

## Reflection on the publication event of Performance Research Journal Edition on 'Social Imaginaries'

*edited by Danae Theodoridou and Falk Hübner*

Photo report by Yulia van Leeuwen

On Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2025, Fontys Academy of the Arts in Tilburg organized in collaboration with Kunst  $\approx$  Onderzoek, a launch event of the latest issue on Performance Research. During the event, practitioners and researchers in the arts, including students from the Fontys Academy Master Performing Public Space, reflected on the idea of 'Social Imaginaries.' Danae Theodoridou and Falk Hübner proposed this concept as a practice to re-imagine the social connotations ascribed to our bodies, our surroundings and our society. Throughout the event, pictures were taken and put into this diary, edited by Yulia van Leeuwen, as a way to document and take you along the experiences of the day.



We find ourselves in an empty library space where big windows shine light on the green carpet and green seats. "Performance Research Launch" is written on the board and everybody is chatting amongst themselves before the start of the session. This green room, a space of reflection, is the backdrop of our coming together and a collective imagination extending beyond these four walls.



*Falk Hübner in the introduction session.*

Danae and Falk introduce the program of today's event, consisting of an introduction on 'Social Imaginaries', a workshop by Philippine Hoegen and Veerle Spronk and a collective reading session. In the introduction, Danae explains how the 'social imaginary' is a term stemming from sociology. It refers to a set of values, ideas and symbols through which a certain community shapes their ways of living together.<sup>1</sup> In the editorial of the *Performance Research Journal*, they give the example of the 'nation' as a social and imagined construct where being 'Dutch' or something else is made up by arbitrary reasons. What are the criteria that makes us 'feel' Dutch? Danae and Falk state that if our imaginary values for this agreement were different, we could understand ourselves differently."<sup>2</sup>

Danae also explains social imaginaries as a practice with a repeating pattern. Imagining is something that we do with our bodies over and over again. Here, the term experiments with the present, rather than being future oriented. Most importantly, by staying in the 'now,' the social imaginary is not concerned with an unreachable utopic idea of society. Instead, Danae and Falk acknowledge the struggle that we, in dominant Western 'rational' thoughts, often can and can't imagine ourselves differently at the same time. This is where the crucial role of art lies to ask questions of 'how else' and 'what else' in order to create alternative worlds of being together.<sup>3</sup>



*Danae Theodoridou in the introduction session.*



<sup>1</sup> Danae Theodoridou and Falk Hübner, 'Editorial' in 'On Social Imaginaries,' 1.

<sup>2</sup> Theodoridou and Hübner, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Theodoridou and Hübner, 1.

“When was the last time you remembered your dream and what was it about?” One of the students asks. In a talk show manner, two people sit together in front of the group and the structure is simple: one asks a question, the other one answers and then switches to a new person. A slight tension or hesitation arises from not knowing who gets up from their seat and the kinds of conversation that will occur in the moment. Yet, this unexpectedness leads to an open exploration of what imagination, whether positive or negative, could bring us. Hope, but also the acceptance of hopelessness when we cannot visualize ourselves outside of an established order.



With the seats and tables arranged in a class setting, those of us in the back listen very carefully. Occasionally making notes and flipping through the printed journal that was generously gifted to us. It is a smooth surface with pages filled with performances illustrating imagination as a coming together; creative, open ended and embedded in issues occurring in the present moment. Occasionally, a person wanders off to the table with snacks and drinks. This enables a disorganized attention that is not disruptive. Perhaps social imagination starts with sharing spaces together.







*Philippine Hoegen and Veerle Spronck during the beginning of their introduction*

In the next session, Philippine Hoegen and Veerle Spronck give a workshop based on their article 'How We Wish To Work' that touches upon the complex matter of audience participation in performances. The authors highlight how ethics (for example, the amount of agency a participant has) and aesthetics (the structure of the work decided by the artist) are always treated separately. As if bringing the two concepts together could cause unease and the risk of losing 'meaning' either in the work or within the experiences of the participants. However, according to Philippine and Veerle, aesthetics and ethics are inevitably linked and intertwined in artistic (research) practices.



The two specific case studies and discussion grant me, personally, a look inside the mind of a performance maker. The scenario discussed in my group focuses on a clothing piece being passed on through different audience members who are supposed to 'inhabit' a certain persona when they wear the item. The participatory performance is meant to foster a

nonhierarchical relation between the spectator and artist. My group first raises ethical questions about how much motivation a spectator feels to participate in this performance. We think that prior information about the show is necessary for audience members to have a better understanding and expectation. Information about the content of the performance, the cultural meaning behind the clothing item, and the persona that spectators need to embody is crucial. By informing the audience more extensively, their participation is not merely in performing actions, but also in engaging with the conceptual structure behind the work. My discussion group concluded that this is the sweet contact point between ethics and aesthetics.

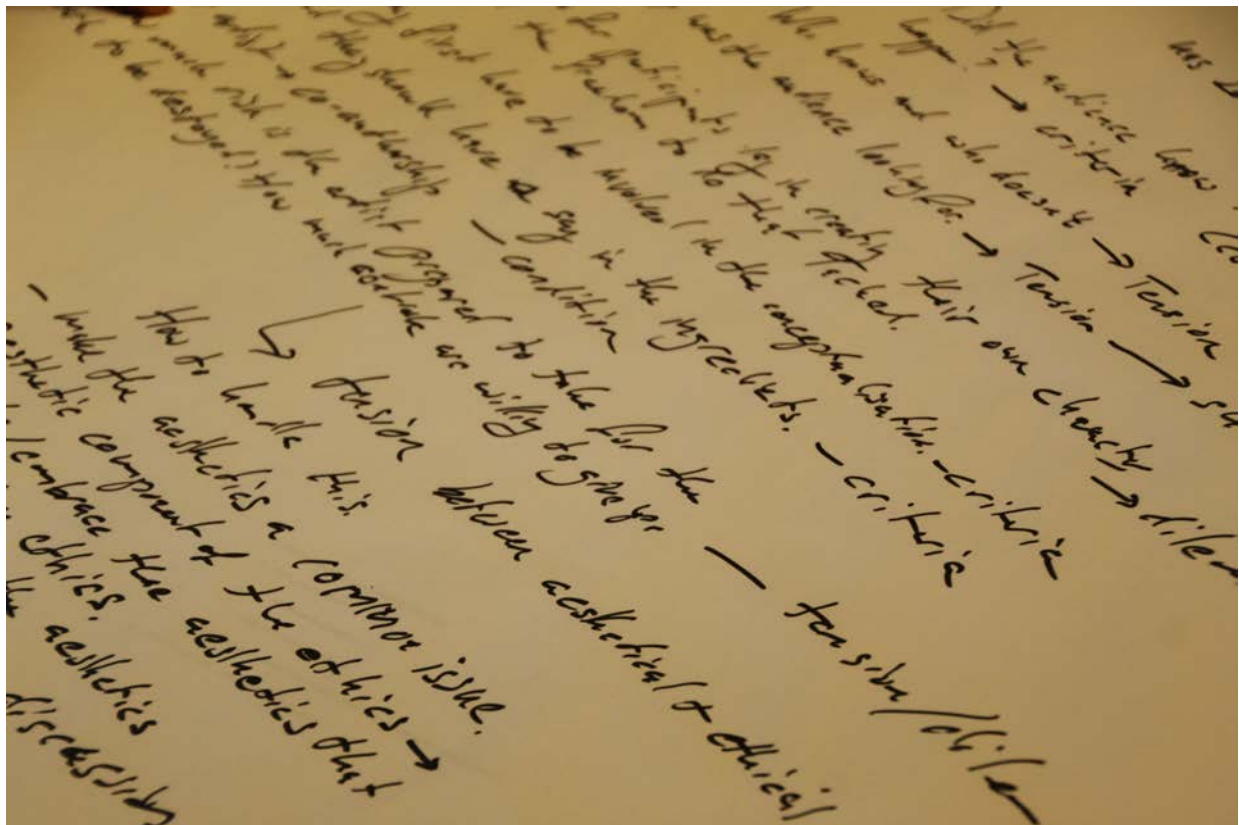


Aesthetic choices lay the foundation of an artistic work, but aesthetics are inevitably subject to change when a performance is brought into public spheres. In other words, initial ideas and compositional structures are not set in stone, rather, they can transform into interactions between spectators and makers. From the perspective of the artist, Danae asks, “How much can a work be destroyed?” I interpret the balance between aesthetic choices and ethical considerations as a balance between holding on and letting go. How much control is an artist willing to let go of in order to make the participatory work more equal? And how much opportunities or chances do the participants have to make it their own?



Afterwards, we collect our insights, advice and questions. A main point brought up is the broad meaning behind ‘aesthetics’ as the study of beauty. One student mentions that aesthetics for her is more about the kind of values she puts in her work that guides her artistic method and collaborative practices. Slowly, aesthetics and ethics merge together and we speak of an ‘aesthetics of ethics,’ circling back to Philippine and Veerle’s question in the beginning. If aesthetics and ethics should be seen as separate paths or if these concepts can cross each other, simultaneously carving out new desired lanes on how we wish to work. It relates back to Danae and Falk’s point made in the introduction of social imaginaries as a collective practice, a process of co-creation that is never static.





Next, is a collective reading session where Danae and Falk select a different text from the Performance Research journal. One group dives into the writing of Ana Vujanović 'Body as Proletarian' while the other engages with the article 'With Whom Can You Imagine Sharing This World's Sidewalk?' by Bojana Cvejić. The room is filled by the sounds of numerous voices reading out loud and different conversations. Often, a simple gesture, "Sssh," bounces back from one side of the room to the other. Yet, regulating our speaking volumes remains a challenge especially when the writings are thought provoking and raise many questions.



In the reading group, 'Body as Proletarian' we discuss the difference between 'having' a body and 'being' our bodies. And how this relation, whether owning or being, changes the way we are experiencing the world. Ana Vujanović argues that when the body is perceived as a possession, we are responsible for 'putting it to work'. Our



bodies become a site of production and wage labour. My reading group notices the disconnection between body and mind that stems from such European capitalist notions of the body. On the other hand, when we return to being our bodies, we feel more open to our surroundings regardless of any monetary value. I think of moments where the sun shines on my skin, the grass that I feel underneath my feet, or the smell of rain in the summer breeze.

The second reading group talks about privilege and being an ally in the fight and justice of less privileged people. They conclude that there is only one way to achieve any social cause, which is to sacrifice one's privilege for the cause. There are different ways of undoing privileges; one is to simply speak up for a group. The conversations are emotional as many people in the reading group bring up different political struggles from the places they grew up.

In the end, everybody is in their original seat and we share what stands out to us regarding Social Imaginaries after reading the two texts. The texts inspire us to return to our bodies, stepping outside of preconceived identity markers and social positions and reorienting ourselves as relational. Can we owe and not owe our bodies? The focus is on 'being' rather than 'possessing' bodies of thought and bodies in space. Someone says, 'I am a body' that experiences, feels, senses and interacts. The ability to imagine happens within our bodies as we sit, write, read, speak, laugh and it stays with us when we walk out of the green room towards Fontys' beautiful inner garden in the late afternoon.



*The collective reading session*





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### References

Hübner, Falk, and Danae Theodoridou and. 'Editorial: What Makes Us Want to Get up and Play This Game?' *Performance Research* 29, no. 2 (2024): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2024.2434993>.