care must be deeply connected with aesthetic practices. It is worth clarifying that we consider the connection between practice and aesthetics as a field of research concerned with the sensorial dimension. Indeed, we will use the word aesthetic only in its adjectival meaning. Following Mattozzi and Parolin's (2021) theorisation about 'aesthetic practices,' we do not focus on 'aesthetics,' as a philosophical reflection on art, but as a simple helpful adjective to describe a specific kind of practice.

As Thompson (2015) underlines, we can consider aesthetics both in the dimension of the production of something with the senses, and as participating in something with the senses. To better analyse the connection between perceiving and producing aesthesis, we propose using Mattozzi and Parolin's (2021) theorisation about 'aesthetic practices' developed from Actor-Network Theory. They use 'aesthetic practices' in reference to a wider range of practices and activities characterised by two different, albeit strongly related, processes: *aesthesis* and *poiesis*. *Aesthesis*, derives from the Greek word *αἴσθησις* (perception), expresses feeling or perception from the senses, feeling, hearing, and seeing. *Poiesis*, derived from the Ancient Greek *ποίησις* (make, invent, compose, create), is considered as something greater than making, encompassing that which produces aesthesis during and after the process of making. Mattozzi and Parolin embrace a pragmatic approach to aesthetic practices in line with Science Technology Studies and the work of Annamarie Mol (2008). Therefore, we frame our proposal of an aesthetics of care as a sensory ethical practice (Thompson 2020) that implies *aesthesis* and *poiesis* (Mattozzi & Parolin 2021).

In this way, the mutual capacity of bodies inscribed in the aesthetic of care as the practice of eliciting senses and affects both in producing and attending to something, is equally valid when we speak about non-human bodies.

According to the New Sociology of Art (De La Fuente 2007; DeNora 2000; 2003; Hennion 1997; 2015; 2019), non-humans also have agency with respect of raising senses and affect. According to Hennion (2015), the artistic object is not a passive product, but an entity that acts in the world through its material properties. For example, in drawing on Latour's framework, De Nora (2003) shows how music is co-produced by the material (such as musical instruments) and the social, and has the potential to act in the world. Thus, using an aesthetics of care with Actor Network Theory and New Sociology of Art sensitivity, we can trace open-ended flows of joint affect that derive from humans and non-humans (*see* also Mattozzi & Parolin 2021). Indeed, non and more-than-humans participate in caring, eliciting aesthetic perceptions, feelings, and emotions. This is not hard to parse. Staying in a well-kept, good looking and clean hospital, for example, is manifestly different from being in an uncared for, dirty and sad one. Therefore, producing something that provokes sensations and feelings in people, like preparing a good meal, cleaning a room, and creating a nice picture, is of itself an aesthetic act of care. The case of Superbergamo, provides an

illustrative case to flesh out the broader arguments around an aesthetic of care that we are making.

The case and the methods

The case is based on extensive research undertaken between March 2020 and June 2021 when 'Superbergamo,' a collection of artists and activists responded to the crisis of the Covid-19 Pandemic with performances of care. This initially took the form of immediate relief for the elderly in the form of delivered groceries, drugs and oxygen, but led to the organisation of a performing arts festival and a summer camp for children (Pellegrinelli & Parolin 2021; Parolin & Pellegrinelli, 2022). For the purposes of this article, we are attentive only to the research material that relates to the arts festival (called Gap, Popular Art Groups) organised by Superbergamo, which included performances in the elderly facilities.

Our research methods include the analysis of a participative observation undertaken by one of the authors, who was involved in the festival's management team as a theatre professional. We also employ unstructured interviews, and a collated selection of articles from the national and regional media, social media, and public and private materials produced by the volunteers and professionals who collaborated with the festival. In addition to this, we also collected minutes of meetings, emails and group chats used by the group to coordinate the activities of Superbergamo and the Gap festival.

The complete fieldwork on the Superbergamo project included 70 long interviews with the promoters, volunteers who joined Superbergamo, volunteers from several associations who participated, members of institutions and non-profit organisations who collaborated, artists and technicians involved in the festival, health care professionals and other professionals who became involved. The material has been analysed using content analysis, and the main findings were presented in a book (Pellegrinelli & Parolin 2021).[1] Here, we are attentive to the ethnographic diary of the author involved in the organisation of the festival, 10 interviews undertaken with artists, sound technicians and festival organisers, and 5 with caregivers in the elderly facilities. For illustrative purposes we also use some of the materials collected from the media. In particular, we focus on a story surrounding a letter published by a woman known only as 'ML' to a newspaper director, a journal article and the interview we carried out with her daughter. Prior to considering these aspects, however, we place the Gap art festival within the wider context of Superbergamo.

Superbergamo and the Gap festival

During the peak of the pandemic (March to June 2020), a group of people in Bergamo's local cultural and social associations coalesced around a project to provide food and medicine to people in need. Superbergamo [Supporto Unitario Popolare e Resiliente – Unified Popular and Resilient Support], named in reference to the idea of superheroes who provide help in times of need, quickly became a crucial player in responding to the community's needs (Parolin & Pellegrinelli, 2022). The group constituted over 280 volunteers creating an extensive solidarity network that collaborated with the Municipality and NGOs to deliver relief to the population.

Superbergamo was significant because Bergamo was the epicentre of the Covid-19 outbreak in the Lombardy region. With at least 6.000 Covid-19 related deaths in 2 months, it remains one of the worst affected cities throughout Italy (Senni 2020) and the world (Bernucci et al. 2020). *The Guardian* described the experience of Bergamo as being in a "lazaretto of pain," where hospital staff faced the horror of selecting which patients to treat based on their chances of overcoming the infection. In addition, the city's cemeteries were so full that they

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[1] Another article in preparation, is dedicated to discussing the whole case of Superbergamo as sociomaterial practices of care.

had to ask neighbouring provinces to take their corpses for burial (*The Guardian*, 6th April 2020).

The role played by Superbergamo in reacting to this unprecedented horror has been documented elsewhere (Pellegrinelli & Parolin 2021; Parolin & Pellegrinelli, 2022). Suffice to say, the group were critical to the delivery of essential groceries and medicines to the elderly and provided cylinder oxygen, oximeters and located relatives in emergency quarantine facilities. In addition to this, films and other artistic endeavours were used to raise money to support the needy. For the purposes of this article, however, we are concerned here with the festival (Gap).

The Gap (Popular Artistic Groups) was an interactive and mobile arts festival explicitly designed to be performed under the severe pandemic restriction.[2] The strategy consisted of blending traditional Italian street theatre techniques with contemporary multimedia technologies. During the lockdown, the festival animated streets, squares, and neighbourhoods; transforming them from places of boredom and desperation into spaces of public performance and community. People could participate from their windows and balconies while respecting social distancing rules. The festival brought performances to several districts of the city, the province and crucially, broadcast online. The streaming was conceived so that activities were accessible via a simple digital tool with an interactive map, where people could see where and when a performance was taking place, and 'to book' a performance for their street or square.

The festival ran from June to the end of October 2020 and offered 192 live performances within the municipality of Bergamo and the wider province. The population of Bergamo, the province and its institutions played a central role in the festival. Indeed, the economic sustainability of the festival was based on direct donations from citizens, generous support from a local bank foundation (obtained through an application), and the sponsorship of the public administration of the Province of Bergamo.

When the strict restrictions were lifted (4 May 2020), and it became possible to attend shows in person, the organising group decided to widen the Gap festival, bringing performances to elderly facilities, refugee centres, and social houses. Starting from August 2020, several performances took place in these locations where the isolation and consequences of Covid-19 had hit the hardest.

The ML story

On 14 September 2020, Michele, one of the volunteers who organised the Gap festival, read an article in the local newspaper where a resident in a Bergamo elderly facility denounced the isolation she and the other guests were forced to endure during the pandemic. The article is in the form of a letter, addressed to the newspaper director from a woman who signed herself with the name of ML, which revealed neither her name nor the facility. ML wrote:

> Dear director [...] Maybe you don't know, but since early March of this year [2020], we are segregated at home [in the elderly facility], and we cannot see our loved ones except for a quarter of an hour a week, and this [opportunity] has only been in the last two months. We can no longer go out, so if there is any family anniversary, we can no longer celebrate [...] We can't take it anymore. I have a lot of physical problems, I thought at least my head was all right, but now it seems that I am losing that too. I can no longer speak as before; I am never happy; I am always sad. These are the last years of

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[2] It is worth noting the severity of the lockdown in Italy which prohibited people from leaving their homes without good reason.

our life; why can't we find a way to stay with our children with a little more freedom? […] Why can't we play a game of bingo? I see my companions who are in wheelchairs and cannot move. They haven't seen a piece of the garden since March. They are closed in the ward and stay there. […] Let us remember that we cried when we saw the military tanks carrying the dead away, and we wept because they had not been able to greet their children; the children had not been able to greet mothers and fathers. The same thing is being done with us; we slowly die in solitude. This is not easy. [ML letter published on the 14 September 2020 in the *Eco di Bergamo* newspaper].

The Gap organising group saw the letter as an explicit request for help, and confirmation of the increasing salience of the Gap festival's activities. With the help of a local banking foundation, the group had already organised several performances in many elderly facilities. Therefore, it ought to have been a relatively simple challenge to manage a new intervention for ML and her companions. Unfortunately, data protection regulations prevented the newspaper from releasing information about the author of the letter. Only by virtue of a personal chain of acquaintances, were Gap's organisers able to find Elsa (pseudonym), ML's daughter, and finally, ML herself.

Elsa was thrilled by the idea of bringing a performance to her mother's elderly facility, where everything was provided for their survival (such as food, primary care), but the guests were left to themselves. Nothing was organised to stimulate them, nor did they have any other company due to the severity of the restrictions. On almost every way, the residents were suffering from relational deprivation. As she stated in the following excerpt, there was a need to intervene in a situation that was, in her opinion, affecting the well-being of those in the facility.

> My mother is more clear-headed than me. She has always been involved in the social field; she was the school board's director; she was the president of her 'after work'. At a certain point, she found herself locked in the room without physically going out. She hadn't been out for months; the only people she saw were the health care workers who wore coveralls and were unrecognisable. The psychologist was no longer there to listen to people. The loudspeaker works only to make the catholic prayers heard. So, my mother was there, without any information on the progress of the situation in her elderly facility, without knowing who was leaving. I remember that a lady, the mother of an acquaintance of mine, usually very clever, said she saw families of ants on the wall and talked to them. So, after months of isolation, my mother decided to react. She writes about her situation and makes people understand what is happening. (Interview with ML's daughter Elsa)

The deprivation they felt was caused not only by the absence of recognisable and familiar people, but also an information deficit about what was happening to them and what was going on around them during the long period of isolation. Similar to many other institutions in Bergamo at that time, the situation was rationalised by the facility management as the consequence of the pandemic. There were similar relational deprivations in the facilities across the city. A director of another facility in the province of Bergamo that participated in the Gap festival wrote:

> We have chosen to host a Gap performance to give our guests back a bit of normality. We are still closed to external entrances. The relatives are not allowed visits to the room or without notice. The relatives must make an appointment only one day a week, with only one relative for each guest. And in any case, even with relatives, guests cannot touch, hug, kiss. This is perhaps the most critical lack they feel: physical contact. [...] (Interview with an elderly care facility director)

The Gap management team proposed two performances in ML's elderly facility. On the 7th October, the Gap group organised a music concert in the garden of the residence and a theatrical performance a week later. An article in the local newspaper *L'Eco di Bergamo* (Belotti 2020), was published the day after the concert. It described ML thanking the artists who performed in the musical afternoon.

> Fragile bodies leaning on wheelchairs dance to the rhythm of music, while large black glasses protect from the sun, without being able to hold back a few tears that fall. "It's a cry of joy; you really gave us a nice gift", ML applauds and thanks to the artists, who yesterday afternoon brought the patients [of the elderly facility] back to life with a two-part concert dedicated to them. (Belotti, 2020)

Figure 1. Image of one of Gap's performances in elderly facilities used in social media. Photo courtesy of Pietro Bailo.

This interaction clearly shows how the Gap festival group was able to intervene with arts and performances to interrupt the chain of isolation and support the elderly in these institutions. This excerpt from an interview with a Gap volunteer illustrates the point well:

> We wanted to reach those who had been most affected by the crisis. In the elderly facilities, for example, visits from relatives were forbidden until the summer, and the same in psychiatric communities. Not to mention the refugees' centres, which had even greater movement restrictions. Going to these places meant sending a message, saying – we are here, you are not alone. (Interview with a Gap volunteer)

This message of communality and of repairing social ties through music concerts and theatrical performances was also perceived by the artists who participated in the festival. One told us:

> In [name of three villages near Bergamo] we intervened in elderly facilities. It was nice because people were very eager to participate. Not everyone was perhaps able to follow, understand or grasp the nuances of what was read and told, but we saw a great deal of attention and great interest. [There was] [R]eally a light in their eyes. These people had not seen anyone since March,

it had been six months now and they had experienced a very heavy situation also because there had been several deaths. In such a situation of illness and discomfort, there was a feeling of death and total precariousness […] It was a wonderful experience to see these people participate, to hear their laughter and applause. Once we had a technical problem because the [audio] service did not arrive in time to set up the sound system. But people were already there ready to attend the show. So, we started chatting and singing some songs. We made a kind of live jukebox with dedications and requests [of music] from the forties, fifties, sixties, something exceptional. I found myself singing with them and it was perhaps one of the best moments. [Interview with one of the artists]

Whilst another told the local newspaper said:

I am excited, I have been singing for fifteen years, but it is a unique context here. People have gone through a horrible time of loneliness, it's a profound experience, and I think music is pacifying (Belotti, 2020)

Appreciation of the Gap's initiative also came from the management and professionals who worked in elderly facilities and other institutions where people were suffering from isolation. The performance demanded gathering outdoors, and the hosts gave them the opportunity to participate, comment and share feelings. A professional stated:

It was the first time we took the guests out into the garden together. Also, the first time I saw them sing. It was truly a joy for them and for us. They were very excited. We usually take them out in small groups, while here they were all together, and everyone participated and listened carefully. Someone also wanted to get up and dance. Others commented, listening to the story of basil [a tale about the basil in the Italian regional cooking traditions]. They remembered when they cooked and prepared meals. This brought joy and nostalgia. They have rediscovered their tastes for food, the desire and the joy of living. It was nice. Please go ahead. What you have given us is life. (Interview with a caregiver in an elderly facility)

Many comments on the Superbergamo social media page shared similar levels of enthusiasm about the performances. For example, the following comment was from a professional who worked in one of the elderly facilities involved in the festival mentioned on Superbergamo's Facebook page:

I believe you have done a lot more than you think. Still, today, meeting me in the corridors, two guests told me – It was a really nice Saturday! For us it was wonderful to see the joy of our "grandparents" (I like to call them that, even though I know it's unprofessional!), Hearing them laugh and sing. Even people who no longer express themselves with words let their joy shine through attending the concert. Music warms hearts and excites them!

Discussion

The case study of Superbergamo, shows an intervention underpinned by an aesthetics of care. Put simply, a group of activists publicly intervened and supported fragile and vulnerable members of the community to interrupt the state of isolation forced upon them by an unprecedented pandemic. We argue that Gap's intervention in elderly facilities and elsewhere as nothing less than an act of aesthetic care, which sits within the trajectory of Tronto's definition of care as, "everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Tronto, 1993, p. 103). In this act of reparation, the Gap management group repaired, by way of unlocking, the sensory deprivation of elderly residents. For the activists, the care practices embraced the ethical

and political dimension, and its aesthetic and sensory aspects, interrupted the residents' suffering, and brought a positive sensory stimulus related to beauty and pleasure in its place.

Through the Gap festival, Superbergamo's activists paid attention to care in its aesthetic dimension as a way of contributing to social justice. This chimes with Thompson's (2015) notion that care is not a private matter, but necessarily a social and political one. The aesthetic of care is deeply connected with the ethical dimension of care that is by definition intrinsic to most conceptions of justice:

> Care ethics suggests we can learn about seeking justice and a practice that urges a fairer world from relationships where we are called to care for or have experienced the care of some other: where our interdependence and reciprocal needs are highlighted. (Thompson 2015, p. 434).

The support for people like ML and her companions, began with the activists becoming attuned to the community's needs. The art festival itself originated from supporting the local community during the lockdown. However, when most of the citizens were able to leave their houses, the performances were brought to elderly facilities, refugee centres, and social houses where people were still suffering from isolation due to their vulnerability.

The intention to be attuned to the needs of the community was an important characteristic of the Superbergamo project. For example, in order to be apprised of the community's needs, they monitored the changing situation of people in need through phone calls, or communications across other media, like social networks, newspaper articles, or other requests for help. Thanks to this monitoring they promoted new initiatives (the offer of free grocery packages, the arts festival, the children summer camps) or pushed for changes (bringing the performances in elderly and other social housing facilities).

For example, with respect to the art festival, the ML request for help in a local newspaper confirms the ethical value of bringing the performances to the facilities, and triggers for novel actions. The ethical engagement of the Superbergamo activists is also readable in the intent to find ML, despite having no reference to who she was, or which facility among many, was where she was located. The mobilisation of personal chains of acquaintances throughout the city enabled them to complete the goal of finding her.

The persistence of the Superbergamo activists in considering the needs of people in distress collectively represents a *bona fide* example of the ethical and political aspect of care practice. Meanwhile, the practice of the performance (the music concert) with its sensory and affective activation can be read as the aesthetic part of the care intervention. This was inscribed in the broader Superbergamo ethic of taking care of people by being attuned to emerging needs and was explicitly designed to reactivate the senses of people in isolation.

We would argue that the examples we have used, articulate the potential to read actions an as aesthetic of care in two ways:

- as a collective open-ended flow of mutual affect that constantly stimulates the senses (Strati 2007; Gherardi 2019) and produces tacit sensible knowledge.
- as a sensory ethical practice (Thompson 2020) that implies aesthesis and poiesis (Mattozzi and Parolin 2021).

This can be best illustrated by considering how the mutual flow of affect begins with the letter from ML in which she condemned the pain caused by the separation from friends, family, the other residents as a consequence of the pandemic restrictions. Her testimony showed how relational deprivation affected the general psychological situation and accelerated physical decay processes. In expressing her emotional landscape, ML's narrative

mobilises emotive words like "segregation," to emphasise the levels of separation between the elderly residents of the facility and the other people outside. This ought to be taken as both the justification for her intervention, and an implicit criticism of the facility's administration. ML lists a series of conditions that show how, as a segregated person, her agency is compromised: "we cannot see our loved ones," "we can no longer go out," and "we can no longer celebrate." Finally, ML reveals the consequences of her compromised agency. The lack of contact with loved ones affects her physical and psychological condition: "I have a lot of physical problems, I thought at least my head was all right, but now it seems that I am losing that too. I can no longer speak as before; I am never happy; I am always sad."

The dimension of the body is strongly reflected in what ML says, and it is still present in the description of her attending the performance made by the local newspaper. The newspaper article mentions the "fragile bodies leaning on wheelchairs dance to the rhythm of the music." Our excerpts from the interviews, newspaper articles and social media comments describe how attending the Gap performance the audience danced, cried with joy, applauded, commented, and interacted in a way that brought them somewhat back to life. The effect of the music, the collective fruition of the performance, the feelings of joy (but also nostalgia) and their collective appreciations, like the appreciation of tastes for food demands that we consider how bodies are aesthetically affected by the practice of care.

Thus, the aesthetic aspect of care in the qualities of the relationship were activated by the group of activists. They started the collective affective and sensory flow of mutual attention in a feedback cycle (Tronto, 1993, pp. 105–8). As underlined by Mol (2008), the logic of care is based on the corporality and awareness of the fragility of life. Everybody may need care in their life, and in turn everybody can be a caregiver, making the interconnection crucial to the logic of care. As Mandalaki et al (2022) point out the concept of care is also connected with our unavoidable inter-dependence on one another crucial for our literal and symbolic survival (Butler, 2015).

As shown by the excerpts, the performances were emotionally affecting not only for the public but also for the artists, the volunteers and the caregivers.

When caring is mutual affection and between bodies the concept of care expands into its aesthetic dimension. Furthermore, *qua* Thompson's (2015) critique of liberal ontology, we too stress how the aesthetics of care has a strong collective dimension. The sensorial deprivation of the body – including the lack of social interactions – led ML to slowly experience the degradation of her mental health, happiness, contact with the world, and even her capacity to speak. According to ML, the guests were physically cared for, but relationally abandoned in their rooms in the ward, not even enjoying a "piece of the garden." Participating in the performance, however, brought ML back to aspects of relative well-being, and regained enough agency to manage aspects of her own life. This is evinced from the newspaper article, which testified how attending the concert was important, not only for her, but also for the other guests of the facility that were having the same experience.

The testimony of Elsa, ML's daughter, contextualises these elements better, showing the extent of the isolation, sensory and relational deprivation of the elderly guests. She explained how the PPE (personal protective equipment) suits and masks which covered the workers who usually brought them food, limited their social interactions. She also clarified that normal activities were suspended, psychologists were not available, and loudspeakers only chanted catholic prayers rather than playing music or informing people about what was happening. The performances by the artists repaired the lost relationship ties by giving the residents the opportunity to express and share their feelings:

> The eyes of the more than forty elderly people present, dull after months of isolation, are rekindled, their hands have begun to beat again, their feet hinting at a step on the treble of Michael Jackson. (Belotti, 2020)

In addition, we underline how the audience's positive reaction also reverberated to affect the musicians and the artists of the concert. The artists too, had been adversely affected by the restrictions of the pandemic, severely limiting their opportunities to perform. Engaging with an appreciative audience for the first time since the lockdown, revitalised their sense of worth and wellbeing. Moreover, the specific context of this encounter with such a unique audience elicited a deep sensitivity in expressing themselves through music.

We argue that the augmentation of Thompson (2020) with Mattozzi and Parolin (2021), offers a distinct definition by framing an aesthetics of care as a sensory, affective ethical practice that involves two complementary actions. The first relies on *aesthesis*, by stimulating positive sensory perceptions in the form of feeling, hearing, seeing, tasting, and producing imagination. In our case, it is connected to how the audience responds to the stimulation of the performance: dancing in wheelchairs, commenting, smiling, crying and expressing joy. The second is the existence connected to *poiesis*. That is to say, the production of things, actions or practices that generate positive sensory perceptions, like performances, tasty dishes of food, pleasant pieces of music or lovely architecture. In the case of Superbergamo, it is evinced by the work in preparation for the Gap festivals, the decoration and alteration of the squares, courtyards and public spaces and the organisation of the performances in the health care facilities were acts consistent with an aesthetics of care. As Thompson pointed out:

> Preparation is, therefore, paradoxically part of the exhibition within this mode of the artistic project: it can demonstrate and model a form of mutual regard. There is a sensory quality in the relationships to which a project that prepares in this way aspires. (Thompson 2015, p. 438)

We argue that Superbergamo's interventions are consistent with what Thompson defines as a mode of aesthetics of care. It is comprised of acts of caring that have an affective, sensory, manufactured quality that can be regarded as aesthetic. Furthermore, it is an act of caring. This is because it can produce or strengthen social relations between individuals, groups and communities. As we demonstrate, there was an open-ended flow of mutual affect that constantly stimulates the senses (Strati 2007; Gherardi 2019) and produces tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1958). In this respect, Superbergamo's intervention with the Gap festival is a compelling example of an aesthetics of care, and of sensory and ethical practice (Thompson 2020) that is singularly suggestive of both *aesthesis* and *poiesis* (Mattozzi & Parolin 2021).

Conclusion

This article has shown how practices, argued to be expressive of the aesthetic dimension of care, were evident in the organisation, development and production of an art festival during the first wave of the pandemic. Drawing on Mol et al. (2010; 2015) who recognise that care practices include a way of working and conceptions of knowing that come from a professional practice (Gherardi & Rodeschini, 2016), we concur with theories asserting that care consists of the constant work of repairing the conditions of life (Tronto, 1993). We further suggest that this repairing activity also involves the aesthetic dimension of the care practices – a dimension that offers much to work and organisation studies. In argumenting these ideas, we anchor our claims in Thompson's (2015) notion of care aesthetics as "a set of values realised in a relational process that emphasises engagements between individuals or groups over time" (Thompson, 2015, p. 437). Thus, we are connecting the aesthetics of care to:

- theoretical perspectives from phenomenological traditions that emphasises the centrality of the body and affects on work practices;
- and reflections inspired by recent debate in the New Sociology of Art and aesthetics practices from Actor-Network-Theory.

From the application of this analysis to our case, we make three essential conclusions. First, the aesthetic of care entails the production and the reception of aesthetic stimuli that involves bodies and aesthetic affection is the flow of mutual stimulation of the senses (Strati 2007; Gherardi 2019) and produces knowledge (Gherardi & Rodeschini 2016). This manifests in the meeting of a loved one, talking to people, contemplating a nice garden, listening to music, reading, and writing – all activities that activate a sensorial dimension which contrasts with the deprivation hitherto felt.

Second, the aesthetic of care has a strong collective dimension characterised by mutual affection and based on relational ontology. The affective flow influences all the participants, for example, the subjects of care (the facility residents) and the active carers (artists, Gap volunteers and caregivers), were both triggered by common affective reactions.

Third, the aesthetic of care consists of sensory ethical practice (Thompson 2020) that implies *aesthesis* and *poiesis* (Mattozzi & Parolin 2021). *Aesthesis* consists of the perception of the sensory stimuli by the audience, and *poesies* are made by the preparation of the performance (stimulus) by Superbergamo's activists, artists, technicians and the practitioners of the elderly facility.

The aesthetics of care is not limited to the characteristics of the case we explored. Rather, we maintain that our conceptual framework can be extended to consider all situations where care practice elicits a pleasant involvement of the senses that activates sensory and affective reactions. In this respect, our proposal makes a meaningful contribution to the care ethics scholarship, by drawing on an aesthetic dimension that is not only useful in talking about performances, but also in the study of work and organisation.

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