Performing Arts and Social Imagination -

redefining art's social role through the turn to collectively speculative processes

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This article wishes to examine the relation between arts and social imagination. More particularly, its interest lies in the way performing arts –which largely depend on the live presence of audience and the construction of human communities, even if only temporary ones– can contribute to the emergence of alternative social imaginaries, especially in today's socio-political conditions in Western world. Two concerns render this investigation utterly significant at the moment: the first one relates to the severe crisis of social imagination capitalist societies face today; the second has to do with the fact that the presence of arts in the emerging field of 'social imaginaries' –a field primarily interested in this crisis– is a problematically limited one. The field of 'social imaginaries' is described as an interdisciplinary endeavour of scholars that wish to emphasize the important role of 'creativity and the imagination, not only for the cultural-artistic sphere but for articulating responses to contemporary social issues'.[i] Although the strong connection of the term to the cultural-artistic field is thus explicitly recognized in the field's discourse, the major disciplines that participate in it are those of social theory, philosophy, history, political theory and sociology. The almost complete absence of arts from this discourse constitutes indeed an interesting paradox that urges us to draw particular attention to the orientation current art discourses take regarding the social and political value and role of art today, especially in a time when this value and role are seriously questioned.

I wish to engage here with questions connected with both abovementioned concerns by drawing on my five-year-long theoretical and artistic research on the notion of 'social imaginaries', which took the form of a series of performances and performance lectures, research seminars and workshops with the participation of artists, scholars and general audience in Belgium, Greece and other European countries.ii My analysis will be divided in four parts. It will start with a mapping of the current socio-political conditions in western world, characterized severely by a crisis of social imagination. It will continue with the impact these conditions have on performing arts, as well as with problematic understandings of the 'political' in art today; in order to move on to 'social imaginaries', discussing it as a term but also as a practice that can offer an important shift in the way we understand the social and political role of art today. In the last part of the article, I will attempt to articulate a new mandate for art based on a demand for more collectively speculative creations, as well as some working principles that could contribute to the development of such mandate. The aim there is to share some suggestions about the next steps we need to undertake, as scholars and artists, in order to build a strong discourse on the relation between art and social imaginaries and develop skills and methodologies to explore this relation in artistic practice.

1. Crisis of Social Imagination: societies of 'no alternative'

The *least* discussed crisis today, after financial crisis, crisis of democracy, environmental crisis etc. is probably the crisis of social imagination. As Bojana Cvejić and Ana Vujanović have argued: 'Perhaps, the social imaginary does not appear in public debates to be at all in decline, because we have not been aware of

having (or losing) it.'[iii] Two important observations derive from this comment. The first is the fact that crisis of social imagination does not appear at all in public discourses although it constitutes a severe crisis today, severer perhaps than other more 'popular' ones, which in fact constitute its outcomes. In other words, crises such as the financial or the environmental one, which are the ones we usually encounter in news, are a result of the fact that societies today seem unable to imagine and create ways of living together based on values different than the capitalist ones. Nevertheless, we seem to neglect this fact and discuss *those* crises much more than the one that actually creates them. The second observation, perhaps even more significant than the first one, relates to the fact that not only we do not talk publicly about this serious crisis of ours, but we may not even be *aware* that there is such a crisis going on. We may not know that we had something and lost it, as the two writes note, and that what we lost is responsible for a series of other crises we face today.

What is it exactly that we could have, though, or that we used to have and lost? How can one trace back the presence of social imagination in societies and, more importantly, how can one (re)activate it and develop a discourse around it today? These questions, together with the writers' question, 'why is it so difficult or why does it seem utopian to think of a society that is not neoliberal-capitalist?', urge us to remember 'the times when society and the imagination were not deficient and incompatible categories, and to describe what it is that is missing and what prevents us today from investing beliefs and images in a social idea'.[iv] The times to remember, according to Cvejić and Vujanović, are linked to societies that have undergone socialism and social democracy in the 20th century.

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A bit earlier than Cvejić and Vujanović, Fredric Jameson has also argued that 'it is certainly of the greatest interest for us today to understand why Utopias have flourished in one period and dried up in another', while attempting a tracing back of the use and understanding of the term 'utopia' from the period of the Cold War onwards.v In this frame, he has referred to a current 'universal belief […] that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socioeconomic system [apart from the capitalist one] is conceivable, let alone practically available.'vi Subsequently, according to him, late capitalism seems to have no enemies today. I will return a bit later to the use of 'utopia' instead of 'social imagination' or 'social imaginaries' here. For now, it is useful to add that Cvejić and Vujanović have drawn our attention to the serious limitations imposed on social imagination because of similar (pseudo)arguments that posit that since the previous alternative, i.e. socialism, failed despite being big, strong and supported by states, then nothing else can ever constitute a realistic alternative. As a reaction to such arguments, the two writers provoke us to consider also 'the misery of the new individualism' and 'imagine social configurations that are capable of responding to it without repeating the recipes and mistakes of real socialism.'vii

London-based designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby have elaborated on such views in an insightful way. Our dreams today, they have argued, 'have been downgraded to hopes'. Today, we hope that 'we will not allow ourselves to become extinct, hope that we can feed the starving, hope that there will be room for us all on this tiny planet'.viii But there are no more visions. We do not know how to fix the planet, we do not know how to dream collectively about changing things, we are just

hopeful. Since the 1970s, accoding to Dunne and Raby, a series of key changes in the world (such as the fall of Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of real socialism in Eastern Europe, the triumphal victory of market-led capitalism, the individualization of society etc.) have made imaginative, social and political speculation more difficult and less likely. After the failure of the at least one existing sociopolitical alternative in western world – the socialist one– and following the broader frustration that accompanied the decay of the great dreams of the twentieth century –including the social imaginaries that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s in Europe and the USA– we now seem unable to imagine and produce visions for our present and future; to create new dreams for the twenty first century.

At the same time, in the few cases where such collective dreams and alternative models may still emerge today –it would be unfair at this point to not recognize the importance of many, inspiring, self-organized social and economic initiates that emerge especialy the last few years in South Europe and America, in Middle East, Asia and elsewhere– these are either immediately appropriated and exploited by capitalist systems that can turn them into profitable products in a speed faster than the light's[ix], or else they are dismissed as unrealistic or fantasies. In other words, anything that does not align with the dominant lines of neoliberal thought today is something not to be taken seriously. Margaret Thacher has famously argued already a long while ago that 'there is no alternative' and in contemporary policies in Europe and beyond (including those of austerity for example), this seems to be more true than ever.

2. <u>Results of the crisis of social imagination in performing arts: rethinking the 'political'</u>

Performance theorist Bojana Kunst has discussed the results such policies have on art, while reflecting on the broader sociopolitical context. It is more and more often the case in numerous European states today, she has argued, that we witness severe cuts in arts funding from neoliberal governments that question the value and role of art in the public sphere, arguing that the state should not support something that has no effect on the public.x In this frame, contemporary art is discussed as 'leftist elitism' with no public interest or influence. At the same time, artists supported by the state are considered as comfortably protected in their alleged 'laziness' from the self-regulating, dynamic market. Such arguments need to be urgently re-thought, according to Kunst. It should be urgently recognized that the arguments against subsidizing arts are part of a populist, neoliberal rhetoric that aims to profoundly erase any articulation of the communal and community in contemporary society. In this populist corporate language, art should be left to the decisions of 'free' individuals on the market, who will choose (i.e. buy) what they like or what suits them best, making connections in accordance with their own desires. Art is thus reduced to the result of individual choice rather than being something in the common good.xi Even beyond arts, of course, in the light of such populist rhetoric, any support and cultivation of a common good is viewed as political elitism by an engaged leftist circle. Against this background, in a more agonistic tone, Brian Massumi has sharply defined as our urgent task the uncoupling of value from quantification and the recognition of value for what it is: irreducibly qualitative, summarizing accurately the

(re)action that needs to be taken against 'purveyors of normativity and apologists of economic oppression'.xii

Another revealing point in Kunst's insighful analysis, though, is the observation that the crisis in articulating art's value and social role appears more dominant after several decades of 'political art', when we have been repeatedly confronted with numerous socially and politically engaged artistic projects. In other words, today we witness the following paradox: the more art is obsessed with socially-related issues and the public sphere, the more its role and impact on this sphere is seriously questioned.xiii The problem here, as Kunst also notes, is quite complex. On one hand, populist arguments, such as those mentioned above, demand from us to radically re-evaluate and protect what we have *in common*, beyond economic measurements. But, on the other hand, we will need to also critically reflect on problematic functions of the 'political' in art over the last decades.

For Kunst, the current politicization of art constitutes itself a symptom of the disappearing public sphere, of the fact that society is disappearing. Art deals with social problems but is constantly pseudo-active because the social itself is disappearing and we live in a time of radical powerlessness in terms of establishing together the kind of realities in which people's communities would be articulated. Art can have no impact on the social realm because there is *no* such realm anymore to have an impact on. At the same time, art's pseudo-activity relates also to the fact that artistic production has as well become part of the capitalist machinery. Following dominant modes of neoliberal production, artists today are asked to fully preplan their projects, project them always to the future, present the results of projects that have

not even started yet and prove their full value, preferably money value, in advance, only to then be given permission and support to simply execute them. This leaves no space for experimentation, risk or imagination. And this is also why art loses its constitutive role in society, Kunst stresses. Instead of offering social and political alternatives, as is its main role, art today resembles more the treadmill of a gym, where artists always run among several projects, without reaching somewhere.xiv

Art historian Claire Bishop has elaborated further on problematic understandings of the 'political' in art.xv It is often the case today, she has argued, that artists wish to create socially and politically transforming processes –usually through a vivid participation and interactivity– able to liberate us from our problems. In other words, we often witness artworks that wish to take over the work of governments and deal with social problems in their place. This, of course, is exactly what neoliberal governments also seem to argue for, when they demand that art should have measurable/quantifiable effects on a social level. What is asked from artists in this case is to deal with significant social issues that politicians themselves are not dealing with –although this is really their job– while they (politicians) focus on 'self-regulating, dynamic markets'.

But to return to Bishop and art, artistic practices that aim at social impacts with 'transformative' effects in fact, for her, denote a lack of faith in the power of art and the work of artists, which is not to solve social problems but to enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew, which means to speculate about alternatives and not merely reproduce what is already there. At the same time, seeing the art event and the sociopolitical event as indistinguishable, expresses also a serious

lack of faith in politics and democracy itself, implying that the forms and structures these take, as well as all the fights done in their name, are useless in themselves and art should take their place. Only when we make sure that distinctions between the artistic and the social, between the artist and the citizen, do not collapse, only once we do not lose faith in the intrinsic value of art as a third term that we need in order to communicate, only then we can actually start imagining another social and political realm, Bishop concludes.

In a similar tone, Cvejić and Vujanović have also argued that today 'we often see brilliant critiques of neoliberal and individualist capitalism, but only rarely are other possibilities affirmed.'[xvi] Two reasons could be rendered responsible for this situation. On the one hand, as the two writers note, cynicism in art (and beyond) seems to constitute a popular position today. Artists are capable of 'cynically recognizing a disagreeable state of affairs without engaging with a critical or constructive stance from which to change it'.[xvii] On the other hand –given the complex, overloaded with information, dangerously stressful, social structures we are part of– problems are also created due to the fact that artists may have too many doubts about what to affirm while the 'self-regulated' market eagerly waits to award its 'winners' and 'losers' by demanding some big 'something' from them, a demand that definitely paralyzes imagination.

As one then moves closer to the current crisis of social imagination and its relation to performing arts, one can detect some blind spots that obstruct art fulfilling its real aim, which is to address the public in ways that open space for reimagining our social coexistence anew, experimenting with social and political alternatives. These blind

spots relate, on one hand, to main characteristics of capitalist societies: the broader loss of the common world in frames that push atomization, fragmentation and specification of concerns and interests to their limits; the unbearable burden put on artists to 'make it' quickly and effectively, to continuously run without a clear destination, stressed and panicked, on market-led treadmills, arriving nowhere while draining their capacity to (re)imagine the world.

On the other hand, though, these blind spots relate to problematic understandings of the 'political' value of art, which connect artistic processes either with normative functions that aim to intervene and solve 'real' problems –or even use/sell these problems in order to effectively take part in the abovementioned capitalist modes of artistic production– or with counter-productive cynical reactions that prove one smart, 'capable of navigating the 'system' and in that way superior to the others who are blindly overlooking the dark sides of the 'system' that they are part of'.xviii In all these cases, art fails to engage with speculative processes able to offer new articulations of social imagination. In these terms, one can argue that the social and political value of art, especially within the frame of the current crisis of social imagination, should be urgently redefined on the basis of the perception, recognition and establishment of the visibility of what we now envision and will envision in common regarding our social coexistence. I will return to this point later, in the last part of the article.

3. Social imaginaries as a term and practice

At this point, the notion of 'social imaginaries' becomes quite relevant for the discussion. Scholars such as Cornelius Castoriadis –perhaps the most prominent

figure in the field– and, later, Charles Taylor, have used the term to refer to the imaginary significations that provide meaning to whatever presents itself as 'reality' in a society. While Castoriadis emphasizes on processes of institutionalization in this respect –as processes par excellent to represent common views and values in a society– Taylor's approach is more quotidian, touching primarily on how people imagine the social world through their daily experiences. For the latter, 'social imaginary' refers to 'the way people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations', which of course differs significantly from one society to the next .xix Despite the different focus the two approaches may at times have, though, it is important to underline their pronounced turn to plurality in relation to imagination, which always addresses the common, the shared, the co-created. This comes in clear contrast to the equally important, albeit here less relevant, role of imagination as an individual capacity, which may for sure fuel social imaginaries but remains distinct from their complex, communal force and impact. 'To put it bluntly', as Chiara Bottici has argued, 'if imagination is an individual faculty that we possess, the social imaginary is, on the contrary, what possesses us'.xx

In his *Imaginary Institution of Society* –a seminal reading in the discourse on social imaginaries– Castoriadis has argued that societies construct a series of imaginary values on which they base their institutional 'reality', and that no society can ever survive outside of the commonly agreed imaginary significations that constitute it, since these are the ones that orient the activity of the people who live in it.xxi Such imaginary-made constructions are, for example, language, the regulation of sexual

relations, the existence of an authority within society and the way in which this authority is imposed and legitimized etc.xxii Sometimes, Castoriadis notes, these imaginaries cannot even by any means be supported or justified rationally. In the case of religion for example, another important social imaginary, no-one can ever prove that Christian God exists but in a way even if one tried to do so rationally, it would not be of any interest.xxiii

The idea of the 'nation' constitutes probably one of the most dominant social imaginaries. As Benedict Anderson has insightfully argued, every nation in fact constitutes an imagined political community. Although the members of this community will never know most of their fellow-members, yet in the minds of each one of them lives the image of their communion, grounded on specific imaginary principles and values that make us 'British', 'Japanese', 'Greeks' etc. Subsequently, Anderson has noted that 'communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined', commenting in this way also on nationalist views.xxiv I would like to emphasize a bit more on this 'style in which a community is imagined', because it relates to the core of my argument here. If all communities are imaginary ones, then what matters in our approach to them (as art scholars and makers but not only) should go beyond the (pseudo)conflict between more or less 'rational', 'irrational' or 'imaginary' social structures, and focus instead on the *how*; on *the way* social imagination is constructed and used in different communal social constructions. I will return to this point later too.

The merit of Castoriadis discussion on 'social imaginary' at this point, though, is that he reveals the utterly significant role that imagination plays in processes of

institutionalization. As Bottici has noted, Castoriadis 'distances himself from the view of imagination as representation of what is absent, which prevails in modern theories' and which approaches imagination either as a hallucination –something that is not real– or as something yet to come, a better future for example.xxv Contrary to such approaches, social imaginary is in Castoriadis more real than 'reality', since it is exactly this imagination that constitutes whatever is conceived as reality. As himself has argued:

When it is asserted that the imaginary plays a role with respect to the institution only because there are 'real' problems that people are not able to solve, this is to forget […] that people manage to solve these real problems […] only *because* they are capable of the imaginary.xxvi

'Real' problems, for Castoriadis, present themselves in a society only in relation to the central shared imaginary values of this society. If those values were to shift and change, if that society would co-create its imaginary central values in *another* way, then those problems would either not have occurred in the first place or they would diminish. Such radical approach in relation to the central role of imagination in the institution of a society is what distinguishes Castoriadis' 'social imaginary' from notions such as those of 'utopia' or 'fantasy', which are often used indistinguishably in relevant discourses. Although philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur have referred to the ability of utopia to 'shatter' and recast reality, utopia for them still acts as a *variation* on existing reality, as 'a place of distance from and critique of present social reality'.xxvii Utopia always carries the 'ou topos' in it, the unrealizable non-place that can never be reached, remaining hypothetical and distanced from society. And

although it may offer invaluable forceful directions to social imagination, these remain horizons that, as we know well, cannot be reached. 'Fantasy', on the other hand, as Roland Barthes has noted, refers to the absolutely positive scenario that stages the positives of desires that know only positives.[xxviii] If we think of the literally genre of fantasy, for example, we again arrive at fairies, magic forests and other supernatural, magical creatures and far away mysteries.

On the contrary, 'social imaginary' as a process of active instituting in the way Castoriadis discusses it, constitutes a tangible, shared social action *in* this world that directly acts on society and has the potential to shift its established institutions from within. During one of the seminars I curated in the frame of my research, sociologist Rudi Laermans has stressed the fact that social imaginaries are *not* future-oriented or distant forms of social activity that aim to put forward plans for what is to come. On the contrary, they are already present in a society as less visible, or sometimes totally invisible, alternatives, and they have the ability to break historical time at unexpected moments, bringing forth other possibilities. In this sense, social imaginaries can be seen as an action of practicing fractures, opening a different consistency of the social present, which is never closed but always subject to other ways of being together.[xxix]

In societies that define and redefine their needs all the time within a process of constant negotiation, this on-going creation of common imaginaries that institute yet and again a specific society can thus be seen as a political practice par excellence. At this point exactly lies the second merit of Castoriadis discussion on 'social imaginary'. As he has insightfully pointed out, a society that lives according to specific 'instituted', i.e. established and legitimate, imaginaries, is always and at the

same time 'instituting' these imaginaries. No society could ever exist if the individuals created *by* it were not the ones who at the same time create it too. In other words, Castoriadis has sharply emphasized the dynamic, mutual, continuous, complicated and full of potential relationship between an already instituted society – which transcends the totality of the individuals that compose it but which can actually exist only by being realized in the individuals that it produces– *and* those individuals who dynamically practice in common the redefinition of their society while being defined by it.xxx Similarly, George Taylor has characterized social imaginaries as 'paradigms in the making'xxxi, a description that also views such imaginaries as a social (co)doing, an ongoing shared questioning and experimentation that acts on the problematics of collective life, which can be significantly different from the individual one.

If we tend to believe, though, that human societies are always co-practicing such activity, then we better thing again, Castoriadis warns us. The social questioning of established ideas that relate to freedom, equality, the question of what is truth etc., is *not* self-evident. The universal belief that human beings everywhere and always were promoting these questions (the more commonly known as the 'eternal' human questions) and were seeking for replies to them, in fact constitutes a major historical illusion. Castoriadis reminds us that the ninety eight percent of human history and the societies we know –from Asian to Pro-colombian ones, to Byzantine and Medieval European ones etc.– accepted without question all social imaginaries that the institutionalized tradition of their time had imposed on them and raised them with, as criteria, values and purposes of life. There exist two and *only* two societies and historical periods, according to Castoriadis, when the active co-practice of

constructing social imaginaries was actually raised. Two societies, only, where humans *started to question* the traditional views of the world, the traditional ideas concerning what is worthwhile and what is not, what is fair and what is not, and started to ask themselves questions such as: How should society be instituted? What is justice? How are we to think? etc. These two societies were the ancient Greek one from 8th until the 5th century BC, and the western European one immediately after the end of the middle ages.xxxii If, then, human societies in general find it remarkably hard to obtain a strong critical position towards their established social imaginaries and to actively question and re-institute them, this difficulty appears even bigger today, in the time of 'no alternative'. This is exactly why the need to find collective ways to overcome such incapacity becomes perhaps even more urgent than ever before.

The best way to do that, according to Castoriadis, is by counting on our society's creativity, i.e. on the creativity of the specific individuals that institute this society, which he defines as the major threat to established institutions.xxxiii In this frame, Castoriadis also urges us to observe the characteristics of the two societies that managed to work with their creativity in ways that reformed them significantly. One such characteristic was, for example, the fact that in those communities, 'civil society' was itself an object of instituting political action. And through their wide participation in it, citizens actively co-created 'public space' not in the way we understanding it today, as an increasingly privatized, surveillanced space, supposedly 'open' and 'accessible' to all, but as a political domain that belongs to commons, a domain where the community takes decisions on common affairs. Even more importantly, these decisions are not only 'final decisions' but include also everything that leads to them. In other words, in societies that actively (re)institute their social

imaginaries, whatever is of importance has to appear publicly, whereas citizens have to educate themselves in public thinking and speaking *in practice*, i.e. through their participation in such processes, which are not to be left in the hands of 'experts'.[xxxiv]

It thus becomes clear that what is essential for the expression of social creativity, according to Castoriadis, is not discovery but the active constitution of alternatives. The Athenians, he humorously notes:

did not find democracy amidst the other wild flowers growing on the Pnyx, nor did the Parisian workers unearth the Commune when they dug up the boulevards. Nor did either of them 'discover' these institutions in the heaven of ideas, after inspecting all the forms of government, existing there from all eternity, placed in their well-ordered showcases. They invented something, which, to be sure, proved to be viable in particular circumstances, but which also, once it existed, changed these circumstances essentially – and which, moreover, 25 centuries or 100 years later, continues to be 'present' in history.[xxxv]

It is exactly at this point that Castoriadis also brings art in the discussion. Similarly to what happens in social instituting, he posits, 'art does not discover, it constitutes; and the relation between what it constitutes and the 'real', an exceedingly complex relation to be sure, is not a relation of verification.'[xxxvi] Art does not verify reality, it does not mirror reality, it does not reproduce it. Art makes reality, it constitutes it. Art is part of reality too. Moreover, it is a reality that primary counts on imagination for its constructs. And it is exactly for this reason that one could argue that art, especially the performing arts that largely depend on their live encounter with an audience,

constitute a public area that can contribute significantly to the reactivation of the dynamic relationship between the instituted and the instituting social imaginary in the time of 'no alternative'; and, thus, to the emergence of alternative social imaginaries today.

4. A new mandate for art: the turn to collectively speculative processes

As specialists trained professionally –and much more than other disciplines that take part in the discourse of social imaginaries– to explore, analyze, and work with imagination and representation in all its forms, artists and art scholars should be the first to be called upon rescue against our number one enemy today, the social imaginary of 'no alternative'. In these terms, their voice in the field of 'social imaginaries' should be a strongly visible one. At the same time, it is more than certain that this voice's interaction with the other interdisciplinary voices of the field, will contribute decisively to the development of art's discourse and operational modes as far as its social role is concerned.

For the last five years, my artistic research has focused exclusively on forms, structures and aesthetics that could contribute to such mission. Questions such as how can one address the public today in order to reactivate common social imagination and shift 'instituted' realities, as well as how can one work with representation in order to construct narratives able to assist the emergence of alternative social realities, have been central in my work. Due to the limitations of this article, I will not refer to the concrete artistic projects that were created in this frame. Drawing on them, though, I will attempt a speculative articulation of a new mandate for an art that

wishes to actively take part in the field of social imaginaries today, as well as of some working principles that could contribute to its development.

According to this mandate, art's social and political value should be urgently (re)defined on the basis of the decisive role it can play in facing today's severe crisis of social imagination by giving form to commonly envisioned social alternatives. Art, in this sense, should sharply focus on the creation of frames that (re)activate social imagination by constituting complex speculative worlds, as alternatives to the 'real' one. If our established social imaginaries have led us to the dead-end of 'no alternative', artists urgently need to develop methodologies that will experiment with the creation of 'counter-imaginaries' wherein alternatives can still be collectively revealed and practiced. This new mandate could be called 'the turn to collectively speculative processes'. Through it, art can take the place it deserves as major contributor in the field of social imaginaries while reacting to (pseudo)questions regarding its social impact. At this point, though, the real question emerges: *how* can this contribution take place? What are the new tools and methods that artists need to develop in order to delve deeper into the 'style' in which *the specific communities they work in* are imagined, but also in order to be able to shift this style to other directions. Below, I try to articulate a series of working principles that could contribute to such endeavour.

The first principle emerges directly from the above specificity. *Locality* plays a decisive role in art's effort for collective speculation. In order for 'counter-imaginaries' to be revealed, artists have to focus much more attentively on the particularities of the specific context they create and place that work. The time of

exciting 'globalization' that established the 'successful' careers of numerous 'international' artists in Europe and beyond –to the extent that it often makes no difference if one attends a festival in Brussels, Vienna or Berlin– while imposing on them a life style full of exhausting movement around the world (where you meet many but you actually connect to nothing and no-one) seems to have arrived to its end. It becomes more and more obvious during the last years that such superficial, market-led approach cannot correspond to current needs anymore.

Already in 2007, performance artist Eleonor Bauer has vividly described the image of artists that travel far to make work inside empty rooms that are very much the same with the empty rooms of the city they just left behind. Only one thing changes and this is what stands outside the window of each room. This difference rarely matters, though, since artistic works are mainly created in close connection to the artist's omnipresent 'mac of one's own' (probably the most popular computer brand among 'international' artists), which connects one easily, fast and virtually way outside the window. Against this impersonal production mode, Bauer challenges us to think about why we have to move so much; about how we can use our international network to work differently than simply running around the globe chasing after the money and space; about how much and how we can care about the particularities of the place we work in; about the critical relevance of our presence in one place or another; in other words, about how can we challenge ourselves to include what is outside the window.[xxxvii] Bauer turns her gaze here to the 'inside' perspective that Bruno Latour has also insightfully discussed more recently.[xxxviii] According to him, there is an alarming social and political danger in the dominant 'global' perspective that views Earth 'in general' from out, far and above, missing the complexities that

constitute the social imaginaries of each one of its communities, which are particular to that community only. And he insisted on the need to shift our attention to the complexities of the 'inside' as soon as possible.

Such demand goes a step further from the older demand of conceptual art and other art genres to question the artwork as an autonomous object and approach it in relation to its context (mostly the financial and institutional context of its production). Here, the need is to look more carefully 'outside the window', not only of the room where the work will be produced but also of all rooms where it will be presented after its production. Moreover, this look should not look out 'in general' but examine and rework with concrete (i.e. also limited) elements of that context. This means that artists need to create open structures that will allow the work to come in dialogue with the 'inside' of the 'outside the window', which means structures that can change and become different *in* relation to the particularities of that 'outside'.

A second principle derives directly from this first one. If the need is to observe and work with the complexities of locality, we will definitely need to develop much stronger skills of attention for such task. During the recent 'POST-DANCE-ING' conference[xxxix], Jeanine Durning has talked about 'a *virtuosity* of attention and a virtuosity to attending to those details that are not seen and do not take discernable form' and she has defined art as 'the word we use for the kind of attention you can bring to where you are, rather than where you want to be or where you think you should be', emphasizing once more the value of the complexity of the local here and now.[xl] Konstantina Georgelou has also discussed the relation of art to attention especially in times that demand quick eyeballs that constantly engage, process and

evaluate, training us masterfully in a continuous process of surfing the surface. In this frame, the need to re-skill ourselves, as makers and audience, in 'spending time with', in deciding for ourselves how we want to exercize contemplation and navigate through the world, becomes prominent.xli Art, especially the performing arts that act as sculptures of (more or less expanded amounts of) time, within the frame of their events, constitute the ideal territory to (re)train our ability to understand, practice and reconfigure attention and the temporalities involved in such task. The creation of artistic structures that provide insightful frames for attentive approaches of the style in which our communities are and can be re(imagined), is therefore another necessary part of art's new mandate.

As soon as we recognize the need to turn attentively to the particularities of local contexts, the third principle emerges. This relates to the quality such attentive approach should have, which is also my main topic of interest here. There are definitely several ways to understand and (re)work with a specific socio-political context. Moreover, as already said, one could argue that art has focused exactly on such task especially during the last decades. Bishop, for example, has referred to the term 'social practices', used in the USA for artistic modes interested in intervening in social contexts. The fact that 'art' is totally absent from this term, as opposed to other similarly used ones, such as 'useful art'xlii, 'artivism'xliii etc., could be seen as indicative of the strong social focus such practices wish to have. This same absence, though, could also be seen as problematic, for reasons explained in the second part of the article. Nevertheless, in all cases, terms such as 'social practices', 'useful art', 'artivism' point to the aim for immediate, tangible outcomes as results of artistic interventions, and express the demand for art to become part of processes with

significant, graspable impact. While sincerely cherishing the invaluable efforts done in those frames, I would like to make here a suggestion for a radical shift to less 'hopeful' and more 'unreal' or 'speculative' artistic interventions.

I referred earlier to Dunne and Raby's scepticism towards 'hope' and to the fact that our dreams today have been downgraded to 'hopes'. I would now like to elaborate a bit more on that view. Under the provoking title 'Fucking the Regime of Hope in Choreography', choreographer Malik Nashad Sharpe has recently argued that although hope is necessary for humans as a territory that hosts their 'good', 'useful', 'positive' sides, and as the need to attain a state of optimism, this state can also been seen as a dangerous and rude one, especially for those who suffer most in this world, as are the people of colour for example.[xliv] Aligning with the views of Dunne and Raby, the choreographer has posited that hope often fails to address things or shift something in the world, while discouraging immediate action. What if we take a radical performative turn though? What if art can actually do nothing for dismantling or disarming hate? Nothing for challenging established forms of approaching things we do not understand? What if we are not hopeful?

Once we move away from the limiting promise of hope, once we enter a politics of hopelessness, we might be able to at least start articulating ways to expand the possible. If, as Laermans has argued, social imaginaries are already present in a society, ready to crack the surface and pop up at unexpected moments, then art needs to practice the fractures through which such appearance will take place. This will not happen via 'hope' nor via a normative approach that will reply to 'real' problems, though. In neoliberal times that demand from us to produce in effective, profitable,

rational ways, we have to reply with frames that move against dominant social intensities; ways that do not 'produce' something, that do not offer 'good solutions' to anything, that move less 'properly' and more imaginatively. In other words, we have to reply speculatively by finding ways to crack things open.

Drawing on such views, I would like to call this third principle 'quest for the Unreal', as an oppositional concept to hope. Based on it, art cannot and should not wish to produce ends nor wrap things up in neoliberal ways. On the contrary, it should work for the im-possible, not in the utopian sense, but more in terms of aiming to expand the possible by revealing what lies under it and could become its alternative. Art's value today, hence, lies in the construction of 'im-possible', 'unrealistic' processes and narratives regarding *other* possibilities in this world, made from *within* the particularities of the specific context it takes place in and in close relation to it. In other words, such artistic endeavour places itself *between* the normative and the fictive, offering speculative, imaginative (micro)shifts to the possible. While gentle, such shifts also gently work against what is expected of people when they are together.

In a lecture I attended recently in Brussels, choreographer Thomas 'Talawa' Prestø was asked if he is still hopeful as to whether things will one day change for people of colour, especially in relation to the fact that our white eyes are skilfully trained to omit any history and contribution of black cultures in the world. His straightforward reply was that he is not hopeful at all, that only from a quick look in the world around us it becomes clear that we have failed and we keep failing every day. And then he added that it was exactly because of these failed efforts of his community, which

were nevertheless attempted as impossible missions, that he himself was able to study, complete his MA degree and be able to talk to us that day.xlv On this note, I would like to also call the third principle in art's new mandate 'proceeding through the impossible'.

Artistic creation that operates via the principles mentioned above, could be characterized as 'dramaturgy-driven'. Dramaturgy, in this case, should be understood as a 'working on [the creation of] actions', following the etymology of the word deriving from the Greek 'drama' (action) and 'ergon' (work), and not with reference to the 'compositional logic' of a work on any other process of 'cohesion making', as is often the case in relevant bibliography. To define a work as 'dramaturgy-driven' in this sense means to evaluate it on the level of the heightened mode of awareness its actions create towards the systems that generate social interaction within its context.xlvi The argument here, thus, is that the artistic structures that assist the creation of local, attentive, 'unreal' counter-imaginaries are operating as collective (micro)actions, i.e. as a commonly practiced heightened mode of awareness through which to observe the style of social imaginaries within specific contexts.

The notion of 'action' is of course central here. In the recent publication +, which I co-authored with +, we elaborated on the creation of 'actions' in performance.xlvii In this frame, we drew on the analysis of philosopher Hanna Arendt, who has discussed 'action' as the human ability to start something new and concrete in the public sphere (initiation) which involves and addresses many (plurality) and which is not necessarily bound to the initial action but is nevertheless bound by the sphere of human relationships in which it appears (boundlessness). The results of such actions

can never be estimated in advance (unpredictability).[xlviii] According to Arendt, this type of plural, boundless and unpredictable actions tend to disappear completely in a time when all actions are gradually absorbed by the principles of capitalist societies of extreme atomization and are evaluated merely on the basis of their 'controllable', 'effective' and 'productive' performance and results.

I would like to close my argument by addressing a plausible objection that may have arisen by now. Given that art's aim, as often said, is to act as a mirror of society, comment on it and expand its perspectives, in what way does this 'new' mandate to focus on a common practicing of speculative social alternatives –as suggested here– differs from that aim? Similarly, in what sense the need to act collectively in this frame differs from the turn to 'relational aesthetics' already present in art since the 1960s?[xlix] I believe that the reply to both questions is given through the abovementioned approach to dramaturgy. The suggestion here is to move from 'relational *aesthetics*' to 'co-created *(micro)actions*', i.e. to creations whose value cannot be conceived outside the *materiality* of their unstable, unpredictable and often unnoticed micro-resistance to capitalism's pseudo-rationality of exhaustive control, opening to a rhythm of their own, building indefinite potentialities.[l] This does not mean, though, that an artwork should abolish its interest in its aesthetic value, nor that it should replace that interest with an activist interest that demands immediate rationally measured results. What this new speculative mandate aims to suggest, though, is that artistic actions should be (co)created as sharp initiatives that rework 'unrealistically' on specific social elements in particular contexts, in ways plural and unpredictable. From thereon, other social imaginaries can pop up…

i Suzi Adams and Jeremy C.A. Smith, eds., *Social Imaginaries: Critical Interventions* (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), pp. xxiii.

ii author's personal website reference to be added after completion of peer review.

iii Bojana Cvejić and Ana Vujanović, 'The Crisis of the Social Imaginary and Beyond', in Marie Nerland, ed., *The Imaginary Reader* (Bergen: Volt, 2016), pp. 34-37, p. 35.

iv Cvejić and Vujanović, p. 35.

v Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future.* (London: Verso Books, 2005), p. xiv

vi Jameson, p. xii.

vii Cvejić and Vujanović, p. 35.

viii Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013), p. 1.

ix It is indeed remarkable that the 'me too' motto of the recent feminist movement against sexual harassment and assault can already be bought in products ranging from T-shirts, to cups and even a houmous brand.

x Bojana Kunst, 'The Project Horizon: On the Temporality of Making', *Maska*, No. 149–150, vol. XXVII (Autumn 2012): pp.66-73, p. 71.

xi Kunst, p. 71.

xii Brian Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value: A Postcapitalist Manifesto*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 3.

xiii Kunst, p. 71.

xiv Kunst, 'The Project Horizon: On the Temporality of Making', p. 72.

xv Claire Bishop, 'Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvXhgAmkvLs, accessed 27 November 2019.

xvi Cvejić and Vujanović, p. 36.

xvii Cvejić and Vujanović, p. 36.

xviii Cvejić and Vujanović, p. 36.

xix Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 23.

xx Chiara Bottici, 'From the Imagination to the Imaginal: Politics, Spectacle and Post-Fordist Capitalism', *Social Imaginaries* 3,1 (2017) pp. 61-81, p. 63.

xxi Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. K.Blamey, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

xxii In one of the research seminars I curated in the frame of my research on social imaginaries, a participant defined language as 'a dialect with a flag and army', accurately illustrating the power relations involved in processes that distinguish 'dialects' (the languages of minor communities) and 'languages' (a state's official choice).

xxiii Cornelius Castoriadis, 'On The Imaginary Institution of Society', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6O7_YswJOXY, accessed 27 November 2019.

xxiv Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities - Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 6. In the same work, Anderson refers also to the fact that the style in which a society creates its 'imaginaries' is not always a positive one. After all, Nazism was also a [distorted] social imaginary, which proved that social imagination and creativity are not always necessarily constructive. As he characteristically notes about nationalism in general, this is 'not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist' (p. 6).

xxv Bottici, p. 64.

xxvi Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 133, my emphasis.

xxvii Paul Ricoeur cited in George H. Taylor, 'Delineating Ricoeur's Concept of Utopia', *Social Imaginaries*, 3, 1, (2017), pp. 41-60, p. 42.

xxviii Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together*, trans. K.Bruggs, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 4.

xxix reference to be added after completion of peer review.

xxx Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society,* 1987.

xxxi George H. Taylor, "Foreword", in Suzi Adams and Jeremy C.A. Smith, eds., *Social Imaginaries: Critical Interventions* (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), p.xii.

xxxii Castoriadis, 'On The Imaginary Institution of Society', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6O7_YswJOXY, accessed 27 November 2019.

xxxiii Castoriadis, *The Social Institution of Society*, p. 133. A useful distinction could be necessary here. 'Creativity' constitutes a popular term today in the vocabulary of capitalism. The whole philosophy of the 'successful' career of the 'unique' entrepreneur and his/her 'groundbreaking' start-up idea has been based on this word. Such individualistic understanding of the term is quite different from the complex creative tensions involved in a collective imagination that constructs social imaginaries, which are the one Castoriadis refers to.

xxxiv Cornelius Castoriadis, 'The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy', in Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, Translated and Edited by David Ames Curtis, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 277. Here Castoriadis also notes that for the citizens of Athens in ancient Greece, the idea that there could be 'experts' on political affairs would be inconceivable and it would anyway constitute a mockery of the idea of democracy itself, which means 'the power of people' and not of 'experts'.

xxxv Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p.133.

xxxvi Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p.133.

xxxvii Eleonor Bauer, 'Becoming Room, Becoming Mac - New Artistic Identities in the Transnational Brussels Dance Community', *Maska*, vol. XXII, no 107-108 (Summer 2017), pp. 58-65.

xxxviii Bruno Latour, 'INSIDE', a lecture performance presented in Kaaitheater, Brussels on 24 November 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzPROcd1MuE , accessed 27 November 2019.

xxxix POST-DANCE-ING conference took place in Stockholm from 23-25 October 2019 and it was organized by MDT, Cullberg, Danscentrum and DOCH, for more information: https://mdtsthlm.se/archive/6671/ , accessed 27 November 2019.

xl Jeanine Durning, Response to Reggie Wilson, https://riksteatern.solidtango.com/watch/3f7t0eg2, accessed 27 November 2019.

xli Konstantina Georgelou, 'SEMESTER', *Performance Research*, 24, 4 (2019), pp. 88-95, p. 94-95.

xlii Arte Útil, https://www.arte-util.org, accessed 27 November 2019.

xliii See among others: Florian Malzacher, *Truth is Concrete* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014).

xliv Malik Nashad Sharpe, 'ON HOPE: Fucking the Regime of Hope in Choreography', in the frame of POST-DANCE-ING conference, https://riksteatern.solidtango.com/watch/gewetyc6, accessed 27 November 2019.

xlv Thomas "Talawa" Prestø, 'The Black Body as an Archive & What You Are Trained to Not See', lecture organized by P.A.R.T.S., Brussels, 6 November 2019, author's notes.

xlvi Pil Hansen, 'Introduction', in Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison, eds., *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), pp. 1-27, p. 19.

xlvii Reference to be added after completion of peer review.

xlviii Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1998).

xlix The term is mainly known through Nicolas Bourriaud's book with the same title (Les Presses du reel, 2002).

l Erin Manning in her book *The Minor Gesture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016) talks more extendedly about similar views. The 'minor', as a term, and its relation to 'materiality', as well as the relation between arts and crafts in this frame, are issues that could also significantly contribute to the development of the new mandate I wished to articulate here, which can take the discussion about the way art could redefine its social role in society even further. My aim is to elaborate on them in a future article.