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Société Imaginaire

JULIO MARIA SANGUINETTI

One of the most enthusiastic participants in the Société Imaginaire has been Julio María Sanguinetti, current president of Uruguay. His viewpoint on the Société Imaginaire does not limit the organization strictly to the cultural arena. Rather, he invokes the applicability to society as a whole and to its socio-political realm. The diversity of opinion about the role of the Société Imaginaire, represented by Sanguinetti's perspective is, in fact, one of its chief characteristics. The Société Imaginaire engages a long term dialogue among individuals who are not only distant geographically from each other but who also exercise rather diverse occupations across a spectrum of societies. As Mark Strand has aptly pointed out, the contributions of the participants "build the Société Imaginaire, giving it both form and content."

Julio María Sanguinetti is a leading figure in the democratization process in Latin America. He was the first democratically elected President of Uruguay (1979-1984) after years of military dictatorship and was elected again in 1994, the hiatus between terms being the result of the Uruguayan Constitution which does not permit a President to succeed himself in office.

To The Société Imaginaire

We read, listen and watch; we, the everyday inhabitants of the nightly news. Catastrophes become instantaneous. We watch, but do we see? Do we know ourselves any better as a result of what we see? Do we really know what things mean in all of these different places? The TV viewing citizen, *Homo Coca-Jeanens*; does he have the world in his home, or is he more alone than ever?

The Société Imaginaire stretches a thread between cultures and weaves a dialogue. Poets and artists. Words and forms. The Americas and Europe. Latinos, Germans and Slavs. Human beings all of us in our strength and also in our frailty, understanding each other across oceans and distances, borders and silences.


Only by comparing do we nurture understanding. Nothing is learned nor can anyone be known in isolation. Beneath the surface there flows a deep and fresh current, humanistic, creative and universal. Horror has become too globalized for us to renounce bringing together the best of ourselves: pure forms recently created, words that are music, lines that are words. In creating we give life; we assume our miraculous condition and push away the demons that lie always in ambush, hiding behind ignorance that fills us with fear and draws us toward hatred.


When the imaginary is brought to paper it begins to live. That thread which here and now joins poets and artists begins to become real. And the Société comes to life.

Julio María Sanguinetti

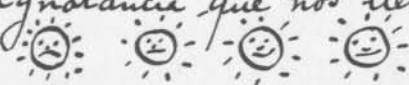
Translated from the Spanish by Timothy Keating


// La Société Imaginaire

Leemos, oímos, miramos, habitantes cotidianos de un telediario. Las catástrofes se instantaneizan. Miramos... ¿pero realmente vemos? ¿Nos conocemos mejor por ello? ¿Sabemos qué quiere decir cada cosa en cada lugar distinto? El ciudadano televidente, el homo "cra-jarens" ¿tiene el mundo en su casa o vive más solo que nunca?  —

La Société Imaginaire tiende un hilo entre las culturas y teje un diálogo. Poetas y artistas. Palabras y formas. América y Europa. Latinos, germanos y eslavos. Humanos por igual, en su fuerza y su debilidad, entendiéndose más allá de mares y distancias, fronteras e incommunicaciones. — 

Sólo la comparación nutre el conocimiento. Nade ni nadie se conoce en el aislamiento

to. Por debajo de las superficies,
fluye una corriente profunda y fresca,
humanística, creativa, universal. De-
masiado se globalizan los horrores para
que renunciemos a acercarnos a través
de lo mejor de nosotros, formas puras
recién creadas, palabras que son música,
líneas que son palabras. Creando damos
vida, asumimos nuestra milagrosa condición
y alejamos los demonios que siempre acechan,
escondidos en el desconocimiento que nos hace
temer y la ignorancia que nos lleva a
odiar. - 

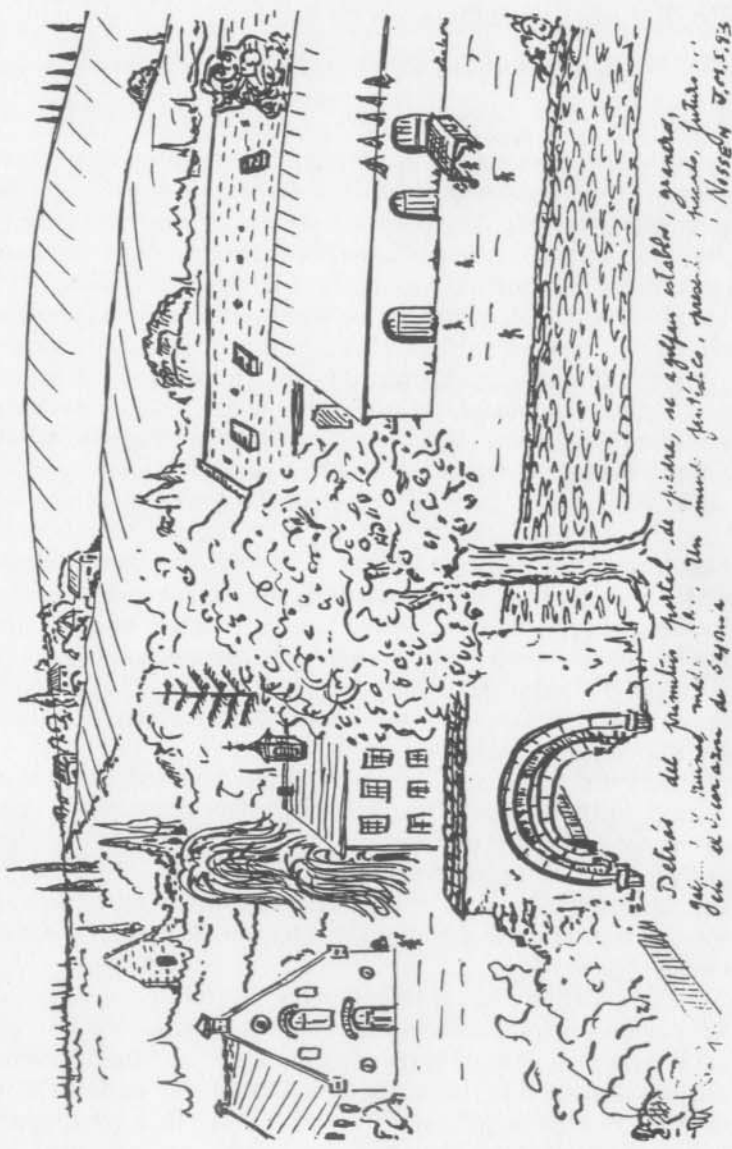
Cuando lo imaginario llega a un papel
comienza a existir. Ese hilo que aquí y hoy
une poetas y artistas empieza a ser real. Y
le Societe a vivir. - 

Julio María Sanguinetti

Società Imaginare

La inquietud de Bating llegó a Altzella, son de
Società Imaginare y en la arena del pueblo y el
bosque se inicia un mundo de arte y reflexión.

Inauguración
en Altzella



Delirio del primitivo portal de piedra, se agitan todos, grandes,
guerreros y guerreros mágicos. Un mundo primitivo, pero... futuro...
N. S. 1953

Drawing of Altzella by Julio María Sanguinetti

Société Imaginaire

FERDINAND PROTZMAN

Of Bells, Bellows, and the Call to a Community of Cultures

I was waiting on a subway platform in Chicago recently when a pay telephone next to me began ringing. I did not answer. My first thought: Batuz is calling for help in moving the wheels of universal culture. Not today, I told myself, this is a vacation day. Even in the Société Imaginaire, there must be time to rest, relax, and burrow into a pile of novels. So no fixing, faxing, writing, or phoning. It's off to pick up my niece at school, then home for tea and some work on her reading skills. The ringing continued. An itch crawled across my right palm and buzzed into the fingers. A train arrived, squealing to a stop. People got off, people got on. No one touched the receiver. As we pulled out, the bell stopped. And I wondered what time it was in Buenos Aires, where a phone must have just begun ringing.

Over the past nine years, through three changes of residence, two job switches, and a successful search for love, I have become conditioned to expect calls from Batuz. During that time, he spent hours on the telephone and in person trying to convince me that the Société Imaginaire was growing into something special, that his simple idea of creating an international community of the mind and spirit—where artists, intellectuals, or everyday people so inclined could step out of the cacophony of global popular culture and communicate directly with one another about the arts, literature, or whatever subject they chose—was gaining adherents.

He believed artists and writers in various countries were increasingly isolated on the islands of national or provincial culture, becoming alienated from any feeling of greater *Weltkultur*. "This leads to Slovaks writing only for Slovaks, or any country or culture writing only for itself," he would say, "and is conducive to self-inflicted, incestuous, retrograde literature. That is dangerous in that it can allow literature to become infected by nationalism."

The problem of cultural isolation was not limited to any specific nation. On a cultural level, New York City, buffeted by trends and the "what's hot, what's not" mentality of mass media, can be as closed to cultural developments elsewhere in the world as a rural village in Batuz's native Hungary. Modern technology and mass media, rather than offering a solution, compound the problem, drowning the exceptional in a flood tide of mediocrity. Ignorance rules the air waves and pulp printing.

So Batuz, a painter, decided in 1984 to create the Société Imaginaire to find ways of getting artists and intellectuals from different countries and cultures together in various informal settings where they could be themselves, observing, talking, arguing, laughing, living. From those gatherings, relationships would develop and grow. After parting, the participants would write to each other. They would translate one another's works and generate ideas for new ones. That very idea spawned what has become the society's Correspondence Project, in which the letters between the writers, artists, and intellectuals from these gatherings are compiled, catalogued, and archived by the University of Maryland and the National Gallery of Art. To date, five portfolios containing the interdisciplinary writings and art works by society members have been produced. Those held by the National Gallery are accessible to researchers or scholars using its library or print room.

The Société Imaginaire has evolved over the past 11 years into an organization providing a significant service for writers, artists, scholars, and students in 30 countries, and its approximately 500 members include such dissimilar personalities as Julio Maria Sanguinetti, Olga Hirshhorn, Rudolph Scharping, and Toshio Hara. Even in nascence, a cautious but heady feeling of the society's possibilities emerged from its gatherings. As Polish writer Jacek Bochenski wrote in an early portfolio produced by the Société: "The plan to save culture by means of the Société Imaginaire is a hopeless enterprise. The members of the Société Imaginaire are few. But I do recall that the editors of the first underground news edition in the communist state (of Poland) were also considered to be engaged in a hopeless undertaking. And we were only a few editors. Our first edition totaled six issues. Batuz, do you understand? No?"

Other innovative efforts were organized by the Société, such as One-Day Museums, in which the seven or eight of the most important Argentine painters, for example, would arrive at a museum in Germany on a given morning. They would tour the institution with the director, then have lunch and meet local artists, art historians, critics, art lovers, and intellectuals. Afterward, their paintings would be hung and the public invited in, with the presence of the artists beside their works creates a unique, direct form of communication. The next day the exhibition moves on.

Still, the concept of the Société Imaginaire seemed somehow regressive to me and its international context appeared dubious. Culture marches to rhythms of its own, the cadences often indiscernible, always complex. What could young Eastern German painters have in common with poets or writers from Argentina or the United States? Did any of them even care? How can a truly creative individual's drive fit into a structure, any structure?

Answers to those questions are evident today in the Société's phenomenal growth. And I stand convinced. Artists, writers, intellectuals, creators great and small, share much in common. In pursuing their passions, be it in poetry or print making, they are often isolated, sometimes lonely. Working by themselves at a desk or in a studio, they were indeed curious about what their counterparts in other countries were doing. And they were consciously or unconsciously seeking a circle of international peers, a handful

or people, scattered, perhaps, across the planet, who could and would understand not only the product, but the calling, process, and consequences of their creativity.

Batuz has touched a universal nerve. Whether it is Michel Butor's letter in a bottle, Julia Hartwig's bridge, or the "new context for dialogue" of Stanislaw Baranczak, the images that Société members use time and again in their writings represent a reaching out, a desire for community. As for structure, it is essential but secondary. It can take forms as concrete as a fellowship to work at the Société Imaginaire's center currently being created at Kloster Altzella in Nossen, Germany, or as ephemeral as a flock of faxes carrying the latest revised translation of an Alvaro Mutis poem through the ether over the Atlantic Ocean to a colleague in Prague.

The Société Imaginaire quickly became a vital service, putting writers in touch and stimulating them to maintain long-term relationships so they could come to a more profound mutual understanding, thereby helping expand their respective cultures.

Perhaps the most apt description of the Société Imaginaire comes from a letter written by Mark Strand after attending a gathering in Berlin: "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 newswbite. 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."

What does membership mean in a society that refuses definition? As much or as little as the individual puts into it. Julia Hartwig described her experience as a member during a luncheon at an exhibition by the Société in late October at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in St. Augustin, Germany. She and her husband were fascinated by the Société Imaginaire as a concept, but were never sure if they are members and remain, in fact, somewhat uncertain as to what exactly the Société Imaginaire is. "But we like it very much. The idea found acceptance because it is so unreal, because there is no structure. People wanted to meet and exchange ideas informally. And there is no feeling that someone is trying to make money out of this. There is no commercial aspect."

The exhibition at the Adenauer Foundation was typically unorthodox. Along with photographic portraits by Inge Morath, young Eastern German artists—Michael Morgner, Mark Lammert, Ellen Fuhr, and Tanja Zimmerman, to name just a few—were commissioned to produce prints inspired by specific written works contributed by Czeslav Milosz, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Olga Orozco, Milan Uhde, and Enrique Molina.

The society has become a genuine service to artists, writers, and intellectuals, facilitating direct communication, organizing events, energizing its members. Politicians, students, and people from all walks of life on

three continents have become involved, volunteering their time, skills, and funds. The idea will undoubtedly spread to the remainder of the world when Batuz finds the time or is successfully cloned. Determination is the English word for Batuz. Multiply the hours he spent trying to convince one skeptical American by approximately five hundred members and countless more passive supporters and the result would still be less than the total time he has spent creating the Société Imaginaire. His energy expenditure requires a nuclear, rather than human scale.

Measuring the Société Imaginaire is equally difficult since it seems to be in constant evolution. Recognition, a yardstick of sorts, is steadily increasing not just from intellectuals, but from the mainstream media in Europe, the United States, and Latin America.

One of the most significant events in the society's relatively brief history will occur later this year, when the Société Imaginaire will be featured as part of the Kennedy Center's 25th anniversary celebration in Washington, D.C. on November 10th, and an exhibition of writings and art works by Société members will be on display in the Center's library. It will include the exhibition from the past November at Germany's Konrad Adenauer Foundation in St. Augustin. In the Kennedy Center atrium on November 10th, the society plans a dinner and an array of cultural events, including lectures and readings by Messrs. Strand, Mutis, and other members. The portfolios from the National Gallery, which highlight the intercultural, interdisciplinary writings, and art works of the society's members, will also be on display, making them available for the first time to a broader public.

Also on the horizon is publication of the first *Société Imaginaire Reader*, a book containing a gathering of writings by young and old American poets, fiction writers, and essayists whose works reflect to some degree the sense of dialogue or direct communication shared by writers and artists in the Société Imaginaire. The *Reader* will be edited by Stratis Haviaras, Charles Simic, and Mark Strand and will be the first of a series.

Unlike simple anthologies, which are carefully selected but intended for either specialists or a mass audience, the *Reader* will also serve as a further context for the society's members to communicate with each other and share their work. While it will be available to the general public, the *Reader's* central audience will be the society's members. Thus the authors are also the primary readers, making the books a forum for continual, intense dialogue and debate.

The *Reader* will eventually be translated into all the languages of the society's members, with the goal of simultaneous publication, Batuz says. By comparing the original language with the translation, he sees the readers discovering the semantic idiosyncrasies and differences while thoroughly understanding the content. "The translation is important even for those who can read it in the original language," he says. "That way they just don't read a poem, for example, but are put in a position to improve the translation in their own mind." This would further the notion of a collective search among them for more understanding, described by him as, "perfecting the commu-

nications of thought from one culture to another." The quest is the inspiration for the Société's upcoming gathering of artists and writers from Central America and the Baltic Republics later this year.

Also taking shape is the Société Imaginaire's working center in Kloster Altzella, where workshops for sculptors, painters, and graphic artists are being built along with studios and studies for painters and writers. The center also has several exhibition rooms. In June, the Inge Morath Museum of Photography will be inaugurated, exhibiting her classical works as well as the portraits of writers she has taken at the society's first gatherings. Those photos will be accompanied by handwritten texts by the subjects of the portraits. Works by other photographers that capture the essence of the Société Imaginaire will also be on display. The society's Heyer handmade paper workshop is already operating at Altzella.

Society members will be able to apply for stipends from the Batuz Foundation, which organizes and administers the Société Imaginaire, for a stay in Altzella, naming in his application the name of the "Correspondence Partner" he or she wants to meet and work with. The idea is that writers and artists who became acquainted at the society's gatherings and have corresponded would be able to work together in Altzella, writing and producing works in the paper workshop. The originals of those works will be displayed in the rooms of Altzella, in what Batuz has named "A Museum of Creation," while limited, numbered editions will go to the national galleries of the participants' respective countries.

Professors and graduate students from more than 20 participating universities, particularly those studying the works of the writers or artists involved, will assist with linguistic and logistical support. The society is building up a database that will provide all the information available about the participating writers and artists. The works on paper and the museum are intended as testimony of the encounters and as a way for scholars to follow the development of these relationships.

In Altzella, the participating members will be guests of the Batuz Foundation, housed in a modern apartment built into the former cloister and provided with a study and meals. The stay will be free of charge and members will be allowed to store materials or personal items on the premises for subsequent visits. From a one-day museum to a museum in constant creation, Batuz, as Enrique Molina said, seems to be "weaving a magical carpet on which we travel in the imagination."

As I write about the Société, it still seems farfetched somehow. But living in Europe the past nine years I have seen many things come to pass that were once deemed impossible. Batuz, Bochenski, and the society's members may not be saving culture but they are clearly providing it with nourishment and watching its vital signs. So when a voice on the telephone booms "Haaallllloo, it is Batuz calling," I've learned to listen. And I know that in Warsaw, Bratislava, Managua, Mexico City, Baltimore, Buenos Aires, and dozens of cities and towns around the world, others have heard not just the bell and the bellow, but the call to a meeting of the mind.