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Care as political artistic practice[1]

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Abstract

This article aims to show how care is playing an important role in socially engaged artistic practices, in line with the political significance that care has today. It argues that the interest in care relationships is also part of a transformation in the affective regime of contemporary art, which now seeks to reclaim the value of emotions such as empathy—emotions that may have been considered soft, or even taboo, in much of twentieth-century art, particularly political art. Furthermore, it contends that ethical practices of care possess an inherently aesthetic dimension that make it possible to articulate an aesthetics of care. Ethical-aesthetic care practices are embedded in forms of participatory political art that that seeks to empower individuals by involving them in collaborative activities that inspire more democratic and just forms of sociability.

Keywords

Care ethics, Care aesthetics, Empathy, Political art, Socially engaged performance

1. *The Moral and Political Significance of Care*

Spanish moral philosopher Victoria Camps defends in a recent book that we live in "times of care." Published in 2021, while still immersed in the COVID-19 pandemic, this work highlighted the awareness of human fragility and vulnerability that events like that made evident. It connects, however, to other issues such as the climate crisis and the increase in life expectancy, which has already

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placed a significant portion of the population — at least in those countries where the aging process is a reality — in the position of needing care. These are shared challenges that affect us all, emphasize our interdependence, and demand collective and supportive responses. We could continue citing many other difficulties faced by vulnerable groups due to reasons of gender, race, class, or origin, which also generate a demand for care, not to mention the central role care plays in our daily lives.

Our most urgent and intimate needs are met in the domestic realm through activities such as eating and cooking, dressing, personal and household cleaning, sleeping and resting, loving and caring for children and the people and things around us, and so on. Following Rita Felski's description (2000, p. 77), these mundane activities, which are often overlooked but frame our incursions into other, more esoteric or exotic, worlds, ultimately constitute a "non-negotiable reality" and the inevitable foundation for other forms of human activity.

Then, it seems that care constitutes a primary ethical issue due to its ubiquity and the diversity of circumstances in which it is required, perhaps with particular significance today in the social and political spheres. It has, therefore, shed the invisibility that for centuries excluded it from public debate. For philosophical thought, as Camps (2021, pp. 9-10) also points out, care did not become a concept worthy of study until just fifty years ago, when feminist philosophers developed the ethics of care following Carol Gilligan's seminal essay *In a Different Voice* (1982).

Indeed, Gilligan offered a different voice or alternative to the dominant perspective in Western moral philosophy, which was centred around concepts such as equity, impartiality, justice, and universality. These general concepts shaped normative approaches based on principles that, in the name of rationality and the objective treatment of moral issues, abstracted from the particular circumstances of individuals and the contexts in which people's moral lives unfold. Gilligan highlighted the difference between men and women when justifying decisions and choices to resolve moral problems. While men tended to appeal to general rules of justice, women were more likely to put themselves in the other's shoes, also considering emotional implications and the concrete situations and conditions involved. Far from constituting, as it seemed, a sign of women's inferior moral maturity,[1] Gilligan defended this shift in perspective as a call to attention regarding the insufficiency of

[1] Gilligan contested Lawrence Kohlberg's model, which associated a justice-centred and rule-governed ethics as superior or more mature in a scale of moral development.

universalist approaches.[2] She argued for the need to situate ethical deliberations within a more sympathetic perspective, attentive to the particularities of each case — a viewpoint that could thus be seen as more *feminine*. Shortly after, in 1984, Nel Noddings published *Caring*, subtitled *A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Together, they would have shown that a domain traditionally restricted to women could be a source of an ethics that encourages cultivating sensitivity, thoughtfulness, empathy. However, accusations of gender essentialism led Noddings to replace in the title the term *feminine* by *relational*.[3] The important thing is that the ethics of care points to a different way of being in and building the world, one that is relational and interdependent, in contrast to other more individualistic models. In this way, care gradually shifted from being seen as a domestic matter and a women's issue to being understood as a public concern and a democratic duty. The initial interpersonal relationship, mainly developed within the family, extended to other broader social relationships, as well as to the care of non-human creatures, nature, environments, and even to the realm of objects. In summary, we can endorse the widely quoted definition given by Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, who describe caring

> *as species activity that includes 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, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web (Fisher & Tronto,1991, p. 40).

However, all of this does not mean forgetting the reality in which care practices unfold. Performances of care enact inequalities of power and privilege that determine care distribution and who undertakes it. Thus, vulnerability affects both sides. Carers often abuse their charges and patronize care-receivers but, often as well, carers are exploited as cheap labour with almost no rights at all. By nature, women may not be especially skilled for the practice of care, but the fact is that their contribution in this matter is greatly disproportionate. Care tasks are thus carried out mostly by women, who in great part belong to minorities such as migrants, accepting hard and poorly paid jobs, while remaining fairly invisible and vulnerable.[4] Hence, the politics of care takes into account that

[2] Care ethics does not aim to cover the entire scope of moral relationships, nor does it oppose the ethics of justice; rather, it complements it.

[3] In the second and updated edition of her book (Noddings 2013).

[4] Long reserved for women, children, the socially devalued workers, even slaves, as opposed to the public spaces of what historically has been truly important (such as those of philosophy and politics), the invisibility of care remains especially in the spaces of the

caring structures and practices are many times in fact uncaring and that care is considered as "a commodity, something that we 'buy' rather that something we expect to *do*" or, generally, is decried as a burden.[5] However, the notion of care incorporates value, a normative dimension that indicates how we should act and relate with other people and the world. In this vein, Joan Tronto defined four ethical elements of care (attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness), which care performances should incorporate corresponding with the four phases of care: caring-about (or the recognition that care is necessary), taking care of (namely, assuming some responsibility for the need and determining how to respond), care-giving (meaning being directly involved in meeting the needs of care) and care-receiving (this is, recognizing the response of the person receiving the care).

To sum up, caring is not only assisting the needs of others. It is not any job, because care is a way of doing things, "which includes a set of appropriate skills" (Thompson 2022, p. 49) and invokes affective qualities, pointing to human relationality and interdependence, "trying to overcome the asymmetric relation that constitutes it by definition" (Camps 2021, p. 13). From a political perspective, the need to cultivate more empathetic and compassionate beings, attentive to the needs of others, aware of interdependence in the recognition of a shared vulnerability, contrasts with a neoliberal rationality and agenda that promotes self-sufficient individualism and increases the vulnerability of the most disadvantaged ones. Care offers a more social agenda of interdependence, social responsibility, and mutual aid.

And yet, the rise of this neoliberal view in its more radical forms — one that abandons and deteriorates public services, ignores or attacks environmental conservation, or dehumanizes migrants, not to mention the survival of the fittest prevailing in the international arena — makes one think that, rather than admitting that we live in times of care that concerns us all, such commitment today may constitute a marginal option, even a risky one; an option of resistance and political rebellion. In her speech during the 2025 SAG Awards, Jane Fonda declared:

domestic or, in general, the private. Here is where great social inequalities of gender, race, and class have been fostered, consolidated, and repeated. Therefore, everyday life became the space where harm, oppression, and injustices were hidden and forgotten, and where they were mechanically reproduced for centuries; it is the space where gender inequality has been carried out and justified, profoundly, over time — as feminist theorist Dorothy Smith pointed out (Smith 1987 quoted by Giombini & Kvokačka 2021, p. 10).

[5] Fisher (2020, p.6).

> What we actors create is empathy, […] Our job is to understand another human being so profoundly that we can touch their souls. And make no mistake, empathy is not weak or woke — by the way, woke just means you give a damn about other people.[6]

Clearly referring to the political changes that accompany the new U.S.A. government, Fonda stated:

> this is Big Time serious, folks. So, let's be brave, we must stay in community, we must help the vulnerable, we must find ways to project an inspiring vision of the future, one that is beckoning, welcoming.[7]

Not long before the arrival of the new Trump's administration, two activists from that country, Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba, affirmed: "We believe in caring for each other as a form of cultural rebellion" (Hayes & Kaba 2023, p. 42). After decades witnessing the cross-mobilization of mutual aid and mass protest across many important sites of political struggle, such as the fight against racism in the United States, Hayes and Kaba argued that solidarity is the most natural response among human beings when facing common problems, especially difficult in the case of catastrophes. The activists wonder why such narratives are less widespread than the official stories or those heavily publicized through, for example, Hollywood action films, individual heroes, and the "every man for himself" mentality.[8] And they defended how participants in movements or webs of mutual aid can be tough on systems by nurturing a "counterculture of care". Such culture, they said, requires the undoing of individualism and siloed politics and harbours the potential for new life-giving frameworks, which is not the outcome the powerful are hoping for (p. 52).

2. *Artistic Political Activism: Disturbance and Protest*

However, speaking of care as "countercultural" may seem novel, among other things, because the promotion of mutual care can, in a way, appear foreign to the artistic strategies of the 20th-century counterculture, which were dominated by protest through prov-

[6] The speech is available at *Watch Jane Fonda's 'Woke' Message During Life Achievement Award Speech at SAG Awards* (2025).

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] A similar suspicion regarding certain circles and media seeming to have anticipated, or even encouraged, actions of panic, brawls, and looting, as if it were a Hollywood movie, emerged following the massive power outage in Spain and Portugal at the end of April 2025. See Salas (2025).

ocation and transgression. Also, in her introduction to the book, Mariame Kaba admits that, early in her activism: "I was a major brat to people who I proudly proclaimed were sellouts because they had to be accountable to private funders and to 'the man'", until someone asked her "What have you built?" and she realized that protest was not enough (2023, p. 16).

Indeed, despite proposing alternative life experiences to those derived from the capitalist system and the society of the spectacle, the 20th-century counterculture was mostly identified with protest, especially in the artistic sphere, dominated by neo-avant-garde trends, sometimes referred to as "anti-artistic". We can sum it up by saying, with Arthur Danto (1990), that in contemporary art abounds art that is "disturbatory". He means art that aims to disrupt the typical viewer experience, moving beyond mere contemplation and engaging with the viewer on a more visceral level. These works confront audiences with the realities of life, aiming to produce reactions that are continuous with those real-life experiences, and so, they dissolve the traditional distance between representation and reality. What is key is that this sort of art is "intended to modify the consciousness and even change the lives of its 'viewers'" (Danto 1990, p. 299). It thus seems that political art is committed to producing certain effects in the viewer that may lead to moral, social, or political change. But to get it art had to be somehow disturbing. In this respect, Danto comments examples of feminist performance that, he argues, is "funky, aggressive, confrontational, flagrant, shocking, daring, extreme and meant to be sensed as dangerous" (p. 300). Indeed, performance art that, according to Dieter Mersch, mostly "aimed at sparking social revolt" (Mersch 2022, p. 520) could work as a paradigm of what Danto calls disturbatory art. Mersch comments that, in the early sixties, some performances "were less about getting the audience to participate or sharpening their senses and more about shaking them up and shocking them" (p. 519). "Performance relies on 'disruption'", —he says— "on making the positing of difference into an event" (p. 525) and "performance derives its ethical dimension from [this kind of] transgression" (p. 522) since it creates possibilities and realities yet also shows the fragility and precariousness of actions in social existence (p. 526).

Much of this political art claimed to be not only anti-artistic but anti-aesthetic since a set of ideas such as the autonomy of art, taste, beauty, visual pleasure, sensuousness, the expressive genius and so forth were negated (Best 2014, p. 14). According to Hal Foster's famous definition of the anti-aesthetic, while those categories of the

aesthetic represent "the idea of a privileged realm", the postmodern anti-aesthetic signals "art can now *effect* a world" (Foster 1983, p. xv; my emphasis). Nonetheless, others, have seen in postmodern art not so much an anti-aesthetic art as a rejection of traditional aesthetics that "transformed" aesthetic problems (Best 2014, p. 14). In the end —as Mersch says — in performance "the aesthetic and the political are inseparable" (2022, p. 520). In this case though it was an aesthetics of transgression and of political protest and rebellion against injustice.

In the official artistic culture of today, "Dada through and through", Danto saw activist art that he described as "angrily political" (Danto 2003, pp. 58, 123). He explained that, as a means of advancing social and political agendas, artistic activism tries to make people angry, not so much against the works but what the works are about. Danto claimed that political protest needs anger as its trigger, encouraging the necessary prolongation of the struggle and the impulse to counteraction (p. 113). However, although when injustice, abuse and wrongdoing happen, anger is certainly justified, very often anger motivates stupid and dangerous decisions. As Susan Sontag stated, "you cannot hit and think at the same time" (2003, p. 118). Besides, we can say with Kathleen Marie Higgins (1996, p. 283) that "the big threat to effective political action is despair" and that political activism requires "not only commitment and courage, but also faith" and, therefore, hope. In these same lines, Mariame Kaba proclaims: "Taking action is a practice of hope" (Hayes & Kaba 2023, p. 19). But Mysha Cherry analyses how anger can be compatible with hope too; it can even express "agape love", "a universal love that involves goodwill and respect" (Cherry 2021, p. 90). Hereby, Cherry identifies a sort of anger that is not merely destructive, rather fills with optimism and motivates to fight, to pursue justice and radical change in society from an inclusive perspective, this is, for all, including the wrongdoers. She calls it "Lordean rage" after the Black feminist scholar and poet Audre Lorde, whose work on anger and race inspired Cherry to theorize about this matter. Detached from hatred and revenge, Lordean rage can be of service to a rightful political activism that focuses on more productive forward-looking thoughts.

Thus, as I see it, political activism nowadays vindicates the role of hope, love, and mutual aid as a smart and natural or properly human strategy of protest and action, since, as Hayes and Kaba insist, "solidarity with one another" could be our "best hope" (2023, p. 22). Although 20th-century activist art has traditionally

been associated with disturbance and shock, the vindication of care as political practice should have also reached art.

3. *The Transformation of Emotions in Contemporary Art*

Therefore, hope, love, compassion, empathy, solidarity, care, seem to be attitudes and emotional states that are becoming prominent in political activism. These words and feelings have been though long suppressed in artistic and critical vocabularies. And yet —art historian Rebecca Bedell sustains— they are also rebounding. Hence, Bedell (2024) identifies a "transformation in the emotions of contemporary art". She cannot say that such emotions, to which she refers as "tender and connective", wholly disappeared from art, since they could be found even within the work of the avant-garde. Nonetheless, for the most influential narratives of the art of the past century, they were relegated to ordinary life and the intellectually despised territory of mass culture (p. 6).

As Bedell analyses, the changes of *emotional regimes* are recurrent within Western art.[9] Thereby, "the emotions considered acceptable for artistic expression have undergone dramatic transformations over time" (p. 3). In the case of tender and connective emotions, Bedell notes the rhetoric of modernism and postmodernism for turning them into a sort of taboo for artistic practice. Briefly,[10] she recalls how the "emotions of life", as Clive Bell called them, were declared irrelevant to the appreciation of art. The champion of formalism, Clement Greenberg, thought of these emotions as sentimental and consigned them to the disdained realm of kitsch. However, emotions like angst, rage, despair, and doom could be reconciled with the heroic and tormented masculinity of the mid-century avant-garde, represented by Americans Abstract Expressionists. Later, the pretended aesthetic indifference that followed in movements such as minimalism along with the ironic provocations of Pop Art deepened the discredit of emotions considered to be too soft. Finally, postmodernism also left little room for them. Over the decades, art took further avant-gardist pursuit for originality above almost all else and searched for the 'shock of the new', which demanded increasingly extreme ploys that challenged viewers by drifting them into disturbing, disgusting, and horrifying experiences, as I described above. Bedell observes that the suppres-

[9] Bedell borrows the idea from historian William Reddy (2001), who argues that states, cultures, and communities establish and enforce "emotional regimes".

[10] I am offering a summary of Bedell's narrative in (2024, pp. 3-6).

sion of the tender and connective emotions has much to do with misogyny and elitism (*Ibid*.). But both, misogyny and elitism often share a sort of disdain for the space of the everyday that —as I argued too at the start—is commonly identified with the domestic, the feminine or the private and, traditionally, differentiated from the truly important things, which have occupied philosophy, politics, or art as critical attitudes toward the world; namely, the invisible realm where care practices have been located until very recently.

Bedell's hypothesis is that the transformation of emotions in contemporary art could start in the 1990s. Significantly, "the AIDS epidemic may have played a part as artists gave expression not only to anger and outrage but also to grief, care, and concern" (p.14, n.8). She also mentions political movements like *Black Lives Matter* but nevertheless, she thinks that COVID 19 pandemic caused the acceleration of a process of transformation of the emotional regime of art, which brought back love, compassion, empathy or care also "to advance social, political, and environmental justice" (p.1).

4. *Collaborative Art and Political Capabilities*

I would like to focus though on a particular kind of political art: collaborative art; because I think that the promotion and improvement of care practices as a political artistic purpose is developing especially in projects of this sort.

First, collaborative art is a kind of participatory art. Falk Heinrich, philosopher, also an actor, theatre director and installation artist, defines participatory as art that "requires the active participation of the audience as a *constitutive* part of the artwork proper" (Heinrich 2014, p.1). Participatory art defies the traditional contemplative stance towards art because the participants and their actions are an inherent part of *the work*, as ontologically unstable as it could be. Certainly, the label "participatory art" covers a huge diversity of production according to various levels of participation both of artists and audience. In the projects defined as 'collaborative', the artist's task is to design and create devices and set things up for people to engage in certain activities of cooperation. Thereby, artists provide enough guidance to bring the project or performance to life yet fostering high levels of freedom of choice and action to avoid patronizing *the audience*.[11] For Matteo Lanfranchi, it is rather like

[11] In Carrasco-Barranco (2025), I seek to outline a theoretical framework to critically assess the artistic value of participatory art. My paper defends that a functional account of art criticism, which makes artistic value dependent on the artist's intentions, can still apply

creating games and should also include the possibility of failure (2021, p. 32). His view appears in a book that presents the project *Intimate Bridges* in which Lanfranchi participates. It took place between the end of 2019 and mid-2021 (given the delay due to the Covid-19 pandemic) in different European countries (Italy, Portugal, Greece, Austria). *Intimate Bridges* aimed to produce effects for a better development of intercultural dialogue and for a more inclusive and multicultural reality. The "Introduction" to the book, by Riccardo Corcione, says:

> Involving artists and non-artists, migrants and non-immigrants, European citizens and world citizens, *Intimate Bridges* seek to promote the recognition and appreciation of diversity, personal development, empowerment and empathy (Corcione 2021, p.6).

Projects like this are indeed a type of political art but I will say that they are the sort that Spanish philosopher Gerard Vilar refers to as "an art of political capabilities" (Vilar, 2017, p. 146). These are artistic practices that differ from other forms of political art that might seem more familiar to us, such as denunciatory art, namely, the sort of art that expose moral and political injustice. Denunciatory art develops especially in the 20th century and —as explained earlier— is perhaps what is currently understood as political art. According to Vilar, denunciatory art is political art that clearly identifies the cause to fight for and calls for action. However, there are other more contemporary forms of political art that do not offer slogans nor is activist in that sense but rather invites autonomous reflection via uneasy proposals that challenge and maybe disturb our sensibility so each person can reflexively reach their own conclusions. Vilar gives the examples of Thomas Hirschhorn's installations or Santiago Sierra's performances (p.154). Now, what Vilar names an "art of the political capabilities" is a different thing; it is art that aims to alter the roles and functions of the experience of art in order to change the capabilities of a participatory audience (p. 146). For Vilar, the art of the politics of capabilities redistributes spaces, times, and roles, changing subjects to some degree by fostering the cultivation of their capabilities or by providing them with new ones.[12] For this reason, Vilar believes that they are forms

to the criticism of participatory art, whose aesthetic qualities arise in the activity performed by the audience detached from the specific artefacts designed by artists. I am grateful to a member of the audience who, during the discussion of my talk in the *Convegno*, asked me to clarify this aspect of my defence of *artistic* collaborative projects.

[12] Vilar refers to Rancière's approach to emancipation (Rancière 2008) about the discussion about people's ability to choose and shape themselves as a way of experiencing autonomy and, despite the differences, connects it with the discourse on justice developed by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (Nussbaum 2012; Sen 2010). Vilar underlines how

of emancipatory art. The art of the politics of capabilities trusts the participants and empowers people, often those who usually do not speak up, encouraging their self-confidence and inspiring more democratic and just forms of sociability (p. 159). I would say that still is somehow activist political art yet, beyond protest and denunciation, tries "to build" something, using Kaba's terms. After all, Vilar's classification is not essentialist and does not exclude all sorts of borderline cases and hybrids forms of political art.

In any case, and, of course, considering that, in certain sense, all art is political, I am drawn towards Vilar's classification of different kinds of political art.[13] I think it helps to differentiate and somehow organize the always changeable, multiple and complex relationships between art and politics. I like it also because I find the notion of art of the political capabilities very enlightening and useful to analyse collaborative projects, and particularly care practices within their frame.

I believe that projects like *Intimate Bridges*, or examples given by Vilar such as the project *Favela Painting*, founded in 2005 by Haas & Hahn,[14] are art "of the political capabilities". These projects try to empower people, practice equality, in community, therefore, aim to inspire democratic dialogue, and enable participants to pursue their lives with dignity according to their own views. But I would note that, in those examples, they are projects that do so, at least in part, because they practice and promote care.

Nussbaum and Sen have approached the concept of justice also from the perspective of emancipation. They focus on real-world issues such as poverty, marginalization, and social exclusion, contributing to the development of an analysis of human and social rights in terms of capabilities. For Nussbaum and Sen, inequality is above all a problem of inequality in capabilities—a deprivation of capabilities such as life, health, bodily integrity and security, thought and expression, the ability to form freely chosen emotional attachments, to plan one's life according to one's own conception of the good, to interact with others without discrimination, to play, to enjoy one's environment, to participate in politics and affiliate, and to have the opportunity to work and own property.

[13] Indeed, there are four types of political art that he distinguishes. Along with the three mentioned—protest art, art of reflection politics, and art of the politics of capabilities—Vilar cites what is probably the oldest form of political art, that is, celebratory art, performing a propagandistic role in the service of power. See Vilar (2017, pp. 145-166).

[14] In 2005 Haas&Hahn (artists Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn) travelled to Brazil to make a documentary on hip-hop in the communities of Rio and Sao Paulo. But they decided to start a series of art projects together with the local community of Vila Cruzeiro, and later also in Santa Marta. Briefly, the Project consisted of the activities of the locals that, in cooperation also with some artists and architects, restored and painted their houses and street walls creating a colourful mosaic that added beauty and dignity to their Favelas. Therefore, some of the results of the Project are certainly objects with aesthetic qualities. However, the artistic project, the artwork in this case, goes well beyond that, directed mostly to the *quality* of the activities developed and the relationships created among the participants. While the organization grew and projects spawned all around the world, from Philadelphia to Haiti, the Favela Painting project in Rio de Janeiro kept growing and developing.

In a recent study, Lara García-Díaz (2020) has analysed the caring practices that emerged during the construction of a socio-communitarian centre in Cañada Real Galiana in Madrid. As she reports, the architect's studio that proceeded with the project was *Recetas Urbanas*, a studio founded by architect Santiago Cirugeda, "committed to collaborative self-construction as a means to promote social integration and mediate within various complex realities" (p. 65). García-Díaz details how the project developed in Cañada Real Galiana explicitly contained in the contract social clauses related to identification of needs, inclusion and education. She argued that in so far as such social clauses were present from the start, the project could be scrutinized according to Tronto's care guide, which differentiates four phases for effective care and that, in correspondence, should exhibit four ethical elements. Let's recall that the first step towards effective care is recognizing that care is necessary by caring-about, which demands attentiveness. Next, taking care of, which means assuming some responsibility for the need and determining how to respond. Followed by actual care-giving, which requires competence and, finally, care-receiving which involves responsiveness. Thereby, García-Díaz uses the analytical framework designed by Joan Tronto to evaluate the execution of the project. She shows that the project was attentive to the needs of a concrete community and care for their participation, integrating women and children who shared common challenges provoked by cultural, ideological and religious factors. Thus, participants assumed responsibilities, yet the project offered a safe context, where competent strategies could be executed and methodologies were perceived as caring by the participants. Their interaction was flexible and responsive, accentuating the (ideally) reciprocal nature of care.

As mentioned, care ethics indicates how bad care is often practised but offers tools to empirically test and correct such practices. As in the case of the socio-communitarian centre in Madrid, Tronto's framework could then be used to analyse other projects, including collaborative artistic projects such as *Favela Painting* or *Intimate Bridges*, that situate themselves "between art and social change" (Corcione, 2021, p.6). García-Díaz concludes her analyses of the project in Cañada Real Galiana by marking that "good care is aimed at providing as much sense as possible of independency and safeness to the agent, the community or the institution that is being taken care for" (García-Díaz, p. 71). And therefore, I will insist, is art of political capabilities since care practices help to empower people. However, art of political capabilities is not

always about care so, among other possible moral aims, care practices are guided by the *specific* ethical commitment just described in Tronto's model.

Moreover, I would like to point out that, as care ethics insists, care is a practice that, beyond intentions, must be carried out, considering all the circumstantial and contextual aspects that make every care relationship unique. There are no formulas for care. Just through caring what care is could be learnt and it is the only way of knowing if we are practicing good care. Through the four phases in Tronto's model, the quality of our care actions relies on our skills of perception and recognition of what is adequate in each situation. In a recent article, Josep Corbí analyses care, not as a purely instrumental activity, namely, an activity whose end "can be individuated independently of the means by which it can be achieved", but rather as an activity "inspired by a telos that imposes some demands upon the subjects engaged in that activity" (Corbí, 2023, p. 146, 142). And so, he says, care actions "require a kind of deliberation that […] seeks to discern what response is constitutive of [such telos] in some particular circumstances" (*Ibid.*). Hereby, care practice departs from an initial *apprehension* of its telos, but the engagement in this activity requires a continuous effort to discern what the telos may demand from each participant in any particular context (p. 145). As he describes concrete scenes where subjects are engaged in different activities of care, Corbí admits that the *recognition* of such demands will often be tacit and will manifest itself in some nuances of (i.e.) gestures and behaviour. Therefore, the telos in every care practice cannot be individuated regardless of our ability to recognize how certain gestures, words, or nuances of behaviour enhance or reduce it. Corbí is in line with other care ethicists who have often emphasized the importance of the expression and communication of care, as it has an appearance, which is crucial indeed to perform and evaluate care decisions and actions.

The next point I want to make here is that care is not only an ethical practice but an aesthetic practice as well. This is the basic claim of the so-called 'aesthetics of care' that I would like to introduce here understood as an aesthetics relevant for the political capabilities, and consequently for the art that seeks to promote them.

5. *Aesthetics of Care*

Indeed, the aesthetics of care is a very recent area of research that affirms that the practice of care holds an aesthetic dimension

that nurtures and makes realization of care ethics possible.[15] At the experiential level, such aesthetic dimension, consists of the expression of care, its form, its appearance. Hence, aesthetics is seen as integral to care since care is a practice, a process which constitutes the outcome, the *telos*, in Corbí's terms, affording both the performance of care and its evaluation. Besides, this means that, when engaged in activities of care, moral deliberation emerges in and is delivered by the bodies of care-givers and receivers; thus, care is, as Maurice Hamington (2021) puts it, an "embodied notion".[16] Furthermore, the moral virtues of sensitivity, thoughtfulness, gentleness and respect are expressed *aesthetically* in caring attitudes and actions, but also the opposite. The affective and emotional aspects of our interactions can help to trace forms of cruelty, oppression, inequality, and dependency that exist in many careless contexts. In any case, since care aesthetics claims that the aesthetic dimension of care is integral to care insofar as it embodies it and this contributes to nurture our practices of care, maybe, it could be orientated to train people in good care. Care practices take place mostly as part of our ordinary lives. Therefore, everyday life aesthetics, that focuses on the aesthetic appreciation of our ordinary activities and also tries to shape them as they are seen as influential to people's welfare and happiness, has taken natural interest in the aesthetics of care.[17] But, in the artistic terrain that occupies me here, I will go back to theorists of performative practices, particularly in applied theatre and so-

[15] See Yuriko Saito's latest book (2022), which likely represents the most fully developed account of the aesthetics of care to date. She addresses the collaborative artistic practices that are the subject of my discussion here (pp. 81-84, 117-119). Reconsidering her previous position that minimized the continuity of art and everyday life, Saito has "to come to realize that is more helpful and productive to explore the cross-pollination between art and everyday life rather than giving them a separate treatment" (pp. 9-10). Saito's approach primarily focuses on the everyday practice of care, thereby continuing her significant contribution to the aesthetics of everyday life (marked by Saito 2007 and 2017) whereas here I focus on political artistic practices.

[16] Indeed, "It is the combination of a person with the capacities of another or the way the situation responds or feeds back into the moment, which determines the aesthetic contours of the event" (Thompson 2022, p. 63). Furthermore, the "*intercorporeal*" nature of the embodiment care "is not only dyadic, but realised between complex communities of care, or networks of care practices" (*Ibíd.*).

[17] Saito explicitly advocates for introducing a normative dimension into the aesthetics of everyday life. Considering the capacity of the aesthetic for 'world-making' through the diverse activities—both private and public—that we engage in daily —as consumers, users, and citizens who interact with a multitude of objects and make decisions and judgments (tasks not reserved solely for professionals such as designers or architects, but one in which we all have a role to play) —, failing to employ and direct such capacity toward the aim of improving the world appears to be a missed opportunity (Saito 2020, p. 48). The recent development of this account in the aesthetics of care insists on considering all of us as "active agents empowered to contribute to better world-making" (2022, p.166).

cially engaged performance, who have also proposed an aesthetics of care to be applied to particular social policies (in relation to health, disability or integration of minorities, for example).

As seen in the example of *Intimate Bridges*, these artistic practices are between art and social work and offer participatory and collaborative projects that set up spaces and mechanisms for interaction and cooperation of participants, seeking new forms of sociability that raise empathy, interdependence, equality and reciprocity in the vein — so I am defending— of the art of the political capabilities.

6. *Aesthetics of Care as an Aesthetics for Political Capabilities*

Other many examples of artistic collaborative projects that embody care acts and relationships are offered in the book *Performing Care. New Perspectives on Socially Engaged Performance* edited by Amanda Fisher Stuart and James Thompson (2020). The described and analysed projects are developed in theatre but mostly outside artistic spaces like hospitals, schools, care homes, prisons, and so on. The guiding idea of this collection of papers written by people who are involved in performative arts is to show "the importance of arts practice in building and sustaining more equitable, just and caring societies", particularly, "in our contemporary moment, when carelessness and neglect appear to be the dominant mode of political and social action" (p.17). Therefore, the assumption is not only that care is performative but also that certain artistic practices can be acts of care, helping to express but particularly promote relationships of care in right ways.

One of the editors, James Thompson, argues for a connection between the care that happens through the process of working with people, materials and places during playful situations, rehearsals, or staging and caring in other contexts, even more formal and institutional settings. And for him, the affective solidarity and felt sense of justice that emerges is these situations might be foundational both to the ethics *and the aesthetics* of theatre and arts practice that seeks to engage with communities (2020, p. 38; 2022, p. 1). Indeed, these moments of collaborative creation, conjoined effort and intimate exchange exhibit — Thompson says — aesthetic value that may involve the intervention of all body senses, say, touch, smell and taste along with sight and hearing. Caring has "a certain craft and involves

the creation of sensory, embodied experiences" (2022, p. 2); an affective and sensory dynamic that—he notes— "becomes located in the mutual interaction that is only possible because of the relations that are created by the event" (Thompson 2020, 46). To sum up, productively woven into care ethics, aesthetics can help in making art an act of care.

There is a long and abundant literature on the ethical and political effects of practice art, particularly theatre. Recently, Tracey Nicholls (2012) has explored the ethics of performance improvisation that, according to her, promotes participatory and civic virtues of engagement, dialogue, respect, and community-building as well as the ability to negotiate differences, and willingness to accept the challenges of risk and contingency. The "ethos of improvisation" that she theorizes takes as its central values commitments to inclusivity and responsiveness and moves us beyond the abstractions into concrete, personal obligations.

All this fits within the frame of care ethics and its emphasis on the openness and attention to the other, with its own particularities, along with the awareness of our mutual interdependence and (ideally) reciprocity. But the aesthetics of care adds the significant role of the aesthetic value that is relational or — as Thompson insists— is located *in-between* people.[18] Care can be a source of a powerful aesthetic experience, yet it is also a relational aesthetics that matches care ethics as a "relational ethics", in the sense marked by Nell Noddings. Now, although with significant predecessors in some practices of the Avant-garde, the term relational aesthetics was recently proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud (2002). Bourriaud wanted to account for artistic projects, such as Rirkit Tiravanija's and Liam Gillick's, that worked as set ups for people's interactions by involving them in certain everyday life and social activities like cooking, eating, sleeping or playing ping-pong. For Bourriaud, these artistic practices "which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of humans relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space" are relational art (p. 113). Thereby, art here consists of the relationship that is spontaneously generated by participants' interactions with each other and the environment. Bourriaud characterizes the relationality created by these social participatory artistic projects as "tran-

[18] Saito (2022) defends our moral relationship with objects through the notion of care. She argues that objects possess moral agency and often shape human actions for better or worse. This normative dimension also makes it possible to exercise critique of hostile design and architectural elements, as well as of things that, in fact, entail the exclusion and oppression of individuals and groups (See also Liao & Huebner 2021).

sitivity", "encounter" and "dialogue". He defended that such relationality demands reciprocity, mutual acknowledgement and promotes democratic participation.

7. *Care as political artistic practice*

However, Claire Bishop criticized Bourriaud's examples because the seemingly democratic participation is compromised by the pre-disposition of a like-minded audience of art lovers (Bishop 2004, p. 69). For Bishop, we cannot forget the *why* of art: "Who is the audience? How is culture made, and for whom?" (p. 65). In these artistic games that Bourriaud praises, relationality is cool, harmonious, too easy, not hard won and that — according to Bishop— compromises their pretended democratic character. And I agree. Bourriaud's examples lack social conflict and antagonism that prevails in society blocking the possibility of such 'microtopias'. Years later, in the conclusion of her book *Artificial Hells* (2012), Bishop insists that:

> Participatory art is not a privileged political medium, […] but is as uncertain and precarious as democracy itself; neither are legitimated in advance but need continually to be performed and tested in every specific context (p. 284).

Furthermore, she asserts that "if ethical criteria have become the norm for judging this art, then we also need to question what ethics are being advocated" (p. 23). Again, I agree. But she reiterates the aesthetic-political value of surprising, even unsettling, and disturbing the audience, strategies that —to my view— will continue the trend of activist denunciatory art and that Bishop contrasts to a certain "humanism" present in participatory social art. Bishop notes the emphasis given by such artistic practices to the "capacity to listen, openly and actively"; here — she concludes— "empathetic identification is highly valued", as if only this "can facilitate 'a reciprocal exchange that allows us to think outside our own lived experience and establish a more compassionate relationship with others'"(p. 25). I think though that, as care ethics does not exclude other ethical commitments, care aesthetics does not necessarily count against the effectiveness of other artistic and aesthetic avenues for political activism yet it constitutes a legitimate option for political art. I mentioned at the start that both care ethics and aesthetics are right to reclaim the value of humanism and insist on the need to cultivate empathy as a political response to the moment we are in. And while Thompson also objects Bourriaud's relational aesthetics for being ultimately

more concerned with the formal aspects of the participatory projects and not suggesting why relations with others might be endorsed or what type of relations we might aspire to develop, he accepts his perspective that making art could be a 'proposal to live in a shared world'(Bourriaud, 2002, p. 22, quoted by Thompson 2020, p. 39). Furthermore, Thompson warns that this is not to say that we will have to witness insipid unchallenging performances (p. 46), neither can we expect that there will be no conflicts, and facile agreements will always be encouraged but quite the opposite. But having care ethics as a moral compass means that in collaborative artistic projects attitudes matter and the commitment for respectful cooperation comes first. Therefore, as Bishop claims, we need to question what ethics are being advocated and — as she also suggests— each project can and should be tested by paying attention to its "uniqueness", focusing on "the ideas and emotions it generates in participants and spectators." (Bishop 2012, 48). I have tried to show that Tronto's model for effective care is useful precisely for measuring whether a project is more or less successful. Ethics and aesthetics of care can thus provide a right orientation to certain sort of projects — I believe— by developing an art of the politics of capabilities.

Moreover, the possible scepticism regarding the impact of these ethical-aesthetic artistic care practices can be overcome if we consider that care is an activity that relies on skills, which are learned and trained. Theorists in applied theatre and socially engaged performance defend that performance matters as it is a way of training people to think with creativity. Maurice Hamington understands care as improvisational moral performance where the right thing to do emerges within relational experience (Hamington, 2020, p. 22). To my view, this emergent normativity in care actions derives from the specific kind of deliberation that Corbí signalled as constitutive or required by its telos in some particular circumstances. Moral deliberation here is alien both to instrumental and rule models without rendering the subject's choice arbitrary. On the other hand, care is, also using Corbí's terms, a 'dialectical' activity, that involves value conflict yet aims to solve problems relationally, together.

The model of improvisation in performance is thus offered as adequate for training care attitudes. Hamington notes that "the learned habit of improvisation is still a habit" (2020, p. 21). Improvisation is not pure spontaneity but is rehearsed, trained, and uses the actor's skill in service of a goal such as entertainment, dramatic preparation or care. From this perspective, "a caring improvisation is a moment when we draw upon a set of rehearsed cognitive and bodily skills of enquiry and action to responsively

perform care on behalf of the needs of others" (*Ibíd.*). "Improvisation uses the actor's skill in service of a goal as caring applies the caregiver's proficiency in responding to need" (p. 28).

To conclude, these acting techniques that combine spontaneity and (physical and mental) habits could be useful to train good care as a sort of moral education that generates dispositions in individuals to act and respond in care relationships with attentiveness and empathy to others' needs. The body aesthetics is key in training our attention and perception understanding nonetheless that "while care might be exhibited fleetingly, it is more likely that care aesthetics would be realised in more enduring, crafted encounters between people" (Thompson 2020, p. 44). And, of course, the difficulty in nurturing an ethics of care through an aesthetic process should be acknowledged. But, like Anna Serlenga, another participant in *Intimate Bridges*: "I believe that theatre has a powerful transformative capacity" not only because it provides "a safe space in which the creation becomes possible" but mostly for "being conveyed through the body, embodied in the most intimate sense possible" (2021, p.38). These artistic practices seek to train people to sustain trustful, empathetic, caring relationships toward others and the world, by performing or embodying these attitudes. At this point I would like to recall Jane Fonda's words: empathy is not weak. Actually, it may well be, as Nicholls declares, that

> the only hope we have of building societies that are peaceful and prosperous for all is to train the members of these societies to respond creatively, rather than fearfully, […] and to see all […] as engaged in variations of the same project (p.5).

I have tried to show that, through the promotion of ethical-aesthetic caring activities, this is the purpose to which a good deal of political art nowadays is destined.[19]

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