The Contribution of Participatory Art Projects to a Good Quality of Life in Mountain Regions

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A sense of belonging to a place or group, recognition by others, and other subtle and subjective dimensions such as resonance or identity, are essential to a good quality of life (Max-Neef et al., 1989; Sen, 2000; Rosa and Zilberfarb, 2018). We define a good quality of life for all, in a broad sense, as the achievement of a fulfilled life (Sen, 2000). Despite the fact that these dimensions are inherently subjective, they present a relevant factor for maintaining economic activities such as agriculture in mountain areas (Hinojosa et al., 2016). Place attachment encompasses not only physical space, but also people and activities.

The concept of “territory” (French: “le territoire”) helps to identify these subtle and diffuse feelings, and the physical area where they are manifested (Lopéz and Muchnik, 1997). The territory is not exclusively spatially and socially defined, but it also has a strong historical dimension, thus a common narrative, which serves to explain and justify this space (Waylen et al., 2015; Grosinger et al., 2021). The territory is the result of a specific representation of the inhabitants, the people, their history, thus their identity. These representations, e.g., images, memories, symbols, are materialised in objects and landscapes and have been constructed over long periods of time (Di Meo, 1998). The territorial dimension is a major dimension for the construction of identity and the sense of belonging. Research on mountains shows that attachment to territories is linked through work (Hinojosa et al., 2016), leisure and social relationships (Friedli, 2020) or projects or objects (Petite, 2011). Recent research analyses more subtle and subjective aspects. This requires innovative and place-based approaches beyond of scientific pathways.

The approach of environmental aesthetics can help to explore the role of art in assessing aspects that contribute to a good quality of life issues. Environmental aesthetics suggests that environmental issues should no longer be posed in terms of
environmental objects (pollution, climate change, etc.) but rather in terms of aesthetic relations, i.e., considering ways of doing and interacting with the environment (Blanc, 2018). This includes different relational experiences with transformative dimensions on the environment such as simple trampling, walking to infrastructure projects, agriculture or gardening. These activities through the lens of artistic practices seek to awaken the senses and emotions by mobilising the body or memory through environmental stimuli. This renders environmental aesthetic visible. These practices could be a possibility to establish awareness of different types of place attachment. In Alpine areas were a multitude of local initiatives that have tried to raise awareness through artistic approaches (Sechi, 2017). For example, in situ artistic approaches (e.g. “Horizon Arts-Nature” in the Massif du Sancy in France, or the “VIAPAC - Route d’art contemporain” in the Franco-Italian Alps) offer ways to develop mountain territories by forms of environmental aesthetics (Sechi, 2017). In academia, the special issue “La mise en art des espaces montagnards : acteurs, processus et transformations territoriales” (Guyot, 2017) of the *Journal of Alpine Research* exemplifies the interest to link art and science in mountain regions.

We hypothesized that artistic approaches can reveal aspects of a good quality of life that are complementary to scientific research (Scheffer et al., 2015). We tested this hypothesis by accompanying the French theatre group, “Théâtre des Chemins.” Our research position was pragmatic and based on an experimental approach that combines art and science. It is part of “pragmatic research” whose theoretical foundations have been well established (Dewey, 1993). Frequently the term “research-creation” is used to subsume the multitude of these highly heterogeneous activities. It is in the course of the action that research creation tests and identify what appears (not) possible or not. In particular it looks for and analyses ways of appreciations of possible social-ecological transformations and consequently collective and individual learning values (Blanc, 2018). Based on that, we progressively established the links between the creative process of the theatre group and the possible transformative effects on the social world. We asked two interlinked questions: one on the nature of the quality of life factors mobilised by the artistic process, the other on the processual and methodological dimension that reveals them and transforms the quality of life:

- What is the quality of life factors that certain artistic approaches can reveal?
- What are the methodological specificities of artistic approaches that contribute to the quality of life of inhabitants?

**The Methodological Issue: Accessing the Posture of the Embedded Researcher**

These two different research questions, one that asks for the goal (factors of quality of life), and one that analyses the process to achieve them (the specificity of artistic approaches) requires an investigative approach. From a methodological point of view, the researcher shall be with the artists, or even be involved in the artistic co-creation. By this research can analyse, act, and observe its effects at the same time. The collaboration with the theatre group enabled these conditions for two reasons.

First, the group’s philosophy states “In the cultural field there are not only needs to be satisfied, cultural references to be disseminated, but also capacities to be developed”. The travelling theatre group (www.theatredeschemins.org) has developed an artistic
process that interacts with the inhabitants and the territory to link and connect their performance to the surroundings. It is inspired by the concept of landscape theatre (Rogers, 2012). The group focuses on the enhancement of the original texts of the inhabitants (life stories, legends, tales or songs) in the form of a walking theatre performance against the background of the landscape.

Second, the theatre group worked on the development of an artistic process in co-creation with different actors, including research within the framework of the European project Ecohomy (2020–2022). The European ERASMUS+ funding enabled to hire a researcher to coordinate the project—one of the authors of the article, as well as another researcher to support the interview phase (carried out in dialect) in South Tyrol—the other author of the article. In addition, a partnership had been formed with academics (Grenoble-Alpes University [CERMOSEM]) as well as two other partners whose activities are geared towards local development: BAAT (Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism) and BASIS, “Social Activation Hub in Val Venosta” in Northern Italy. One of the objectives of this project was to collect local oral histories in three European territories: in France, the collection took place in the Beaume and Drobie valleys in Ardèche; in Bulgaria, in the Drianovo region of the Rhodopes; and in Italy, in the Val Venosta in South Tyrol. Each collection led to a public walking theatre performance (see picture 1). Due to their different historical and geographical contexts, these three projects had very heterogeneous results. In this article, we focus on South Tyrol, a mountainous territory with complex historical identities.

Picture 1: Poster of the walking theatre performance in Val Venosta: “Our unseen worlds, words on a walk”
The Venosta Valley: Our Study Area

The Val Venosta is part of the autonomous Italian province of South Tyrol (Alto Adige), a territory marked by an identity of a German minority. German represents the main language (96.51%), whereas the German-speaking population represents about 1% of the population in Italy. Historically, South Tyrol became part of Italy after the fall of the Habsburg Empire in 1918. The Fascist era under Mussolini imposed a strict language policy on language minorities in Italy. A treaty between Mussolini and Hitler in 1939 offered German-speaking minorities to resettle in the “Reich” or to assimilate. Since 1948, in the Italian state, the protection of linguistic minorities has become a constitutional right (Van der Jeught, 2016). The autonomous status allows the Val Venosta a high degree of financial and political independence. Politically, the region is centre-right, with a majority of conservative parties in power and nationalist parties regularly present in elections.

The valley has a contrasting geography between the bottom of the valley and its hillsides. Conventional apple monoculture dominates the bottom and creates a distinctive landscape of geometric and straight lines (Figure 2). Livestock farms on the hillsides may be modern with advanced irrigation systems and tractors adapted to the hilly mountain environment. However, many practices seem to date back to the last century. For example, many farmers keep livestock indoors most of the year and prefer laborious, often manual, haying practices on the hilly pasture land. The theatre group focused on three villages based on aesthetic (e.g., views, landscape diversity) and intuitive reasons (seeking a diversity of inhabitants and land practices). These villages are in physical proximity. San Martin (1356 m) is just above Latsch (635 m), while Val Martel (1301 m) is 15 km from Latsch.
Approach of the Théâtre des Chemins Group

Stage 1—Identification

The theatre group organised a week of workshops to collect oral histories via semi-directive interviews with young Europeans from the three project countries. These intercultural and intergenerational encounters with local inhabitants aimed to foster understanding and tolerance. Inhabitants were selected by different techniques to avoid any political bias. The information was channelled through the municipalities, newsletters, door-to-door and public announcements. For example, the theatre group visited besides people's homes, a retirement home and economic institutions that have been influential in the region (e.g., an old water mill or the strawberry growers' cooperative). The selection of interviewees was iteratively improved by snowballing. One of the challenges was to find oral histories, that go beyond the narration of well-documented historical trajectories (e.g., communal chronicles of about 1000 pages are common in South Tyrolean municipalities), and the description of often politically instrumentalised historical events. To do this, the group stayed close to the individual stories.

The theatre group prepared some warm-up exercises based on improvisational theatre. This helped to sensibilise the young participants on their possible emotional impacts on the interviewees. The group then worked on an analytical grid that encompasses six main themes. These were different economic activities, social relationships, daily life, festive events, the changing seasons, and schooling. Questions addressed temporal and spatial dimensions. They focused on the past (“How was it?”) and the present (“What has changed?”). They also targeted the imaginary by suggesting future projections (“What will change?”) and wishes (“What would you like to change if you've had a magic stick?”). Further, questions focused on the differences between the three villages, by asking how they see each other from their own territory (“How do the inhabitants of San Martin, the upper village, perceive the inhabitants of Latsch, the lower village?”) The group then conducted these interviews in pairs of two. While one person interviewed and listened, the other person focused on possible detectable emotions, such as voice intonation, gestures, expressions, and facial expressions. Most of the interviews took place in a private setting, mostly at home. The interviews were in German, the mother tongue of the interviewees. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into French. This resulted in a material of 17 semi-structured interviews (about 25 hours), and a written transcript of more than 140 pages.

Stage 2—Analysis

Second, the theatre group wrote a script for a theatre play that follows the exact words of the inhabitants and integrates local songs and tales inspired by the testimonies. The theatre play was performed during a walk in which the landscape served as stage. This performance is a guiding thread that underlies the entire creative process. The aim was to produce a play that has an emotional and instructive impact on the participants and...
the audience. It determined and defined the precedent process. This aesthetic aim guided the choice of the territories studied, the interview questions, the sampling of interviewees, and the itinerary of the walk. The artistic work consisted to realign the oral histories and the different landscape elements. For example, the itinerary of the performance followed an ancient way of the Cross in the original direction. This implicitly highlighted the weight of religion in the local culture.

14 The search for an aesthetic rather than a political purpose is part of the group’s ethos. However, art can be instrumentalised for political purposes. The group is aware to not be at the service of political parties when it approaches questions of heritage and territorial attachments. It strives to follow a democratic principle by acting as a spokesperson for a diversity of individuals. For example, if focuses on the original words of the inhabitants and associated factual and lived subjective experiences rather than on pre-constructed public discourses. It warns that the means to achieve a good quality of life sometimes goes against certain societal preconceptions. For example, the script includes some stories of the Korrner, a nomadic people who existed until the Second World War, and who had a bad reputation due to their nomadic lifestyle.

Stage 3—Valorisation

15 The third stage was the public performance of theatre play. The audience was essentially composed of local inhabitants (including interviewees) and people from outside the territory, such as tourists. The viewers were invited to a multi-sensual immersion, punctuated by the walk accompanied by music and the stops where they listened to the testimonies within the landscape. They could weave relationships between what they saw (or felt) in the environment and what they heard (the oral histories). The resuming of the collective walk after each stop presented an opportunity to share emotions and thoughts with others, to complete memories, to formalise the links between the landscapes seen and the stories that have been told.

16 The musicians of the group interpreted local songs with direct links to territories or culture. The work of the group must also be seen as “relational art”, meaning that the final work can only be realised by precedent social relations necessary (Volvey, 2003). When these do not take place, the art cannot be realised. For example, the group proposed to local hackbrett players (traditional instrument) to accompany the texts during the theatre walk. However, these musicians did not leave their traditional setting and the final walking theatre performance could not benefit from this opportunity. From an academic point of view, this suggests that traditions can also act as barriers to access to a good quality of life.

Results and Discussion

17 Based on the observations in the first stage of the artistic process carried out and the other two in progress, three different types of place attachment that contribute to a good quality of life are discussed:

1. Awareness of environmental changes and attachment to a territory;
2. Satisfaction and desire for a common life;
These three factors are based to varying degrees on three characteristics of art: intuition, creation, coincidence.

**Awareness of Environmental Changes and Attachment to a Territory**

The first aspect is the attachment to the geographical space by being aware of its evolution (Debarbieux and Fourny, 2004). This manifests itself in two ways. First, the “awareness of ‘progress’. This stems from the feeling of being less constrained by the geographical space and being able to control it. Second, the contrary “risk awareness” translates the feeling of uncertainty in the face of environmental constraints. Nevertheless, this concern also reflects an attachment to the territory.

The first two stages of the artistic process contribute to “awareness of ‘progress’. The artists’ analytical grid during stage 1 compares differences in generations and changes in the landscape. This dimension is reinforced in stage 2 by the work of writing the script for the theatre play that juxtaposes the views of different eras on the same theme. The installation of the cable car between San Martin and Latsch is an emblematic example that highlights the change within different times. This could be integrated in the script. An extract from an interview illustrates the harshness of former times:

They also witnessed the death of a brother or sister, for example, simply because the doctor..., because it took him I don’t know how long to get up there, the doctor in the valley. (Interview 4)

In contrast, in an interview where she comments on a survey on the guidelines that the commune should follow, an elected representative mentions the happiness of the arrival of the cable car:

Because... they are just happy that it [the cable car] is there, and when you think about it, I go to the departure station, even with the pushchair, in the afternoon... when you think “it’s nice weather”, you are very quickly at the top and you find yourself so much in another world... it’s great that we have this possibility, isn’t it?

(Interview 4)

Stage 2, the script writing of the play is guided by the group’s own ethics. This ethic does not seek to praise modernity or technical progress. It strives to also alert to certain risks linked to these advances in the face of the environmental degradation. For example, the theatre group questioned in its work the possible side effects of progress such as the conventional intensive apple monoculture. From our point of view, a society aware and cautious of risks is also given the capability to analyse the environmental risk factors and the levers of action to make choices. This sense of freedom can then be seen as contributing to the quality of life (Sen, 2000).

In terms of environmental risk, the development of intensive apple farming is one of the most striking examples in Val Venosta. During its interviews, the theatre group noted the fragility of the territory linked to this monoculture. It renders the farms vulnerable during health crises (farms dependent on immigrant labour), to climate change (increasingly frequent hailstorms), to finite resources (the protection nets covering entire orchards are made of petrochemicals) and leads to a loss of landscape diversity. Seen from above, the bottom of the valley looks like a large surrealistic sea of large blue and green plastic roofs, because of the protection from August onwards (see picture 2).
The theatre group strives to participate in the raising societal awareness on these environmental risks. It searches for oral histories of inhabitants that have maintained alternative paths or who have witnessed the turning point of the times: the last millers, owners of plots of land without apple orchards, wine growers, etc. (stage 1). It then presents them within the theatre play (stages 2 and 3): Viewers are invited to the aesthetic experience: a walk in the landscape and a picturesque contemplation of it, sometimes at odds with the oral histories.

This experience gives rise to a debate on the levers for transforming the environment and society. It gives the inhabitants the possibility of achieving a good quality of life by gaining access to the freedom to debate and to be “political” here defined by Jacques Rancière: “Politics is about what we see and what we can say about it, about who has the competence to see and the quality to say, about the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.” (Rancière, 2000).

Satisfaction and Desire for a Shared Life

The identification, analysis, and staging by the theatre group of local oral histories create a sense of belonging among people from different social and geographical backgrounds. Collecting oral histories links geographically and socially distant actors and can create a sense of a single territory. In the first stage of the artistic process, the theatre group systematically asked each interviewee for local songs and stories. Many did not have any ideas, but a few referred to a lost tape containing these longed-for songs.

According to the inhabitants, the Nazi regime hired (for ideological reasons) the musicologist Alfred Quellmalz who collected now forgotten songs in 1940–1942 in South Tyrol (Interview 15). A local resident directed the theatre group to a person in possession of the then-recorded tape. Its owner, a former actress, who lives down in the valley, kindly lent the tape but her tape recorder was no longer working. It was not possible to listen to it immediately. During an interview at a mountain farm, the group saw a tape recorder in the living room. Together with the interviewed farmer, the group was able to listen to these words recorded in 1942. The farmer, visibly touched, concludes:

It’s incredible, this trip back in time. (Interview 12)

Thanks to this tape unexpectedly brought by the theatre group, the farmer made a link with a person with whom he shares the territory and its history but not necessarily the daily life. Indeed, in a more allegorical way it shows the interdependence of these different places of the territory despite their own evolutions. However, in the context of South Tyrol, it is not only a question of connecting two individuals through music, but also of highlighting the struggle of the present generation with the history of the region, where even local music bands are overshadowed by the power of the Nazi regime. Stages 2 and 3 of the artistic process will take up some of the songs from this tape to reinforce these feelings of a shared life at a wider scale.

Strengthening Self-Identity

The third factor is a strengthening of self-identity through distinctions in territorial representations. The group deals with this issue intuitively when selecting the different
villages in anticipation of the theatre walk and the aim to show strong geographical contrasts.

30 During the interviews, the group focused its questions on the differences between the three villages, by asking, how each entity is perceived from different perspectives: “Do you have the opportunity to go to San Martin/Latsch/Val Martel? On what occasions? What do you see from your window?”

31 The inhabitants affirm and define their own identity linked to their life conditions marked by geographical constraints. They manage to do so by comparing themselves to those who do not have the same constraints. Geographical indicators are defined by contrast. For example, an inhabitant of a mountain farm admits:

   And on the other hand, life is hard up there, even today, and you look down and think, ah those valley farmers how nice they are... So it's not really hostility, but we don't really trust each other. (Interview 4)

32 Acceptance of the “other” and of behavioural differences is manifested in the local dialect and in orality. One actor mentioned the expression “Latsch time” (Interview 12). This expression mocks the apparent habit of the more urbanised and affluent population of the bottom of the valley to always be about 15 minutes late. Other quotes confirm the importance of the visibility of one geographical space from another for the sense of belonging. This corresponds to the observation of the Italian architect Francesco Careri who assumes that the landscape is a personal viewpoint and can affect human behaviour (Careri et al., 2020). A woman, who lived very isolated in one of the mountain farms, was confused when asked about her perception of the Latsch:

   The hustle and bustle of Latsch life? No, it's a landscape I don't see, so I don't experience it. (Interview 17)

33 The process of storytelling facilitates the construction of a mental, personal image, detached from a political context. By recounting their experiences, the inhabitants construct their own history. In the context of South Tyrol, this could have a catalytic effect. This region benefits from a well-documented body of information on ancestral and traditional practices. In the past local authorities, often on commission, to foster nationalist sentiment, have used the work of the anthropologists. The artistic approach tries to achieve reconciliation through the possibility of talking about oneself without being nationalistic. The approach is based on intuitions, emotions, and encounters. Artistic sensitivity makes it possible to become aware of this identity difficulty, which is still very much tainted by the Nazi past.

34 The used artistic intuition was exclusively based on aesthetic considerations to capture and “intrigue” an audience. However, coupled with science, which uses intuition in order to find more facts, this choice revealed hidden aspects that contribute to a good quality of life (Perry, 1992).

**Perspectives and Conclusion**

35 This contribution demonstrates that artistic approaches can generate and reveal different types of place attachments, which can contribute to a good quality of life (Max-Neef et al., 1989)
The attempt to couple art and research can lead to discoveries of methods and results that influence the research subject. This is the principle of pragmatic research (Dewey, 1993) where the validation of the method (and/or the factors of its adjustment) are revealed by the observation of concrete results in reality. From the researcher’s point of view, a critical approach to methodology highlights that certain artistic approaches, compared to scientific approaches, can be more effective in assessing and advancing transformations in the social world. Artistic approach based on intuition, coincidence, and orality can help people to take hold of factors favourable to a good quality of life. Creative research, which uses artistic approaches to analyse scientific questions surrounding a good quality of life renders these results visible (Scheffer et al., 2015). Frequently artists are not necessarily aware of these societal issues. They evaluate the quality of their artistic process based on emotional criteria such as the audience’s enthusiasm for the performance. The reflective scope of their creativity is guided by an aesthetic rather than a social purpose (Dewey, 2010). In contrast, by intervening during the artistic process, creative research offers artists more analytical tools for reflexivity. The possibility of adapting or reinforcing certain aspects of their artistic process can further contribute to the quality of life in a territory, even during their creation (Scheffer et al., 2015; Sechi, 2017). Creative research thus cascades transformations in a tangible reality. Summed up, the evolution of the artistic process can lead to the evolution of society and consequently the improvement of aspects that contribute to a good quality of life. The choice of one creative process rather than another is made in the light of new ways that scientific research offers. However, it is necessary to ask whether artistic approaches are always well adapted to territorial contexts. In the case of South Tyrol, the construction of an identity linked to nationalism surprised the theatre group. The group acknowledged and documented the complex history, however it did not feel legitimate and prepared to analyse these subtleties in depth.

This work leads to new questions for cultural policies: how to support artistic approaches that explore territories based on their intuition and/or research and that find themselves far from programming policies and (long-term planning) contracting principles? One needs to rethink how projects that prioritise small communities and underline their self-identity based on oral transmissions that require different forms of proximity can be best put in place. In conjunction with scientific research, this could foster different aspects that contribute to a good quality of life for local inhabitants.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


We analysed the role of artistic approaches to evaluate different aspects that contribute to a good quality of life. We showed that certain artistic approaches have levers for action that can be conducive to a good quality of life. The article follows a pragmatic research methodology. It supports artistic creation and analyses the methodological approach of the artists themselves. The authors of this article were embedded in the artistic process. Our case study is a travelling theatre group (http://www.theatredeschemins.org/). They contributed to the co-construction of a walking theatre performance in the Val Venosta in South Tyrol (Alto Adige)/Italy. This allowed us to identify and assess the links between the emotional state of local inhabitants, and identities linked to place and environment based on 17 semi-directive interviews. We hypothesised that artistic approaches reveal factors relevant to a good quality of life that remains invisible by conventional research methods. The scientific support in this process helps to direct their creation towards a transformation and improvement of the quality of life. We discuss three identified aspects that contribute to a good quality of life: (1) Awareness of environmental changes and attachment to a territory; (2) Satisfaction of and a desire for a shared life; (3) Strengthening of (self-)identity.

Cet article analyse le rôle d'une approche artistique dans l'évaluation des questions relatives à la qualité de la vie. Il montre que certaines démarches artistiques possèdent des leviers d'action pouvant être favorables à une bonne qualité de vie. L'article expose sa méthodologie pragmatique de recherche : un travail de soutien à la création artistique, qui se double d'un regard réfléchi sur la démarche méthodologique des artistes eux-mêmes. Nous présentons ici le cas de la démarche artistique d'une troupe de théâtre itinérante (http://www.theatredeschemins.org/) où l'équipe de chercheurs a contribué à coconstruire la création d'une balade spectacle dans la vallée de Venosta dans le Sud Tyrol (Alto Adige). Le positionnement de chercheurs embarqués, nous a permis d'évaluer les liens entre l'état émotionnel des populations locales, les identités liées au lieu et à l'environnement sur la base de 17 entretiens semi-directifs. Notre hypothèse repose sur l'idée que les approches artistiques mobilisent des facteurs de qualité de vie et aussi que la nature de ces facteurs est à découvrir dans une analyse réflexive du processus artistique en cours. L'accompagnement scientifique dans cette démarche les aide à orienter leur création...
vers une transformation et une amélioration de la qualité de vie. Trois facteurs de qualité de vie sont ainsi discutés dans l’article : (1) Conscientisation des évolutions de l’environnement et de l’attachement à un territoire ; (2) Satisfaction et désir d’une vie commune ; (3) Renforcement de l’identité (de soi).

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