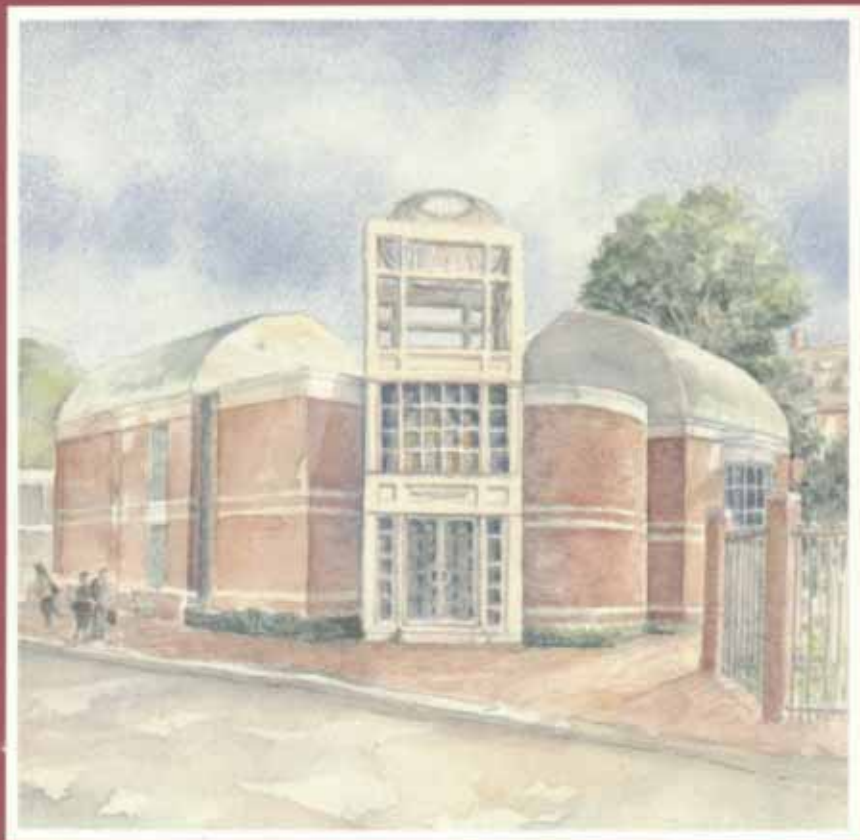


# HARVARD REVIEW



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# Société Imaginaire

## Introduction

"Shipwrecked...on our island and surrounded by the sinister world of *communication*, where through the most sophisticated technical means man has managed to achieve the ability to say everything to everyone and, in the end, to say nothing at all"—this is how poet Alvaro Mutis visualizes the ordeal of the present-day artist or intellectual. The very word *communication* has become a travesty. The ever-increasing complexity of our world has been matched by the even faster growth of the power of the innumerable systems that generate and spread information. But this power is delusory. The gigantic fax machine of the world may send us more and more messages every minute, each one labelled "EXTREMELY URGENT" in the corner, but it is precisely the frequency of the messages and the uniformly large print of their eye-catching labels that make us numb. What is worse, the messages themselves, in their desperate efforts to catch our attention, become not only louder and louder but also increasingly simplistic. "Everything is reduced to a slogan, cliché, or newsbite," writes another poet, Mark Strand. "Anything more elaborate is mistrusted." Ultimately, we are left with the alternative: either to shut the door of our perception or to leave it open only to let half-truths, at best, creep in.

Any individual attempt at breaking the mold seems, at first glance, doomed; but then, as in any apparently doomed cause, the old question of "if not I, then who?" may nag an individual so much that he or she makes the attempt after all. And sometimes such a first step leads to a surprising success. This has certainly been the case of the *Société Imaginaire*, a brainchild of the abstract painter Batuz and beneficiary of his Batuz Foundation. The *Société* is most emphatically not a formal organization which would require its members to toe any political or ideological lines. If it promotes any specific idea, it is the idea of *dialogue*: a genuine dialogue between thinking and creative people, not the pseudo-dialogue between the exhausted apparatus of perception and the never-tiring fax machine of global "communication." The purpose of the *Société* is not to close anyone in the cage of yet another standardized international symposium or tired public debate but, contrariwise, to offer artists and intellectuals an open space within which they would be able to move, think, create, and communicate—and do so without any sort of interference, from ideological to commercial, with which all the official and traditional concepts of dialogue seem to have been inevitably threatened.

The notion of space has acquired its specific and literal meaning over the past year, which saw the conversion of a monastery in the formerly East German town of Altzella into a kind of artists' and writers' retreat. In it, the *Sociétés* participants can spend time on their own work while also establishing personal contacts with each other. The list of specific ways in which the *Société Imaginaire* supports and facilitates the idea of unrestricted dialogue—going on across the national frontiers, language barriers, and cultural traditions—does not end with Altzella. It also includes

travel grants to help in arranging meetings (one highly successful gathering of this kind has already taken place in the Slovak town of Budmerice, sponsored jointly with the Hanns Seidel Foundation of Germany); the translation and handling of the texts of "open" written exchanges between artists or writers (which the *Société* hopes to develop into the chief form of its activity with the participation of scholars from German, American, East European, and Latin American universities); encouraging translation of important literary, philosophical, etc., works, particularly those representing lesser known languages and cultural areas; publishing bibliophile editions of literary and graphic works of outstanding writers and artists (with profits going to the *Société's* fund and the donation of original works to National Galleries in the artists' respective countries), and so forth. This list is far from complete, and, in fact, never will be. The French novelist Michel Butor and the Polish poet Julia Hartwig have offered two seemingly different but equally apt symbolic definitions of the *Société Imaginaire* by visualizing it as a "letter in a bottle" and a "bridge." Between these two images, an entire gamut of specific possibilities for authentic dialogue waits to be developed.



The gathering in the Slovak town of Budmerice.

Inge Morath, Magnum Photos.

# Société Imaginaire

## *To Speak Only to Oneself?*

In his latest novel *Immortality*, Milan Kundera produces a dialogue between Goethe and Hemingway. "You write books about me," complains the modern author to the classical poet, "but my books you do not read."

The so-called imagologists have gained control over the knowledge of things and human beings. Journalists, critics, interpreters, and intermediaries create false images. But because they have the technology to consolidate and disseminate those false images, the public prefers these to reality; more precisely, the public does not become aware of the reality at all.

Not very long ago I was visited by an American journalist. He asked me about the quarrel that had erupted between the Czech readers and Milan Kundera and the reason for this quarrel.

I asked the journalist which novels of Kundera he had read. His response was that he had not read a single one. I asked him how he dared pose questions concerning an author of whom he knows nothing. He explained to me that he was not interested in the author, just in the quarrel.

I told him that I did not know anything of the quarrel.

Only when I saw the journalist to the door did I realize I had not spoken the truth. I do not know anything about Kundera's quarrel with his readers, it is true, but I recalled a hidden, simmering quarrel which, however, never did erupt fully: a quarrel between a group of Czech writers dissenting with their countryman living in Paris. It might not even have been a quarrel, but that is beside the point. To talk of it to a journalist would not only have been futile, but in the long run damaging. Truth simply does not belong to the imagologists. It cannot be conveyed to them.

A world fallen victim to the imagologists is a world without relations.

Still, there are people, things, and relations among them in the original sense of the word. But this concerns people outside politics and art and therefore outside the "public."

The modern artist, having anticipated this, began to speak for himself, and finally also to himself.

He does not want to project himself anymore. His work awaits to be discovered, like an unusual stone in a brook somewhere high up in the mountains.

Perhaps this is not only what remains of the artist, who has rendered himself at some previous time, but also a hope for its renewal.

Milan Uhde

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Milan Uhde is President of the Parliament of the Czech Republic.

# Société Imaginaire

*You, whoever you might be:*

If I had placed your name at the head of this blank page, surely I would have known you for quite some time, and thus, as these lines would develop, flashes of your semblance would come to me, the sound of your voice, memories of past moments together, perhaps from a distant childhood, discoveries we had in common, readings, travels.

If I had written your name, of course, preceded by the well-known formula: Mr., Mrs., or Miss (this last form now in disuse), I would most certainly have used the polite *vous* form, which to be sure I am accustomed to using with many of my friends, even the oldest and dearest, since the step from respect to camaraderie was never taken, a thing which I often regret but which takes nothing away from the relationship.

On the other hand it has happened that I will use the familiar *tu* form in letters to persons I have never seen but with whom I have worked at a distance.

If this letter gets to you, whom I am addressing as *vous*, it will serve to uncover, through our continuing dialogue, who knows what unplumbed depths, gold mines, or perhaps mines of salt that someday will shine in the open air.

I certainly do not yet know you, nor have I even received a letter from you, and I imagine a face, a voice in expectation of comprehension over the vast and frozen expanses of foolishness and deafness, misfortune and lost opportunities, vast spaces into which I hurl this message in a bottle.

Michel Butor

Pari contre, il m'est arrivé de tutoyer par lettre des gens que j'  
n'avais jamais rencontrés, mais avec qui j'avais travaillé à distance.

Si donc cette lettre te parvient, ô toi que je vouvoie, elle ira fouir  
sous nos entretiens habituels, en quelques souterrains à explorer, mines  
d'or ou de sel qui flamboieront un jour à l'air libre.

Parfois je ne te connais pas encore, je n'ai même pas reçu une lettre  
de toi (lors de ces humiliantes sollicitations par exemple, aux quelles nous  
ne sommes que trop contraints, ô vous, tous mes correspondants, connus ou  
inconnus), et j'imagine un regard, une voix, aspirant une autenticité au-delà  
tumultueuses immensités glacées de sottise et de surdité, de malheur et  
d'occasions perdues, sur les quelles je lance cette bouteille à la mer.

Michel

Michel Butor is a French novelist.

# Société Imaginaire

Dear Butor:

The bottle which you dropped into the sea has found its way to one of the possible recipients of its message. I have always thought that messages in bottles are a very unique and particular means of communication between shipwrecked persons. This case is no exception. Shipwrecked as we are on our island and surrounded by the sinister world of *communication*, where through the most sophisticated technological means, man has managed to achieve the ability to say everything to everyone and, in the end, to say nothing at all while he sinks in a sea of idiocy where words and images are just the flotsam of an unprecedented catastrophe at sea. Have you ever thought, perhaps, that in the Middle Ages man managed to communicate with his brothers in fuller and more efficient ways than today? That enormous bottle in the sea, received by all and understood by all: the work of Dante roars out to us to say that it was so. What to do then? Turn our backs, to be sure, on the disastrous call of the *mass media* and begin anew from zero. Such a beginning I see as possible, thanks to our *Société Imaginaire*, which was created (and this is important to keep in mind) by someone who put aside his undeniable possibilities in the world of painting, so that a few of us survivors might begin a dialogue without any other purpose than to share company in truth and courage and to say the two or three things that we need to say; nothing else. We are not going to save the world, nor decipher the role of the intellectual in the modern world; we'll not save the Third World nor the Fourth nor the Tenth. Let us return to the dialogue initiated by the Greeks and carried on, with a little less conviction by the Romans and continued to decline through that feeble century, the nineteenth. As an aside to these comments, I must express my admiration for your work. I speak now to a friend whom I hope someday to be able to address in the familiar *tú* with the deep sincerity of one who believes that this may be our only way out, the only way to win the game. Do you not see it this way also? I am sure your answer is, *Yes*. I send my best regards and also send my own, in no way *imaginaire*, *Yes*.

Alvaro Mutis

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Alvaro Mutis is a Colombian poet.





## Bridge

### MOTTO

Who would have thought that one day I would be starting to construct a bridge?  
Batuz has already named it: The Bridge of Budmerice.  
Because it is here that we have gathered one October day.  
It will not be a bridge of iron and steel.  
It will not be a bridge of wood, nor will it be a dam of stones.  
Yet when looking from afar it may appear  
That we are not walking on the bridge, but just on water.

The neural point of every art is its relationship to reality. Every artist strives toward it, be he poet or fiction writer, painter or playwright.

In his message to the *Société Imaginaire*, Milan Uhde says that the image of things, people, and relationships—created by the journalists and critics and popularized by the techniques of mass communication—forces such falsification upon us that genuine reality becomes unattainable by the public.

Confronted with this everyday falsification, art retreats to a defensive position and begins to talk to itself. The message of Milan Uhde ends with a beautiful image but one that does not promise great hope, that of a piece of art waiting to be discovered like an unusual stone submerged in a brook high in the mountains.

The same problem is also of interest to Stanislaw Baranczak in his article entitled "*Société Imaginaire: A New Context for Dialogue*."\* Yet this time it concerns a necessary but so often disappointing intermediary between the artist and his work, on the one hand, and the recipient on the other. This time it is not the problem of the communication process, but of the editor, the publishing houses and art dealers, not to mention the role of the critic. Thus the object of falsification is not reality, but art itself. Both Milan Uhde and Stanislaw Baranczak are aware of how painful the lack of direct communication is, and they long to come back to the clear streams now clouded by the powerful intermediaries to whom reality and art are negligible. These intermediaries move around in a world of self-serving fiction. In both messages reality—things, people, and the relationships among them—finds its most honest reflection in art. But no doubt Baranczak and Uhde have no illusion that the reality revealed in art will find its way to a large number of people.

From here we arrive at a comparable question rooted in the past: What ray of hope illuminated the creative determination of Vincent van Gogh? Did he paint initially and primarily for himself? (He surely painted with every fibre of his existence.) What were the expectations of the poet and painter Willi Blake? Maybe his creativity was directed to a Higher Being not indifferent to metaphysical dimensions

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\* See *Harvard Review*, Number Two, Fall 1992, pp. 160-162.

and hopefully receptive to artistic values. Likewise the stones of Blake as well as of van Gogh were found in the stream one day and taken out. (Here again arises the question as to the nature of the stone, but the answer must be left, whether we like it or not, to the discoverer.)

On this occasion it is difficult to resist the temptation of quoting another passage, which by an interesting coincidence relates an event whose hero is a man we all know, Batuz, the initiator and founder of the *Société Imaginaire*, a society we are happy to be a part of. This event was related by Jacek Bochenski and took place while he and Batuz were walking together in the Polish Tatra. There, to the great astonishment of his companion, halfway through their march and high in the mountains, Batuz, concerned about losing his car keys, declared that he would hide them under a stone and pick them up again on his way back. Upon Jacek's question as to how he would recognize the stone under which he had hidden his keys, Batuz did not give a satisfactory answer. On their way back Batuz suddenly disappeared again and returned after a short while with the keys in his hand.

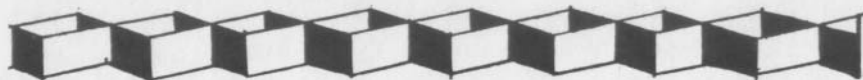
How did he find that particular stone among the thousands of other stones? That has remained his secret until now.

In light of the preceding quotations this story appears to me today as a parable. From every parable emerges a lesson, although you cannot always extract it through formula. It is usually a truth or hope. The stone in the brook of Milan Uhde, and the keys of Batuz and Jacek Bochenski under the stone, do not only function in the realm of what you can touch; they also constitute the reality of art.

**Julia Hartwig**

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Julia Hartwig is a Polish poet.





We live in an age that is increasingly complex but represented in ways that are alarmingly simplistic. Everything is reduced to a slogan, cliché, or newsbite. Anything more elaborate is mistrusted. Esthetic fundamentalism is taking its place beside religious fundamentalism: stupidity flourishes. Enter: The Société Imaginaire. Committedly heterodox, and valuing above all the exercise of freedom, especially in ways as yet untested, it refuses definition. It is always being born, always in the act of becoming, and cannot be pinned down. In this it resembles most a work of art, but one in which we are offered the possibility of living.

Mark Strand.

Letter by Mark Strand, originally printed in the 5th portfolio of the Société, which was prefaced by Richard von Weizsäcker, President of the German Federal Republic.



Juan Sanchez Pelaez and Mark Strand in Berlin.

Inge Morath, Magnum Photos.

## *Traveling Circus, Frenzy of Cultural Events*

Our cultural activities are absolutely staggering. If you have any doubts, look at the calendar of events that you can read every week in the newspapers, study the announcements which find their way each month to thousands of mailboxes, and get absorbed in the programs which the organizers (academics, cultural departments, corporate boards, private citizens, foundations, media conventions, week-long celebrations, trade fairs, discussion circles, colloquia, galleries, continuing education classes, cultural associations, museums, initiatives, festivals, city cafés, summer schools, theaters, women's clubs, youth centers, seminars, literary agencies, trade unions, congress centers, cultural studios, study groups, educational organizations, meeting centers) dish out quarterly—and do believe me, it is not my fault that this sentence does not want to end.

Hence, wherever you look, there is an over-abundance of symposia, presentations, introductions and implementations, conventions, reports, readings, round tables, talks by authors, conferences, dialogues, panel discussions, support programs, talk shows, discourse groups—and that is by no means all; only you would run out of air before you reached the end, if you wanted to continue the enumeration.

It is purely and simply by force of habit that all this is considered normal. Those who step back a few paces to gain the proper perspective will see that an extremely bizarre phenomenon is at work. One is led to believe that neither Gutenberg nor Hertz nor Marconi ever lived; that printing had never been invented; that we lived in a world without radio, without the technologies to duplicate and transmit. Toward the end of the 20th century a subculture has taken shape right in front of our eyes, where things happen as they did in late antiquity or the Middle Ages. Traveling singers roam the country. Itinerant preachers and vagabond rhetoricians are on the road year after year to get their messages across, as if we are suffering from an acute shortage of information and contact, as if we lead a life isolated like in a Tibetan village and are dependent upon the reports of travelers to get information about what goes on in the world at large.

Perhaps it is possible to come closer to an explanation if one focuses on the three principle agents of the performance culture. It is easiest to determine the role of the event managers. For at the very moment the wandering circus finds a "carrier," the managers are cut off from any retreat to normality; the only thing they have left is the flight forward. Wherever a meeting agency has been established, meetings have to take place, and where a special department exists, the departmental agents cannot stay away. Hence a special profession of intermediaries and *animateurs* emerges, plus the concomitant apparatus.

There is also a budget, which has of course to be fully utilized. An appropriate administration requires field offices, associates, chairpersons, deputies, boards of trustees, general secretaries, and presidents. In addition, there arises the inevitable need for space. Without advertising, press office and PR work, the institution would be missing something. A foyer would not be bad either, and a cafeteria might come in handy. Finally one has to think of a property manager and of

cleaning personnel, and if all this is okay, there might perhaps even be something left for an official car.

The second pillar of the performance culture are the performers, the vagrants. As it is with all branches of show-biz, a delicate hierarchy is involved. Those who know the trade can distinguish at a glance between the star and the extra, between the virtuoso and the bore, between the A league and the B league. The participants in the circus know quite well who is on the rise and who is on the way out. The figures go up and down like the stock exchange, and with them the honoraria. Since the managers copy their invitation lists from each other, the guests who are considered to be attractions are chronically over-employed. Philosophers who, because of an abundance of engagements, no longer have any time to practice philosophy; sociologists, whose preferred sociotop is the hotel reception area, and poets who scribble down their verses in the airplane, are no rare occurrence any more.

In this game the public is the big unknown. There is, after all, no point in denying that every evening countless numbers of people rush to the places of worship where the itinerant workers of the intellect take to the floor. Here one is confronted with a puzzle. Why do people take pains to forgo their dinner, to crowd into the subway, to hire a baby sitter, only to listen—beside others in a hall with insufficient fresh air supply—to theses, chapters of novels, travel reports, memoirs, arguments, and poems, which can be purchased without much effort at a good price in the nearest bookstore and read at leisure at home? That is and remains a mystery.

Do the listeners succumb to the illusion that the appearance of the guest is more authentic than all he can ever have printed and distributed? Is it because one would want to have the experience of meeting the philosopher live, of coming “in close touch” with the poet? Is it to experience (*sit venia verbo*) the genuine encounter of person to person? This would be a pity, for it is in the nature of things that expectations of this kind are disappointed. Often, as it turns out, after the fifth appearance of his tour, the artist-thinker-scholar-turned-performer is happy when he has finished his number and yearns for one thing, the minibar in his hotel room.

A small selection from the menu of the *saison*: democracy and the crisis of values. Future without confidence? Contemporary culture and life economy. Literature and responsibility. Understanding and communication. Sponsoring and enterprise culture. Can art be bought? Did the intellectuals fail? Multicultural society—a problem of identity? The end of history—myth or reality? Has postmodernism come to an end? Why do the intellectuals keep silent? What will become of the European house? Does the Left still have a future? And so on, and so forth.

The performing artists have two choices. They may change to become experts. Then their overhead is such as to rule out just one single appearance. Hence they will, once their work is done, repeat the same speech again and again, at congresses, conventions, and symposia. Or—and this is the other possibility—the performer does not go to that much trouble but, instead, simply expresses spontaneously what is on his mind because he believes that everything he says will be significant anyhow. In such a case, the result is this prominent blahblah, this all-knowing fumbling around, which everyone knows from countless talk shows.

Why not, a hard-boiled manager might reply, as long as all participants are

satisfied? After all, what is involved is one of those few industries that flourish even in a recession. Even other branches of the economy make money from their multi-million returns: the hotels and restaurants, the airlines, the poster producers, and the travel agencies.

On the other hand, we hear day in, day out that everywhere economic measures are decreed and spending reductions are announced. Here a library is to disappear, there a theater closes, to say nothing of the groanings of the universities and the lamentations of the nurseries. Only the carnival of cultural events appears to be untouched, as if it is immune to economic adversity. Strange immunity! Three times we may guess what this immunity is all about, and three times we arrive at the same result: the apprehension of the functionaries.

Culture is—and nothing can be done about it—a silent, not to say inconspicuous matter. This one opens a book, that one plays a few tunes on a flute. Two people argue all night about God and the world, war and peace, natives and foreigners. The woman in the workshop is engaged in art restoration. The composer leans over his score. The researcher conceives of an idea. And so on. All those things do not amount to much. All those things are not within the scope of a TV camera. All those things do not make it into the newspaper.

Culture, where it is productive, does not provide any chance to gain status for those who have to manage budgets, to award funds. A juicy New-Age Congress, however, or a crack festival—that is what gets into the news, reaps air time, congratulatory messages, press conferences.

How gray and inglorious would the life of a functionary be if he had to devote his time to his actual job, to secure the cultural infrastructure. This is a laborious, indistinct activity. It resembles the work of a plumber who replaces pipes. For example, literature does not need festivities to survive, but rather a fixed retail price and a reduced value-added tax for books. This makes the fundamentalists of the market economy see red. They want to put the book trade out of business. To prevent such a complete destruction would require a tenacious, lackluster fight in the catacombs of bureaucracy.

What I have to suggest is a two-year moratorium on all those events with which I tired you in the beginning. Of course the idea is not to put a curb on anyone. I would be very careful not to touch the freedom of speech and association guaranteed by the Basic Law. Hence, may anyone who feels like it rent the back room in a restaurant or an entire congress hall in order to talk as he pleases, about the world as a simulation or on the future of futurelessness. He should, however, finance this innocent enjoyment, at least for two years, out of his own pocket, or the pockets of his audience.

All public funds, on the other hand, which have so far been thrown down the drain for functions of this kind—and there are millions involved—should be dedicated to a meaningful purpose: the maintenance, repair, and improvement of our public libraries.

A drop in the bucket would be refreshing.

**Hans Magnus Enzensberger**

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Hans Magnus Enzensberger is a German poet.

# Société Imaginaire

## On the Need for Vision

Everyday life in the “new” *länder* and in Berlin is shaped, shaken, and moved by the consequences of reunification. The main concern is the restructuring of the economy and administration, the overhauling of schools and universities, the stabilizing or closing down of plants, the retention or abandonment of workplaces—and work was (and is) for the people in the former GDR more than a workplace. For these people, social recognition, rent subsidy, and training centers are at stake.

Along comes a *Société Imaginaire*, and the Batuz Foundation, which intends to create a core center in Altzella.\* Is it not luxuriating, even dreaming, to develop an intellectually oriented society from such public assemblies? Is it not illusory to attempt to rescue intellectual encounters out of the sphere of the fleeting, the accidental? Illusory—no. Visionary—yes.

To set up graphic art and sculpture workshops and a meeting center hardly sounds unusual. But this is not supposed to be a center where one congress, one symposium is followed by another. Magnus Enzensberger has directed some sharp, not quite justified sarcasm at the touring circus of culture as practiced in our society, in which “roving singers...wandering preachers and vagabonding rhetoricians...(are) on the road year in and year out to peddle their message,” and where it is impossible to deal with a particular topic seriously. Every topic is dealt with in three-quarters of an hour or is bandied around on talk shows. This irony is taken seriously by the *Société Imaginaire*. It aims to bring together artists, scholars, and politicians continents apart in such a way that a relationship, a network of relationships, yes, an imaginary *polis* is created. This is the vision that the *Société Imaginaire* wants to convey: participating in the creative processes—the correspondence project—sends a signal to the world of secondary literature, where one reads and experiences something “on” but not something “of.” It is precisely this aspect of the core center that I believe is most important for our universities. Their main deficiencies—this is also true of our secondary schools—are over-specialization and the lack of exposure to original ways of thinking, searching, and creating. Secondary intellectual literature prevails; positions taken by others are noted, but no one takes a firm position. In the correspondence project, one knows the work of others, one can discuss the processes by which it came into existence, and one can engage in conversation about it. In countries where scholarly and artistic relationships have been identified as either socialist or non-socialist, such meetings give rise to impulses promoting change. Encountering peripheral cultures—and this is part of the concept—opens new dimensions for understanding what is foreign, what is different. Under the heading What Is Foreign, I discover both what I lack and what unites us. The constancy of personal relationships at the center—the possibility of rooming together—works

\*Altzella: town near Dresden where a monastery was converted into an artists’ and writers’ retreat.

against supeiciality and show. Science and art, which in public announcements are constantly pitted *against* bread, have to make it clear in years of scarce resources that they, too, provide workplaces, but—permit me to say this quite pointedly—I am much happier sitting on a wooden chair with a book, speaking with friends over a frugal meal, or listening with an open mind to a concert in a hall that only seats 30, than I am in a comfortable chair, bored stiff, engaging in small talk at a gala dinner, impatient for the business at hand to be over.

Universities have to develop a profile in the years to come, and they must have the courage to make a difference. A university endorsement of the correspondence project would break down the isolation of specialization, generate creative impulses, and develop, especially in young countries, intellectual, cultural, and human centers of attraction. In our economy this has long since become commonplace; it is not the super specialist who is in demand, but rather the expert capable of teamwork. Altzella can “transmit,” and universities can “receive” and then transmit in their turn: radars of the intellect, of encounters, of the power of the future.

**Hanna-Renate Laurien**

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Dr. Hanna-Renate Laurien is President of the parliament of the city of Berlin.



Courtyard of Altzella, future home of the Société Imaginaire.

Inge Morath, Mangum Photos.