EXPLORING THE UNIVERSE OF THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY

With An Imaginary Symposium, the performance maker and researcher Danae Theodoridou reflects on the notion and practice of the 'symposium'. Contrary to the contemporary symposia, which consist of a series of lectures, the ancient Greek version was a party with food, wine, games, entertainment and in-depth discussion. An Imaginary Symposium tackles the 'social imaginary' – "watching the act of thinking could trigger you to start thinking for yourself." Eva Decaesstecker (art historian, writes for Kaaitheater, Rekto:Verso and CC Strombeek) in conversation with Danae Theodoridou (21.09.2018).

An Imaginary Symposium concludes four years of research and creating performances around the notion of the 'social imaginary'. How should we understand this 'social imaginary'?

Social imaginary is a sociological concept that is mainly discussed by the Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis and Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. It refers to the agreed imaginary principles on which we base our understanding of reality in a society. Instead of understanding this imaginary as (personal) fantasy, Castoriadis and Taylor see it as a concrete social practice. A good example is the notion of nation: nations are imaginary constructions. At some point, it was decided that a certain territory and group of people belonged to Greece, for example. But this could have been determined differently for other hypothetical reasons. Ultimately, it's a totally imaginary value that, nonetheless, holds immense value.

This fascinates me because we live in a time of extreme danger and a lack of (social) imagination. Some analysts state that this lack is caused by specific developments in the Western world: the fall of the Eastern Bloc – the moment when real socialism as a social alternative collapsed – the triumph of capitalism and the atomisation of the society prevent us from thinking of alternatives today. We cannot imagine an exit from capitalism. Nor can the art scene, which I find worrying. Artists increasingly discuss art through a political lens, though they often report on social problems instead of imagining alternatives. Art is incapable of imagining these alternatives as it has become a part of the same machinery as capitalism.

What is interesting about the social imaginary, in contrast to 'utopia' for example, is that it is a concrete social practice based on the agreements that we make. As Castoriadis says: the Athenians didn't find democracy among the flowers of the Acropolis. They imagined something new without formulating a hypothesis for the results. Yet, democracy proved to be valuable and, centuries later, still constitutes our main governing system.

You say that art also functions in this same narrative or 'reality' where there seems to be no alternative. With your performance, are you aiming for a new collective imagination?

I experiment with conditions that might be able to contribute to this. On one hand, I want to comment on the evolution of how certain terms and practices of sociability and sharing knowledge, such as the symposium, came to be understood today. For this, I go back to the symposium in the Ancient Greek sense of the term, which was, primarily, a social encounter, party or celebration. The symposium of Plato, for example, was a party for a theatre writer who had just won an award. The party had food, drinks and a large discussion – for them, a social gathering was inconceivable without discussing issues of social concern. Today symposia are connected to authorisation and a commercialisation of knowledge. It is a competitive authorisation about who has the right to speak. With An Imaginary Symposium, I want to bring back the value of social exchange with regards to the understanding of knowledge and how it is produced.
For this reason, I wanted to put groups of people on stage that want to think together live as a reaction to our inability to imagine together today. This is why I also made an algorithm, which, in some way, acts as an additional performer. The algorithm pushes the performers' thinking in directions that are increasingly absurd, poetic and imaginative.

You invite an algorithm to interfere with human thinking processes. Are you suggesting that humans are incapable of independently altering their way of thinking? Do we need an outside technological tool to help us surpass our own imaginative impasse?

It's true that at one point a collaborator told me that the performance risks becoming very dystopian. The limitations of the human brain are presented and one could think that the algorithm is doing a better version of what we do for ourselves. Although her description worried me, being faced with your limitations is not necessarily a bad thing. It grounds you, as you must rely on what you have instead of thinking and acting as if you are the centre of the world. However, in the case of An Imaginary Symposium, this algorithm only functions as an external trigger to find the topic of the discussion or assist some of our games. It is clearly used by the performers as an agent and not as a ruler. It is fed with the index vocabulary of three books that discuss social imaginaries. So the words it combines are not totally random. At the same time, the results are usually very absurd and poetic.

Which elements did you include from the Greek symposium? And which did you leave out?

We focused on the parts that were more closely related to the social connection of the classical symposium. We first decide on which topic we will discuss. Then we do a small ritual, passing a glass from right to left while drinking from it. This used to be done as a way to commonly agree and commit to each other in the discussion. The discussion is also interrupted by music and games.
During the period of the Ancient Greeks, there was a leader of the symposium who was responsible for ensuring that participants did not get drunk and obstruct the discussions. Even though we serve some wine and water, we didn't include the leader. Also in contrast to the ancient version, we start with an empty space and arrange the elements of the set-design differently each time. This depends on how we want to meet each other on the specific day of each performance.

You also write and work a lot around dramaturgy. How can dramaturgy help the approach to new narratives and the social imaginary?

I work on dramaturgy from a specific perspective: for me, dramaturgy is a working on actions. This comes from the etymology: drama (action) and ergon (work). So I'm interested in processes that create (performative) actions today. I understand 'action' as Hannah Arendt described it: as a political human ability to initiate something new; it addresses many (it's plural, so doesn't just concern yourself); it is boundless and the result is unpredictable. This is also Castoriadis' definition of the social imaginary. The democracy that the Athenians started to practice was something plural. It was boundless and unpredictable in its results. Personally, I understand dramaturgy like that: how can we approach dramaturgy as working on actions, in order to create actions on stage that are plural, boundless and unpredictable?

The performers talk and improvise around the subject of the social imaginary. Did you cast people who were already acquainted with this topic?

This was, indeed, a very big question for me when I started the project: who would be suitable to perform this work? I had already decided to only cast women, as it was only men in Greece. Afterwards, I started working with dance and theatre performers. At one point I started thinking, perhaps I should approach strong thinkers and intellectuals. But putting seven philosophers or like-minded actors on stage would probably be incredibly dull. I also didn't want to replicate a contemporary symposium. So I had to find smart people who, together, could contribute multiple mindsets.

It was stressful in the beginning, as the performers felt obliged to say something interesting. It is, indeed, a very risky performance: everything happens on the spot, which makes the risk of failing very present. The performers don't know what they will talk about beforehand, as the topic of discussion is established in relation to the random phrases of the algorithm during the show. To have your thinking exposed on stage in front of an audience that can immediately dismiss anything you say is quite demanding. This is why I insisted on shifting the focus from producing interesting reflections to the act of thinking itself. This is my main aim for this work anyway and something that I consider to be very interesting to watch. In that way, I want to trigger people to think more. We don't practice our thinking much today and we so easily take things for granted. It is very impressive to see how a brilliant thought may emerge – because it does – but maybe after three less interesting thoughts.

There are two versions of An Imaginary Symposium, one in which the audience watches and another in which the audience participates. Why did you make two versions?

We noticed that it is interesting to enter this universe of sociability and common thinking and wondered if some audience members would like to participate by trying one or two of the tools used during the performance. What started as a workshop ended up becoming a participatory performance on its own where audience members use a similar score of instructions to create their own symposium on the spot. The artistic proposal is visibly different in the two versions so I decided to keep both. In the stage version, one watches performers, who have been trained in the thinking 'sport' we created, develop strategies for thinking together. In the participatory version, one is able to participate in this 'sport' in a more spontaneous way by experiencing possible shifts of thought from the inside. For the audience version, the score is simpler as I only extracted the main tools that assist them to meet and think together for a while. In every phase of the discussion, there are one or two main thinking tools as well as additional factors that obstruct the performers.

It's important to me that 'content' is not the sole focus of the performance. It is not about saying something clever and innovative, although genuine thinking does often emerge in both versions of the work. It is more about seeing the human machinery or thinking 'action' at work and realising what it can do and how. Hopefully, an audience member will be triggered to think more in their own way by seeing the act of thinking on stage. Also, it is about giving the audience an opportunity to enter this social imaginary universe and try it out for themselves.

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