ORCID:
GA: 0000-0001-9157-1527
TC: 0000-0002-7300-3945

Spaces of Resistance of Participatory Arts in Cultural Welfare Initiatives. Insight of Italian Case Studies

Giulia Allegrini, Teresa Carlone[*]

Dipartimento delle Arti, Università di Bologna, Italy
E-mail: giulia.allegrini2@unibo.it; teresa.carlone2@unibo.it
*Corresponding author

Abstract. This article explores the many challenges that arise when artistic practices are evaluated through the lens of social impact. Such an approach compels artists to engage not only with aesthetic considerations but also with social, community-oriented, and participatory dimensions. We aim to contribute to the understanding of how artistic practices are shaped by the growing emphasis institutions place on generating social outcomes across various policy areas. This occurs within a broader transformation of welfare systems toward models of community welfare, rooted in participatory and collaborative principles. Within this emerging paradigm, the cultural sector is playing an increasingly vital role, as reflected in the concept of Cultural Welfare. The insights shared in this article stem from a systematic analysis of findings gathered through three research that explored how participatory artistic practices take shape within processes of significant social relevance. The results presented show that artistic practices can indeed generate meaningful social effects. However, it is challenging to reconcile artistic creation, which may not always be inherently tied to community engagement or specific social goals, with efforts to involve communities and ensure the sustainability of such practices. This tension gives rise to an ambivalent dynamic: on one hand, it is consciously navigated by artists and cultural organizations within the art system but on the other, it opens potential spaces for creative resistance.

Keywords: participation, artistic practices, neoliberalism, resistance, cultural welfare.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the numerous challenges that emerge when artistic practices are assessed through the lens of social impact. Such an approach compels artists and artistic practices to engage with dimensions that are not only aesthetic and performative but also social, community-based, and participatory.

The close relationship between art and participation – particularly when shaped around a strong orientation toward care and the well-being of the communities involved – gives rise to a set of increasingly urgent and

nuanced criticalities especially when considered within the dynamics of contemporary society. In a context of polycrisis (Morin and Kern 1993) – economic, social, political, and environmental – these collective artistic experiences risk being misrecognized or co-opted, bending them to a reproduction of neoliberal logics (Riccioni 2018), as has often been the case with processes of "commoning" and the collective/shared management of local resources intended to promote community welfare (Allegrini, 2020; Bianchi *et al.*, 2022). Among all the potential risks, what seems to be most at stake is the creative autonomy of these practices, that embody experimentation and research in production processes processes, as well as a dimension of *politicality* (understood as the condition of something connected to politics – whether it derives from, is determined or inspired by, or serves as its instrument), and in terms of their material sustainability, long-term continuity, and capacity to foster alternative and counter-hegemonic imaginaries (Carroll 2010; Vannini, 2021). These imaginaries are not only vital to the communities directly involved but also have the potential to reach and transform adjacent publics and contexts.

The reflections presented here stem from a systematic analysis of research findings gathered through projects that, building on the debate surrounding the social impact of the arts (Matarasso 1997; Holden 2004; Paltrinieri 2022), explored how participatory artistic practices take shape within processes of significant social relevance. The article presents and discusses the results deriving from three research projects: the ongoing PRIN – PNRR 2022 project *Cultural Welfare Ecosystems for Wellbeing*[1], other two previously concluded initiatives, the European Creative project *Performing Gender – Dancing in Your Shoes*[2] and the project *Fammi Spazio!*[3] carried out in collaboration with Arci Bologna and funded by the Unipolis Foundation. This analysis therefore represents a systematization, a cross-cutting interpretation of the various challenges that arise in socially engaged artistic production, particularly within cultural production systems increasingly shaped by reduced public resources and the constraints of austerity policies (Vicari Haddock, Mingione, 2017). Given this political context we argue that it is interesting and urgent to explore how participatory artistic initiatives take shape and what practical responses they generate. This includes examining their ambigui-

ties, exploitative drifts, and potential to foster new forms of subjectivity, all within the ongoing interplay between ethics and aesthetics that defines them.

2. PARTICIPATORY TURN ON ARTS AND CULTURAL WELFARE

Since the 1990s, a dynamic debate has emerged around what is often referred to as the "social turn," "ethical turn," or "participatory turn" in the arts (Bishop 2011). The debate remains ongoing, particularly concerning the relationship between the ethical dimension of socially and politically engaged art and its aesthetic dimension (Bishop 2011; Rancière 2004). This tension between aesthetics and ethics is further mirrored in the divide between the autonomy of art and the relational (Bourriaud 1998), participatory nature of certain artistic practices and their social effects (Kester, 2005).

In the field of performing arts, the discussion on the ethical yet participatory dimension focuses also, among other aspects (Allegrini 2020a), on the distinction between community-based art practices that aim at the integration of social groups, not oriented towards questioning dominant social norms and values (Gielen 2013) – thus lacking a "disruptive" element– and practices of agonistic art (Mouffe 2008) or true artivism (Milohnić 2005; Gemini, D'Amico and Sansone 2021) that understand art as a form of public action (Verde 2007), capable of "instituting" processes of political subjectivation. The term artivism may refer to both the social and political engagement of artists/activists and the use of art as a device for organizing and expressing political positions by civil society (Oso, Ribas-Mateos and Moralli 2025; Salzbrunn 2019).

In participation studies, literature has long emphasized the importance of distinguishing between different gradients of participation. These include the distinction between minimalist and maximalist participation (Carpeniter 2011), as well as the divergence between "instrumental" and "substantive" participation (Sorice 2021). The former identified as a new neoliberal rhetoric or a resource for governmentality (Foucault 1991; Swyngedouw 2005), while the latter described as a potential new form of *politicity* (Allegrini 2020) and democratic innovation (Geißel and Joas 2013).

To understand how artistic practices can prefigure a space for civic and political activation (Allegrini, Izci and Paltrinieri 2025) and at the same time being part of governmental processes and neo-liberal logics, it is necessary to highlight certain socio-cultural processes specific to the participatory sphere today.

[1] The project is implemented by the University of Bologna and the University of Urbino Carlo Bo: https://site.unibo.it/cultural-welfare-ecosystems-wellbeing/it

[2] https://www.performinggender.eu/

[3] https://arcibologna.it/fammi-spazio-la-partecipazione-culturale-giovanile-a-bologna-per-attivare-azioni-di-welfare-culturale/

On one side these practices effectively function as spaces for the generation of citizenship, not so much in formal legal terms, but as a practice (Isin and Nielsen 2008) of collectively constructing alternative knowledge and imaginaries (Appadurai 2004) that can give public shape to an idea of a "fair society" (Bauman 2011). They represent a space for an "art-based" community creation and for resistance (Blaske *et al.* 2020) offering alternative forms of relationships shaped by solidarity and reciprocal learning among subjectivities in a context of individualization (Beck 1992). In this sense, the space of participatory art becomes a potential political space in which resources, perspectives, and values are shared, where relational spaces are created to imagine counter-hegemonic futures (Vannini 2021).

On the other hand, the participatory turn in artistic practice should be also read as part of a broader transformation in public policy that began in the late 1990s, increasingly geared toward collaboration between institutions and citizens. This collaborative turn coincided with the neoliberal turn in the Anglo-Saxon world, a trend that later extended to Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In Italy, this period marked the consolidation of an "institutional offer" of participation (Moini 2012) across multiple areas of public policy, especially urban planning, but also within social and health sectors.

In Italy, a key milestone in this shift was the introduction of the principle of subsidiarity (Article 118 of the Constitution), which redefined the welfare system and the role of the third sector by promoting co-design among public bodies, private entities, and citizens. It should be emphasized that the paradigm of subsidiarity and collaboration, is the subject of an intense debate that contrasts two possible scenarios. On one side it is seen as a risk of privatization and outsourcing of public services, in line with the logic of New Public Management, which promoted a neoliberal orientation in governance models characterized by a triangular relationship between citizens, public administration, and service providers (Bobbio, 2003). On the other hand, it is interpreted as an opportunity for a radical and integrated rethinking of the service system, capable of producing innovative responses to complex needs.

In recent years, the cultural pillar of this paradigm of subsidiarity and collaboration has been increasingly studied, finding a systematic exemplification in the concept of Cultural Welfare (Allegrini *et al.* 2025), introduced into the Italian debate since the creation of the "Cultural Welfare Center" (CCW) in 2020. This conceptualization emphasizes the relationship between the arts and social impacts (Belfiore and Bennet 2007; Matarasso 1997; Paltrinieri 2022), particularly in terms of health

and wellbeing. This conceptualization is influenced by an Anglo-Saxon tradition which, since the 1990s, has developed projects and programs under the banner of "Art on Prescription" (AoP), grounded in a salutogenic perspective on the role of the arts. In Italy, following this perspective, cultural welfare is defined as an integrated model for promoting the well-being and health of individuals and communities through practices based on the visual and performing arts and on cultural heritage (Cicerchia *et al.* 2020). Alongside this "salutogenic" focus, there is also an emphasis on revitalizing the social fabric and rebuilding networks of local solidarity through participatory artistic practices and by encouraging the integration of social, cultural, and economic services (Manzoli and Paltrinieri 2021).

From this perspective, artistic practices can play a vital role. They can serve as key tools within social intervention models grounded in a community-based welfare logic, aimed at creating collective well-being (Ponzo 2014; Maino 2023). It is precisely at the intersection of the participative turn of the arts, of the growing attention to their social impacts and the emergence of collaborative institutional approaches that the concept of cultural welfare has gained traction.

3. FIELD OF INVESTIGATION AND METHODOLOGY

Considering what has been outlined, this contribution aims to address, rather than the relationship between artists and community in participatory art in broader sense, how artistic practices are affected by the growing attention given to the social impact of arts at policy level, within the wide scenarios described above.

The research focuses on the following analytical questions: a. How can the autonomy of artistic production processes – the aesthetic dimension – be combined with the participatory and the increasing institutional demand for the generation of social effects– ethical dimension -? b. How can this complex combination be maintained in a way that is sustainable in terms of the material aspects of these practices, without burdening either the work of the artist or the meaning of the practice itself? c. In what terms do participatory art practices run the risk of being co-opted as resources for a neoliberal agenda, and do they represent a transformative space for creating counter-hegemonic imaginaries?

The qualitative systematic review of the critical topic outlined is based on a stratification of research conducted across various contexts. As such, the material analyzed draws from a diverse range of sources and investigative techniques, following qualitative and participatory

methodologies (Hennink 2010; Stake 2010; Decataldo and Russo 2022).

Specifically, the review presents and discusses findings from two research projects. The first is the ongoing PRIN – PNRR 2022 project *Cultural Welfare Ecosystems for Wellbeing*. This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the semantics of cultural welfare and examine its associated practices, with the aim of identifying key challenges and opportunities for social innovation. The research involves a review of international literature, a mapping of relevant projects across Italy, and interviews with artists and cultural practitioners, conducted using a case study methodology (Yin 2003; Priya 2021). Data collection is ongoing, started in March 2024, and includes 2 focus groups and 10 semi-structured background interviews with key informants (artists, cultural operators and professionals) exploring topics such as the language, practices, critical issues, and funding mechanisms related to cultural welfare. The University of Bologna Unit conducted 7 addition interviews for the in-depth Emilia Romagna case-study.

The second study was conducted as part of the *Fammi Spazio!* project, developed in collaboration with Arci Bologna and funded by the Unipolis Foundation, concluded in December 2024. This project aimed to explore ways to enhance adolescents' cultural participation, focusing particularly on the role of cultural spaces within broader cultural welfare initiatives. The research involved 2 focus groups and 17 interviews with educators, cultural workers, artists, and managers in the cultural and educational sectors. The interviews covered a range of topics, including the dynamics and forms of youth cultural participation, the design of cultural spaces with and for adolescents, challenges in assessing social impact, and reflections on cultural policy. One of the cultural spaces that have been investigated – DAS Dispositivo Arti Sperimentali – is today the subject of a more in-depth study within the PRIN project, with a follow-up analysis on specific artistic initiatives with adolescents.

These two research projects are put into dialogue with the key reflections that emerged in the research within the European Creative project *Performing Gender – Dancing in Your Shoes* from now on PG: DIYS. The project took place between 2021-2024 and involved a collaboration between the research team and 11 cultural organizations, 21 dancemakers, and 9 non-professional communities from eight European countries. The research focused on two main fields of action: the first explored themes of gender, sexuality, identity, power dynamics, and the creation of collective imaginaries through bodily expression and dance practices. The second examined the dynamics of encounters among diverse identities, aiming to support shared, intersectional senses of belonging, as well as spaces of solidarity and community. Unlike the other two projects, PG: DIYS was not situated within the framework of Cultural Welfare. Nevertheless, it offered a valuable opportunity to critically reflect on the role of artists in participatory artistic practices, serving as a heuristic tool that helped shape several of the analytical categories presented in this study.

This paper explores the ambivalences and spaces for resistance that emerged from material collected in research processes mentioned above. Through the words of the participants, processes of self-representation (Hall, 1997; Hall, Du Gay, 1997) are analyzed in relation to the lived experiences of artists, cultural operators, and artistic directors.

4. PARTICIPATORY ARTISTIC PRACTISES BETWEEN AMBIVALENCES AND TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECTS

The findings discussed in this section shed light on the key factors that shape both the potential ambivalence and the inherent political dimensions of artistic practices in generating social impact within the framework of cultural welfare policies. Broadly speaking, the tensions outlined in the first part of the essay unfold across two interconnected and complementary levels, which align with the questions posed in the methodological section.

The first level concerns the relationship between artistic practices and the production of social impact, and how this relationship is understood and put into practice by various actors in the arts sector, including artists and cultural workers. The second level focuses on the dynamics between artists, communities, organizations, and cultural institutions within the broader context of cultural welfare policy.

4.1. *Art practices, communities and social effects*

The voices and experiences collected provided insight into how the relationship between artistic practices that involve participation and social impact is understood and enacted. The first aspect concerns the relationship between art and imagination. This relationship is viewed as a potential space for envisioning the future and imagining oneself in an 'elsewhere', which evokes Appadurai's concept of the capacity to aspire.

In contexts where certain communities are marginalized, it is essential to have arts-based awareness processes that help people connect more deeply with their self-imagination

– who they are now and who they could become. It's about understanding how I position myself as an individual within a collective, and about cultivating a closeness to desire (Artist, FG-PWC, March 2024).

It's very difficult because people's needs are so diverse. There's a strong class dimension among young people, especially in their ability to form desires and imagine a future for themselves.' There's a massive class constraint when it comes to imagining the future. The idea of doing something different means being able to take risks – and who can afford to do that right now? Especially when it means asking their parents, who are already struggling, to take those risks too (Cultural practitioner, INT-FS, November 2024).

Imagination is understood here as a framework within which to situate cultural welfare itself – conceived not through a neoliberal lens, but rather in connection with the grassroots construction of demands that give form and voice to the needs and desires of those "at the margins".

There is a driving force behind imagining something new that doesn't yet exist. We must build on the edges, on the periphery, to imagine what is not yet there – together, if we are able. It begins with a need for dreams and desires where none currently exist [...] We must build within the margins, in the outskirts, where we're not expected to be, starting from needs and necessities, from a revolutionary bottom-up impulse [...] beginning with a desire and a revolution (Artistic Director, FG-PWC, February 2025).

The dimension of imagination is directly linked to the normative dimension (Foucault 1991; Butler 1999), where desire occupies a marginal and threatening position (Butler 2009), deeply rooted in the body and in the experience of pleasure. In this regard, within the context of the performing arts, research participants highlight the role of the body and of embodiment processes in producing counter-hegemonic imaginaries – establishing new "fields of appearance" (Allegrini 2025) driven by the capacity to become subjects through the awareness gained in artistic practice.

My work consists in activating the bodies of those who participate. The workshop space is an alternative space to the dominant social dynamics that act upon bodies. I often observe that many participants go through daily life without being aware of their own bodies, and when they are asked to engage in body-based practices, fear and shame are the first emotions that emerge. [...] Society defines an 'efficient' body as one that feels shame and fear. [...] What's unique about artistic and creative processes that involve people is that they deepen experiences which—without the pressure of a performance goal—can become, in the words of the participants themselves, a breath of fresh air, a source

of renewed energy for facing the world (Artist, FG-PWC, March 2024).

The transformative effects are seen as not limited to the specific relationship between artists and the communities they engage with, but more broadly concern the territory in which cultural organizations operate. It considers the unique social, relational, and geographical characteristics of each context (addressing dynamics between center and periphery), as well as the needs and narratives that arise from those territories. The role of artists and cultural workers can emerge through a practice of listening and approaching the local context, in a circular exchange that builds spaces of mutual recognition.

We need to give some context: we're working in a village of 1,100 inhabitants, which opens a broader reflection on the relationship between center and periphery. [...] Creating the right conditions in a small-town means listening, acting based on that listening, and valuing differences as part of the process rather than focusing on the product. It means avoiding pedagogical or educational pressure. [...] it means opening windows and letting children in, not to teach or instruct them, but simply by exercising the power of wonder and amazement (Art Director, FG-PWC, February 2025).

A metaphor that we often use is: stage, audience, city, periphery. [...] At some point, we started looking out from the stage into the audience [..] we thought, wow, look at these people watching us. [...] Theatres that are lived by artists, even when they host artists from outside, have a completely different atmosphere, a different ritual. There's a whole other way of welcoming both the audience and the visiting artists. And there's room for dialogue. [...] In our audience, people don't just look at the stage, we like it when they look at each other too. And sometimes, we come down from the stage and look at them as well. [...] Just like we want the city to come to us, we chose to do this. And outside the city– metaphorically speaking– there's the periphery. On the outskirts there are the "non-people", those who have no rights (Artist and Curator, INT-PWC, May 2025).

Although not the central focus of this analysis, it is important to mention that physical spaces, such as theaters, rehearsal rooms, and venues hosting shared artistic experiences, serve as vital points from which these practices can foster a sense of belonging and community. These places become active platforms for exploring accessibility, experience, and discovery, where the relationships sparked by creative acts produce effects that reverberate in the development of both individual and collective capabilities. This is especially evident when artistic and cultural initiatives are directed at young people and adolescents, as seen in some of the cases examined:

We have a space that's very adaptable—we like that it's quite bare, and that it offers the possibility for someone to leave their mark on it, precisely because it's empty. And it's empty so that it can serve a purpose—before becoming a 'place', it needs to be a blank canvas, something that can be played with, moved around, within the limits of our technical abilities (Artist, INT-FS, November 2024).

The experiences described reveal a clear awareness of the important role that artistic practices play, from the individual to the collective level, in terms of empowerment and "resistance," particularly through the creation of imaginative spaces that foster active citizenship. As highlighted in the first part of this essay, these are practices that attempt to move beyond the risk of using the arts in a merely "digestive" or normalizing way.

It is useful to emphasize the findings from PG: DIYS, which analyzed artistic practices across different geographical, cultural, and political contexts over a long period of time (Allegrini, Izci and Paltrinieri 2025). The transformative potential of these practices emerges in the co-constructed space formed through the relationship between artists and communities, producing effects not only for the communities involved – which are often seen as the sole beneficiaries of social impact delivered in a paternalistic way – but also for the artists themselves and their artistic practices. This in turn opens a space for cultural and artistic innovation.

It was fascinating to discover how all of this became a source of ideas, of artistic innovation. So [...] we discovered the impact our actions had on people, and at the same time we discovered the impact that people had on us—as artists. This dual track was extraordinary for us. It was incredibly stimulating, enriching, and full of new ideas (Artist and Curator, INT-PWC, May 2025).

I enter the process with a technical skill set that can support co-creation, but that can also be challenged. Each time, it's necessary to define a framework for that operation with a community. It's not my own auteur-driven workshop—it's a we (Artist, FG-PWC, March 2024).

Cultural and artistic innovation is supported by a holistic relationship between organizations, artists, and communities – particularly in contexts that foster dialogue between artistic practices and sites of intervention where space and time are shared, such as artistic residencies, which were frequently referenced in the research:

The place [...] was built in several phases. First, there was an in-depth exchange with the artist to understand their research interests. Then came a contextual analysis, which allowed us to guide the artist toward experiences and encounters with relevant people and realities. [...] On the university side, we tried to connect the artist with scholars from various fields such as anthropology and pedagogy. This only strengthens the artistic creation. So, the most interesting work the artist does is within the context of the residency (Artistic Director, INT-PWC, December 2024).

While the actors involved often identify meaningful and positive impacts within these practices, the ability to navigate the delicate boundary between "normalizing" art and "transformative" art must be situated within the broader system that links the arts to the social sphere, particularly through the lens of cultural welfare. One of the most evident risks is placing undue responsibility on cultural welfare to compensate for shortcomings in explicitly social domains—effectively delegating to culture the task of mitigating or solving broader and more complex social issues. This can reduce the artistic and aesthetic dimensions to secondary or supporting roles.

When do I, as a practitioner and curator, realize that my work is replacing what someone else should be doing—and that, in a way, what I'm doing contributes to dismantling the work of social services? [...] It happens when conflict is erased. When we try to normalize processes that are dangerous, difficult, sometimes traumatic—by making them inclusive, simplified (Practitioner and Curator, FG-PWC, February 2025).

These funding calls are designed to make up for gaps in other sectors [...]. You can't ask culture or art to compensate for the work of social services—because we are not social services (Artist, INT-FS, November 2024).

It is within the shadows and ambiguities of these tensions that collective artistic practices can either function as tools of pacification and conflict neutralization (Benesayan and Del Rey 2018), aligning with neoliberal logics of cultural production, or alternatively contribute to building resistance against exploitative and privatizing dynamics – exposing the contradictions generated by austerity policies and the erosion of public investment in culture and social welfare (Festa 2016).

This makes it essential to break down and examine the processes at play, shifting from an internal analysis of artistic practices and their social effects to a broader perspective, viewing them as part of an ecosystem composed of interconnected factors and relationships.

4.2. Between "autonomy and sustainability": production and participation

Research brought up some interesting dimensions that help to understand the processes at play and

the related strain concerning the relationship between artistic practices, participation, and social impact. Taken together, these dimensions illustrate how autonomy – on the artistic side, in the "moment of production" – and participation – understood as a focus on the social dimension – interact with the critical themes of sustainability on one hand and institutionalization on the other. A first crucial element concerns the actors within this ecosystem and how their roles are interpreted.

This is particularly significant because it relates to processes of subjectivation, not only within the field of the arts but also in the emerging space between artistic practices and the welfare system.

Well, let's say our position—because it's not just mine, it's something truly shared by the artistic direction—is that everything we do, we do as artists [...] Meaning that, even if we wanted to, we don't have the qualifications to be social workers or educators. We are not educators, we are not social workers, we are not psychologists, and we're not drama therapists either (Artist and curator, INT-PWC, May 2025).

The issue of roles and how they are interpreted also emerges in relation to the link between production and participation, which, although connected as part of a continuum, represent distinct segments of the process that each require full and separate legitimacy.

When it comes to production, I've seen many experiments, and I don't entirely agree with involving the community in the artwork itself [...] I've never seen a production project that goes beyond the meaning and value it holds for the community. For me, a work of art that draws from fieldwork must then take a step away to speak not only to those who participated in the experience, but to the world at large. If it doesn't make that leap, it's not a work of art. [...] That's a big risk because otherwise it turns into a mess—an artistic or cultural offering that has no meaning for those who weren't involved in its making (Artistic director, INT-PWC, December 2024).

We must not confuse the moment of artistic production with its functionality or treat it as merely instrumental. There must be a mediating space, where professional intermediary roles are activated to facilitate a genuine process of cultural welfare (Artist, FG-PWC, February 2025).

What has been said is closely tied to the issue of skills and professional profiles activated within participatory artistic practices, to trigger meaningful transformative processes. It also highlights the need to develop a shared language that can be used to articulate and communicate these practices. Different perspectives emerge on this point: on one hand, there is a call for the development of new hybrid professional figures:

A dual competence is needed – both cultural and social. Probably [those working in this field are] hybrid figures specifically needed to activate these kinds of processes. I don't know, this is what comes to mind when I think in terms of skill sets. Anyway, we have a problem that is mostly about language and tools, because the wall of mistrust is not easy to overcome (Artist, INT-PWC, June 2024).

On the other hand, some stress the importance of collaboration between diverse professionals who can contribute complementary skills to support an integrated approach that enables inclusive and meaningful participation:

We don't need to invent a new professional profile; the alchemy works best when there's a social or health-related competence working hand in hand with a cultural one. That's when the machine really starts running smoothly, because the added value is the dual perspective. In this case, we're not creating a new figure, but a new form of professional synergy and a strengthening of existing competencies that are already well established (Artist, INT-PWC, June 2024).

From the perspective of the risks associated with neoliberal logics, it is particularly interesting to highlight that one of the key terms used to describe the development of shared languages is "alliances":

The idea of alliances is really resonating with me. I struggle with it, also because the theater sector is very competitive. If someone puts on shows but works in prisons or with people recovering from comas, then for some, that's no longer considered 'theater.' Yet, some of the most beautiful and artistically innovative projects I've seen were born out of collaborations—not just across artistic disciplines, but also across different sectors. Sure, we ended up producing performances, but they were enriched by these trans-sectoral alliances (Artist and curator, INT-PWC, May 2025).

These alliances aren't limited to different sectors but also involve artists and cultural organizations in the co-construction of projects with social or educational purposes. This requires engaging artists at the outset, rather than at the end of the process, starting from their own artistic questions about the world, and gradually connecting those to the intervention contexts:

That's how the [Media Dance] program was designed [...] It was no longer about choosing an artist based on their position within the artistic and cultural ecosystem but rather choosing the artist who could help us address a specific theme. At the time, we reached out to S.G. and asked

her, *'We know that Lo Spettacolo Rosa isn't a performance designed for young audiences, but would you be willing to adapt it for them instead?' [...] We asked what question had inspired her research and creative path. Her question was: 'What do you see when you look in the mirror?' and we posed that same question to the young participants, who explored it using the Philosophy for Community method [...] This transformed the theater space into a place of dialogue among teachers, the artist, and the young people* (Artistic director, INT-PWC, December 2024).

In this case, the resulting project took shape through a transdisciplinary dialogue – between the world of art and that of education – recognizing that the work's central question «could not be answered or resolved solely by the cultural sector» and that «these different actors were facing the same challenges, but a language barrier prevented them from recognizing their shared struggle».

In the PG: DYS project, the idea of building alliances emerged as part of an artistic production process that transformed the very paradigm of production (Allegrini and Paltrinieri 2022). In that context, the notion of a "human-centered approach" was developed, grounded in horizontal relationships between organizations, artists, and communities. At its core is the idea that programming is a specifically human activity, which, when it replaces economic "transactions" with a value-driven dimension, can question the very conditions that define the act of programming. Time is the key element of this approach—both in terms of programming and production. On the programming side, this means dedicating time to building meaningful questions, understanding contexts, and creating a "conversational-dialogic" space for exchange between cultural and social actors. On the production side, it means valuing the process, rather than focusing solely (or always) on the final product. At a systemic level, these elements enable the construction of alliances and the practice of solidarity instead of competing for market positioning – acknowledging that the arts sector today finds itself in a vulnerable condition: economically, in terms of professional legitimacy, and at times, even politically.

Two things: time and place are fundamental. We need to build spaces where the memory of these processes can take root. That's the starting point. Time is political, administrative. We would need at least three years (Artistic Director, FG-PWC, February 2025).

This outlines the idea of a necessary timeframe for caring for "listening to differences", for the communities involved, and for the conflicts that the territory expresses. It affirms the type of relationship one aims to build with the local context and ties it to strengthening com-

munity bonds. It is crucial to have time to "stay in the process", experiment experiences, and allow them to settle into memory. This includes allowing for "failure" or non-productivity, which is understood not in performative terms but in formative and creative ones.

I find it problematic when people approach the outcomes of these projects from the perspective of the product rather than the process. When we carry out work with communities, I firmly defend the possibility of failure, of changing course, of preparing the audience along the way (Artist, FG-PWC, February 2025).

The dimension of time has repeatedly been linked to the very real need to allow sufficient space both for artistic production and for community participation – alongside the need to rethink these as two distinct "moments" in a process. A key issue is the role of funding mechanisms. Currently, the most widely used method for financing these initiatives is through calls for proposals, which have proven inadequate in meeting this temporal challenge. Funding based on the call-for-proposals model generates a double bind: on the one hand, it limits the ability to achieve truly measurable social impact; on the other, the rigid deadlines and procedural constraints compress and overlap the time needed for both production and participation – causing confusion around roles, process phases, and even the very function of art.

If we take it [cultural welfare] as a totalizing label, then everything becomes "the project". But if we use it as a lens, it legitimizes our focus on certain aspects of a project that relate to cultural welfare, while recognizing that others concern artistic production. As a lens, it helps to ease the friction between participatory processes and artistic creation. [...] If we treat this term as a focusing tool that highlights specific components of a project, then we can hold together participatory projects and artistic production (Artistic Director, FG-PWC, February 2025).

The evaluation of social impact, a central element in the artistic process, reveals all its ambivalences when it becomes the sole criterion on which continued funding depends. This is particularly problematic because the demand for evaluation tends to focus almost exclusively on quantitative indicators (such as the number of tickets sold), which often fail to capture the complexity and depth of the social effects generated, that frequently emerge long after the artistic project has ended. A more appropriate form of evaluation would require the introduction of qualitative tools, capable of recognizing and valuing the processual dimension of such initiatives. Another critical issue is the increasing fragmentation of funding streams, which jeopardizes not only the conti-

nuity of projects, but also the stability of the professionals involved, whose positions are increasingly precarious, and the overall economic sustainability of artistic processes aimed at participation and social impact.

Space and time are expensive: working in a neighborhood of 10,000 people means having staff who are in daily contact with various local actors, each with different skills from our own. [...] To do this, we need to work with what we might call mediators—people who prepare themselves, train daily, and require time. [...] In order to take root in a place and carry out activities that, as artists, allow us to activate relationships with communities and territories, we need staff stability. [...] We need highly trained personnel who stay over time (Cultural operator, FG-PWC, February 2025).

Not everything must, nor should, have a measurable impact on the community or participants. Art also involves research... Activities like these aren't immediately profitable or results-driven; they require non-standard timelines and outcomes that don't fit neatly between a defined start and end (Artists, INT-FS, November 2024).

We try to separate evaluation from the product. It's easier to avoid giving space to my participants by handing it over to professional actors, just so the sponsor sees the final product and says 'well done'? We need to go deep into the processes, assuming they will be recognized for their depth, and that the outcomes remain open. Otherwise, these Cultural Welfare calls risk creating a new form of patronage. [...] What is the role of banking foundations in all of this? Is it truly a form of local engagement, or is it just patronage? (Artist, FG-PWC, February 2025).

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we aimed to contribute to the understanding of how artistic practices are influenced by institutions' increasing focus on generating social effects in various policy areas. We have framed this emerging trend within the context of a complex reconfiguration of welfare systems towards community welfare, based on a participatory and collaborative paradigm. Within this paradigm, the cultural pillar is playing an increasingly important role. As the results presented here have exemplified, artistic practices can truly generate significant social effects. In the context of cultural policy, the concept of cultural democracy (Hadley 2021) has emerged to emphasize the cultural sphere's importance in "making" democracy, primarily considering artistic practices as tools for creating and redistributing cultural capabilities and fostering citizenship and social cohesion.

However, combining artistic production that is not necessarily tied to community involvement and the achievement of specific social goals with community participation in artistic practices and the sustainability of these practices is challenging and an ambivalent process that artists and cultural organizations often experience consciously within the art system. Critical issues such as time, financial instruments and the role of evaluation deeply affect this combination. At the same time, potential spaces for resistance emerge within the narratives we have collected. Firstly, alliances between cultural organizations, artists and communities help to make sense of artistic participatory processes, supporting the work of artists and valuing time and artistic labor beyond the extractive logics of neoliberalism (Caleo 2021; Ruggiero and Graziano 2018). This approach also acknowledges the importance of allowing for failure and the necessity of evaluating the qualitative effects produced in the long term. Secondly, in terms of creation of social spaces where the conflict, differences and normativity issues are not neutralized with digestive practices. Instead, they are the core of artistic practices in the territory in which they operate. We argue that these several issues open a terrain of subjectivation not only of communities involved in artistic practices, but also of cultural organizations and artists together.

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