

Transformative interventions. An ecological-enactive approach to art practices

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Introducing ecological-enactive interventions

Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity: but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow-creatures, who owe me nothing? they spurn and hate me. The desert mountains and dreary glaciers are my refuge. I have wandered here many days; the caves of ice, which I only do not fear, are a dwelling to me, and the only one which man does not grudge. These bleak skies I hail, for they are kinder to me than your fellow-beings.

Frankenstein, Mary Shelley

“And what is the use of a book,” thought Alice, “without pictures or conversations?”

Alice in the Wonderland, Lewis Carroll



[*Infinity pool, study for a masked landscape* made in collaboration with David Habets.]

Infinity pool consists of two parts:

1) three outdoor walks with a performer wearing a mirrored chrome mask and 2) three looped projections, in an indoor space, of the images reflected by the masks taken by a video camera during each performance walk - three selfies of a changing environment in dialogue with each other.

The performance walks will take place at three locations: at the Monte Fumaiolo - the source of the Tiber-, on Lungotevere in Rome where the river crosses the city, and on the beach in Ostia where it flows into the Tyrrhenian Sea.

The projections will show the reflections - distorted and blurred by the curved surface of the mask - of these environments with their vegetation and urban interventions.

Words describing objects and the chemical components of water samples collected by live performance participants will accompany each projection. The materials in the specific locations and the abilities brought to bear by the participants engaged in the walks will then define the faces of the looped projected environments.

Through this twofold real-life thinking model - presented in transformative intervention #3- we have tried to question how we perceive our surroundings and to let it emerge how what usually appears distant and unimportant to our lives can approach by staring at us closely.

Crossing the public space wearing a mask I will regard as a monstrous practice, entirely out of the ordinary.

Infinity pool foregrounds how we are nested and haunted by unfolding actions that hold us captive.

How is it possible, through monstrous practices, to open up our field of affordances, transfigure ourselves and transform collective long-term behaviors?]

1. Transformative interventions

Starting from an enactive-ecological approach to human cognition, I have articulated a series of *transformative interventions* to explore how artistic practices can reorganize our form of life. To do this, I discuss how a plethora of heterogeneous tools traceable in the performing arts, such as masks, puppets, and hybrid costumes, can help us, through what I call *monstrous practices*, to explore imaginative dimensions that our

bodies “cannot afford.” This is the core of the transformative chain that I will define *Monster-monster-monstrous*:

We feed monsters to become monstrous to confront the Monsters that haunt us.

We nurture imaginative “monsters,” to cope with the “Monsters” in our lives and become “monstrous” that is to pool and cross-fertilize our abilities.

I will define each *transformative intervention* not only through written words but also using unorthodox sociomaterial invitations, usually not employed in philosophical practice: storyboards, visual-imaginative ethnographies, performance projects, and art installations, which I will define more properly through an enriched notion of *real-life thinking model* that is a tangible way to question our practices, to evoke and promote new landscapes for our form of life.

Contrary to the idea that cognition is the internal processing of information by the brain, the ecological-enactive approach accounts for human cognition in relational terms, as skillful interactions with a sociomaterial environment configured by practices. I will consider precisely those that let underutilized invitations and radically new possibilities emerge and thus could transform, bringing into question, acquired ways of living. Monstrous practices are a way of remaking ourselves in the face of crisis.

Through this introduction, I will provide the conceptual framework for developing my interventions.

To focus on the ecological-enactive account, I will first introduce in a very concise way the shift from classical cognitivism to embodied cognition, which marks the overcoming of the computational paradigm in favor of the action-oriented one (2). I will distinguish, then, within the embodied address, between a conservative front, still bound to the cognitivist framework (3), and a radical one, in which the enactive approach (4) – in its various declinations – and the ecological approach linked to James Gibson's proposal (5) operate. Once I've described these references in the general outlines, I can present the ecological-enactive approach proposed by Rietveld and colleagues (6). From this account, my explorations will begin, which will unfold through various monstrous practices (7). In this task, the expanded notion of affordance proposed by Erik Rietveld and colleagues and that of reorganizational practices by Alva Noë will be of great use to me.

2. Computers and sandwiches

The computer metaphor is at the heart of the “cognitivist revolution” that occurred in the 1950s in opposition to behaviorist psychology. The guiding idea is that the brain is to hardware as cognition is to software. For classical cognitive science, what matters most is the operating program, not the physical device on which it is implemented. Thinking is equivalent to computing, with all that goes with it.

Although this model has been under attack for some thirty years, it continues to be assumed by default in various science areas and circulate as a given within common sense. What we get from it is, in addition to the implicit assumption of a misleading picture of cognition, an alienating and impoverished view of ourselves and our relationship with the environment.

According to classical cognitivism, the brain constructs representations of the external world through computational operations. Mental representations are defined as amodal symbols whose representational format is not perceptual but propositional; that is, they do not resemble what is being represented. Cognition transforms an *input* into *output* through what Anthony Chemero critically calls “mental gymnastics”¹ by which, based on algorithmic rules, strings of symbols are produced. In this sense, mental processes have a syntactic nature. At the same time, they also have a semantic one since amodal representations convey propositional content that describes aspects of the world outside the system. Thus, mental representations have a certain format – amodal and propositional – and a content – defined based on what they represent. Cognition consists, therefore, in extracting, through the sense organs, information from the environment, its storage, and transformation into a “language of thought”² through inferential processes. Functionalism constitutes an important ally for classical cognitivism. From this front comes the notion of “multiple realizability”³ according to which mental states, as amodal functional representations, can be implemented on different material structures. The software can operate on different types of hardware, which precisely, as interchangeable media, play an entirely marginal role within cognition.

Another element that defines cognitive systems is the presence of functional modules, that is, compartments specialized in deciphering certain aspects of the external environment. These individually encapsulated modules are independent of each other, so they cannot interfere with operations performed in different parts of the system. Thanks to central cognition, which is non-modular, the deciphering processes performed by individual modules are integrated into a determinate propositional attitude.

Thus, cognitive processes occur at a subpersonal level in a restricted intracranial space that the agent cannot access.

To critically characterize the model of mind proposed by classical cognitivism, Susan Hurley spoke of the “classic sandwich model.”⁴ Of the sandwich, the juiciest part is the central one, and that is where cognition would take place, according to classical cognitivism. The two slices of bread represent sensory inputs and motor outputs, peripheral and distinct phenomena, which, as we have seen, serve an entirely marginal function. Thus, Hurley's proposed model underscores the problematic distinction that cognitivism makes between senses, action, and cognition.

¹ Chemero, A., 2009. *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

² Fodor J.A., 1975. *The Language of Thought*, Thomas Crowell, New York.

³ Putnam, H., 1967. *Psychological Predicates*. In Capitan, W.H., Merrill, D.D. (Eds.), *Art, Mind, and Religion*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 37–48; Fodor J.A., 1975. *The Language of Thought*, Thomas Crowell, New York; Shapiro, L. A., 2000. “Multiple Realizations.” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 97(12): 635–654; Shapiro, Lawrence A., 2008. “How to Test for Multiple Realization.” *Philosophy of Science*, 75(5): 514–525.

⁴ Hurley, S.L., 1998. *Consciousness in Action*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The classical model of the mind has shown mainly two problematic aspects over time. First, countless empirical evidence has abundantly refuted the modular conception of the brain over the past few years. Just think of the case of *mirror neurons*, which have been shown to activate not only if we are engaged in an action, but also if we perceive others performing it⁵. Thus, some areas considered dedicated to motor processes also turn out to be engaged in perceptual processes. Second, the image – assumed, but also imposed in experiments – provided by classical cognitivism of the perceiver understood as passive has appeared increasingly unacceptable. One need only refer to the fact that in experiments designed to provide evidence in favor of the classical model, subjects were immobilized and invited to observe two-dimensional images on computer screens. However, in our experience, we are certainly not passive in this sense; on the contrary, we actively explore our environment to see what interests us. Paradigmatic is the example used by Alva Noë, in which the American philosopher describes the development of perceptual processes during a visit to an art gallery.⁶ In this case, as well as for the everyday experience, precisely what there is to see doesn't show up for free; it does not automatically pour into our heads but requires effort, an "achievement."

Perceivers are active. They are continuously peering, squinting, moving, looking around, probing the environment to get a better look at what is going on. This shows that we, ordinary perceivers, are not content to consult an internal representation of the world; we are interested in the world and are continuously active in trying to secure access to it.⁷

In a nutshell, classical cognitivism turns out to be unsatisfactory because unable to account for the inextricably intertwined character of action and perception both at the brain level and also with respect to the relationship between organism and environment. Cognitivists have struggled to account for the flexible and context-sensitive intelligence that characterizes human cognition. In short, the role played by sensorimotor and environment within cognitive processes was terribly underdetermined.

As we shall see in a moment, the ecological-enactive approach does not simply overturn the classical model but goes beyond it in the direction of an image of cognition understood as a dynamic exploration of the "rich landscape of affordances."⁸ We open ourselves to the sociomaterial environment through an endless repertoire of abilities. In short, a sandwich will no longer suffice to account for our way of thinking.

⁵ Di Pellegrino, G., Fadiga, L., Fogassi, L., Gallese, V., Rizzolatti, G., 1992. "Understanding Motor Events: A Neurophysiological Study." *Experimental Brain Research*, 91, 176-180.

⁶ In *Varieties of Presence*, from which the following quotation in the body of the text is taken, Noë points out that his interest in art, in the case of this specific essay, comes from the fact that it "recapitulates" our perceptual experience. In this sense, a visit to an art gallery allows us to capture in an exemplary way how we "access" the world.

⁷ Noë, A., 2012. *Varieties of Presence*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London, p. 93.

⁸ Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., 2014. "A Rich Landscape of Affordances". *Ecological Psychology*, 26(4), 325-352.

But how did a computer end up in our heads? The explanation that American anthropologist and cognitive scientist Edwin Hutchins tries to give in his essay on distributed cognition, *Cognition in the Wild*, suggests that classical cognitivism would have isolated a sociocultural activity such as human computation and then projected it within the individual. In this sense, according to Hutchins, the founding myth of cognitivism should be read, which tells of the feat of English mathematician Alan Turing who was able to locate the essence of human cognition within the individual. However, this myth can be easily debunked if one reflects on the fact that it is only possible to conceptualize abstract computation from the practice of human computation, which cannot be considered an isolated individual's internal process. The word computer originally refers to the one who computes, thus to an individual who proceeds in an activity according to a socially shared practice. The process of computation occurs through symbols, gestures, and material supports, so it must first be understood as an embodied and situated cultural practice. Starting from the activity of computation, through a process of abstraction that eliminates the individual engaged in a context, what remains is not the essence of cognition but rather the core of a sociocultural system that, implanted in the individual's brain, is passed off as the essence of cognition itself.

In the words of Hutchins:

The physical-symbol-system architecture is not a model of individual cognition. It is a model of the operation of a sociocultural system from which the human actor has been removed.

Having failed to notice that the central metaphor of the physical-symbol-system hypothesis captured the properties of a sociocultural system rather than those of an individual mind, AI and information-processing psychology proposed some radical conceptual surgery for the modeled human. The brain was removed and replaced with a computer. The surgery was a success. However, there was an apparently unintended side effect: the hands, the eyes, the ears, the nose, the mouth, and the emotions all fell away when the brain was replaced by a computer. The computer was not made in the image of the person. The computer was made in the image of the formal manipulations of abstract symbols. And the last 30 years of cognitive science can be seen as attempts to remake the person in the image of the computer.⁹

Classical cognitivists, having taken the computer metaphor not as such but as a scientific theory,¹⁰ were committed to transforming into internal resources certain abilities that emerge only through a dynamic interaction of the individual with his or her environment. As philosopher Evan Thompson points out, since cognitivism has proceeded by abstracting from culture, society and embodiment, “it remained resistant to this kind of critical analysis and was wedded to a reified metaphor of the mind as a computer in the

⁹ Hutchins, E. 1995. *Cognition in the Wild*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p. 363.

¹⁰ Pylyshyn, Z. W., 1984. *Computation and cognition: Toward a foundation for cognitive science*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

head.”¹¹ The project of cognitivism, based on a long tradition and thanks to methodological individualism from the social sciences, has provided for clustering emerging abilities on the basis of dynamics involving the broader *brain-body-environment system* into a single organ of the human body. Thinking of such abilities as the result of the dynamic interaction of the whole animal with the environment will allow air to circulate and thus enable us to leave the closed cranial *black box*.

3. The many E's of cognition

Since about the 1990s, the model of mind proposed by classical cognitivism has been severely challenged. During this period, a group of approaches emerged, united by the idea that cognition would not be the sole responsibility of a disembodied device manipulating internal information but rather would be identified with the activity of a body located in a sociomaterial environment.

In 1991, the seminal text of enactivism, *The Embodied Mind*, by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, was published, which, proposing to complete the project of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, situates the role of dynamic coupling between brain, body, and environment at the center of cognition. In the same year, in the article *Intelligence without representation*, robotics scholar Rodney Brooks, thanks to his *Creatures*, showed that, for the analysis of simple forms of intelligence, referring to internal representations simply gets in the way since it turns out to be better “to use the world as its own model.”¹² Also, in 1991, a paper by Flor and Hutchins was published that introduced within cognitive science a new framework, *distributed cognition*, which, to account for the performance of cognitive tasks, refers to a unit of analysis that includes environmental features. *Cognition in The Wild* published in 1995, in which Hutchins further develops his conception of cognition, will influence Clark and Chalmers' *extended mind* proposal presented in the 1998 essay *The Extended Mind. The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* by James Gibson published in 1979, although harshly opposed because it appeared in the years of the most significant influence of classical cognitivism, has always been able to count on a certain influence that just in these years has been further spreading.

To refer to the multiplicity of approaches that, since the 1990s, have worked to subvert the old model of the mind, *4-E*¹³ (embodied, embedded, enactive, extended) is used in the literature today; sometimes it has included multiple E's (ecological, empathic) and sometimes an A (*4E & A*, where A stands for affective). Although these approaches are proposed as an alternative to the classical cognitivist paradigm, not all break free from

¹¹ Thompson, E., 2007. *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p. 8.

¹² Brooks, R.A., 1991. “Intelligence without representation.” *Artificial Intelligence* 47, 139-159, p. 140.

¹³ Menary, R. 2010. “Introduction to the Special Issue on 4E Cognition.” *Phenomenology and Cognitive Sciences*, 9 (4), pp. 459-463; Newen, A., De Bruin, L., Gallagher, S., (Eds.) 2018. *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

the conceptual framework they oppose. Thus, it is possible to distinguish between conservative and radical approaches on the basis of how the relationship between organism and environment, the nature of embodiment, and the role of representations in cognition are understood. Julian Kiverstein speaks of *embodied functionalism*¹⁴ to refer to conservative approaches where, yes, the situated body is accorded a role in the performance of cognitive work but an auxiliary one. At most, in these cases, the body simplifies a computational operation by performing calculations, formatting representations, or manipulating the environment. Today, a good portion of embodied cognitive science calls itself such despite continuing to work within the functionalist framework. Shaun Gallagher, in this regard, spoke of the *invasion of the body snatchers*, referring to the famous 1956 film.¹⁵ What distinguishes the enactive proposal from conservative E is that, by focusing on action, it emphasizes that we are a body, but we are not confined to it. We are not freed from the constraints of the computationalist view simply by expanding the field of inquiry to the whole body. The point is that the body, with the brain, constitutes a part of the larger brain-body-environment system. In the words of the anthropologist Tim Ingold: “[t]he body is not a package, nor [...] a sink into which movements settle like sediment in a ditch.”¹⁶

Starting with some proposals occupying the conservative end of the E spectrum, I will consider the ecological-enactive approach on the opposite side.

In an attempt to break free from the assumptions of classical cognitivism, it has been tried, from the *weak* – or conservative – front¹⁷ of the embodied approach, to define mental representations not as amodal but as *action-oriented*,¹⁸ *B-formatted* or *depictive*.¹⁹ These proposals have in common the belief that mental states have a format that is not abstract but defined in relation to the possibilities of action and the structure of the body. The somatosensory, affective, and interoceptive aspects of experience are included in *representations formatted by the body*. Goldman and de Vignemont speak of representations "associated with the physiological conditions of the body, such as pain, temperature, itch, muscular and visceral sensations, vasomotor activity, hunger and thirst."²⁰ An exemplary case of *B-formatted* representation is *mirror neurons*²¹ whose activation would enable us to understand, in a prereflexive way, the motor states of others

¹⁴ Kiverstein, J., 2012. "The Meaning of Embodiment." *Topics in Cognitive Science* 4, 740-758.

¹⁵ Gallagher, S., 2015. "Invasion of the body snatchers: How embodied cognition is being disembodied." *The Philosophers' Magazine*, April, p. 96-102; Gallagher, S., 2017. *Enactivist Interventions: Rethinking the Mind*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

¹⁶ Ingold, T., 2013. *Making: anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*. Routledge, New York, p. 159.

¹⁷ Alsmith, A., de Vignemont, F., 2012. "Embodying the mind and representing the body." *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 3, 1-13.

¹⁸ Wheeler, M., 2005. *Reconstructing the cognitive world: the next step*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p. 195.

¹⁹ Pearson, J., Kosslyn, M., 2015. "The heterogeneity of mental representation: Ending the imagery debate." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112 (33), pp. 10089-10092.

²⁰ Goldman, A., de Vignemont, F., 2009. "Is social cognition embodied?" *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 13(4), 154-9. p. 156.

²¹ Di Pellegrino, G., Fadiga, L., Fogassi, L., Gallese V., Rizzolatti, G., 1992. "Understanding Motor Events: A Neurophysiological Study."; Gallese, V., Fogazzi, L., Fatiga, L., Rizzolatti, V., 1996. "Action Recognition in the Premotor Cortex." *Brain*, 119 (2), pp. 593-609.

through what is called *embodied simulation*.²² A representation is *B-formatted* based on "the relation to the body and its spatial, temporal and biomechanical constraints."²³ In this sense, as is easy to observe, although the body informs internal representations, their production is borne by causal mechanisms placed in the individual at a subpersonal level. Referring to Goldman and de Vignemont, according to whom the most promising version within the family of embodied cognition would be precisely the conception of *B-formatted* representations,²⁴ Daniel Hutto asserts that if these were the contributions coming from embodied approaches, then they would be nothing more than "welcome accessories"²⁵ whose purpose would be not to support the new conceptual framework but rather to enhance the intellectualistic approaches of the mind.

Incidentally, beyond the proposals briefly reviewed, it seems to me that in some cases we can speak of what I would call *body washing*: no one wants to give up a place in the debate – now mainstream – of embodied cognition.

So-called *weak* or *conservative* approaches succeed in departing from the cognitivist framework in that they deny that perception and action are peripheral processes modularly isolated from the central cognitive core; however, they fail to abandon a representationalist position altogether. Their approach thus simply constitutes an attempt to modify classical cognitivism by enriching the repertoire of amodal representations with those informed by the body.

These attempts in accordance with the foundational myth, respond to the cognitivist project of "pushing the world inside the mind."²⁶

Another embodied approach that remains entangled within the classical paradigm is that of the *extended mind*, according to which cognition *sometimes* extends beyond the boundaries of the brain. The basic idea is that external features of the environment can become partially constitutive of the mind.²⁷

The question from which Clark and Chalmers start is: "Where does the mind end and the world begin?"²⁸ To try to answer, they use a thought experiment involving two characters, Otto and Inga, who plan to visit the *Museum of Modern Art in New York*. Inga can rely on her biological memory and head to the museum, while Otto, who is suffering from Alzheimer's disease, must first consult his notebook where the address is noted.

According to Clark and Chalmers, based on the Parity Principle, Otto's notebook is to be understood as part of his extended mind. Everything that plays the same functional role is part of cognition:

²² Gallese, V. and Goldman, A., 1998. "Mirror neurons and the simulation theory of mindreading." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 2, 493-551; Gallese, V., 2005. "Embodied simulation: from neurons to phenomenal experience." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 4, 23-48.

²³ Gallese, V., Sinigaglia, C., 2018. *Embodied Resonance*. In Newen, A. De Bruin, L., Gallagher, S. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 417-432, p. 421.

²⁴ Goldman, A., de Vignemont, F., 2009. "Is social cognition embodied?"

²⁵ Hutto, D., Myin, E., 2013. *Radicalizing enactivism*. Cambridge, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p.11.

²⁶ Meteyard, L., Cuadrado, S. R., Bahrami, B., and Vigliocco, G. 2012. "Coming of age: A review of embodiment and the neuroscience of semantics." *Cortex* 48 (7), 788-804.

²⁷ Clark, A., Chalmers, D., 1998. "The extended mind." *Analysis*, 58, 7-19, p. 12.

²⁸ Ivi, p.1.

If, as we confront some task, a part of the world functions as a process which, were it done in the head, we would have no hesitation in recognizing as part of the cognitive process, then that part of the world is (so we claim) part of the cognitive process. Cognitive processes ain't (all) in the head!²⁹

The information offloaded into the environment, which Otto accesses, functions as a non-occurrent belief; the difference with Inga would consist only in the fact that the information pinned to the notebook lies beyond the confines of the skin.

Among the positions most critical of Clark and Chalmers' proposal are those of Fred Adams and Ken Aizawa. Two closely related topics, the *mark of the cognitive* and the *coupling-constitution fallacy*, pose a challenge not only to the extended mind proposal but to all those radical approaches belonging to the E-family, such as enactivism and ecological psychology, which focus on the constitutive role of the body and the environment in cognitive processes.

According to the *coupling-constitution fallacy*³⁰ argument, the coupling between neural and extraneural processes, which include, for example, body movements and notebook use in Otto's case, is insufficient to define non-neural processes as *constitutive* of cognition but rather as *causal conditions*.

The question then is to understand where to locate the *mark of the mental*. Adams and Aizawa's position rests on the distinction between derived and non-derived representations. Only the latter, referring to mental states internal to the subject, can be considered properly cognitive. According to this perspective, therefore, the content relating to Otto's belief being derived would turn out to be excluded from cognition.

Although the two objections come from the orthodox side of the cognitive sciences, their charges can be used to radicalize the extended mind proposal further – at the cost, however, of abandoning its classical formulation – simply by bringing it to operate within a different explanatory plane, no longer the subpersonal one, but that relating to the mind-body-environment system. On this plane, Adams and Aizawa's arguments would no longer hold, while on the functionalist one, on which Clark and Chalmers' proposal is installed, they have an easy time.

Unlike weak proposals, radically embodied approaches³¹ propose a complete reconceptualization of cognition. In this case, it is not simply a matter of reshaping the notion of internal representations but of abandoning it completely.

It was Andy Clark who coined the term *radical embodied cognition*, defining it in this way:

Structured, symbolic, representational, and computational views of cognition are mistaken. Embodied cognition is best studied by means of noncomputational and

²⁹ Clark, A., Chalmers, D., 1998. "The extended mind." p.8

³⁰ Adams, F., Aizawa, K., 2008. *The Bounds of Cognition*. Blackwell, Oxford; Robert D., 2009, *Cognitive Systems and the Extended Mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

³¹ Chemero, A., *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science*; Silberstein, M., Chemero, A., 2012. "Complexity and extended phenomenological cognitive systems." *Topics in Cognitive Science* 4 (1), 35-50; Hutto, D., Myin, E., *Radicalizing enactivism*.

nonrepresentational ideas and explanatory schemes involving, e.g., the tools of Dynamical Systems theory.³²

The self-declared "radical" theorists of cognition,³³ using dynamic systems theory and ecological psychology, argue that there are extended cognitive processes whenever the variables that describe one system are also the parameters that determine change in the other system, and vice versa.³⁴ It is only for explanatory convenience that in such a system, we treat the agent and its environment as separate and distinctly functioning systems. The dynamics of the two systems are so closely related that they are best thought of as forming a single extended brain-body-world system. Thus, it is in this sense, as Chemero states, that *radical embodied cognition* should be understood as “a variety of extended cognitive science”³⁵ – if, indeed, a different explanatory plane is at stake. Rather than using "extension" therefore, which is potentially misleading in that it implies cognitive work that takes place in the brain and occasionally reaches out into the world, it is more appropriate, from this side, to speak of “coupling” which emphasizes the mutuality between environment and animal, their interdependence.³⁶

4. Enactivism

The term “enactivism” was introduced into cognitive science by Varela-Thompson-Rosch in their 1991 essay *The Embodied Mind*. The English verb “to enact” refers to the enactment of a law, the performance of an acting role, or even the enactment of an idea, and connotes, more generally, the execution, realization, or accomplishment of something.

As the authors write:

We propose as a name the term enactive to emphasize the growing conviction that cognition is not the representation of a pregiven world by a pregiven mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs.³⁷

The enactive approach has arisen somewhat on the ground unearthed by research related to connectionism, situated robotics, dynamic systems theory, and Gibson's ecological

³² Clark, A., 1997. *Being There*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999, p. 148.

³³ Chemero, A., *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science*; Silberstein, M., Chemero, A., “Complexity and extended phenomenological cognitive systems”; Hutto, D., Myin, E., 2013. *Radicalizing enactivism*.

³⁴ See Kelso, J.A.S., 1995. *Dynamic Patterns: The Self-Organization of Brain and Behaviour*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Ward, D., Silverman, D., Villalobos, M., 2017. “Introduction: The Varieties of Enactivism.” *Topoi*, 36, 365-375; Chemero, A., 2009. *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science*.

³⁵ Chemero, A., *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science*, p. 31.

³⁶ Kiverstein, J., 2018. *Extended Cognition*. In Newen, A. De Bruin, L., Gallagher, S. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp.19-40.

³⁷ Varela, F., Thompson, E., Rosch, E., 1991. *The embodied mind*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. p.9.

psychology. The attempt of the authors of *The Embodied Mind* was to define a conceptual framework that could link such addresses to systems biology and mindfulness practices. According to the first definition given by Varela-Thompson-Rosch, the enactive approach is based on two points:

(1) perception consists in perceptually guided action and (2) cognitive structures emerge from the recurrent sensorimotor patterns that enable action to be perceptually guided.³⁸

If, for the classical paradigm, cognitive processes consist of the elaboration of internal representations, for enactivism, they are to be understood, rather, as sensorimotor loops that would manifest themselves “in the way in which motor variations induce (via the environment) sensory variations, and sensory changes induce (via internal processes) the agent to change the way it moves.”³⁹ In a nutshell, the action causes a change in sensory stimulation, which in turn drives the agent's movements.

Action and perception are no longer considered as separate and peripheral elements but as parts of the same process, linked by a relationship of co-dependence and co-determination. Varela-Thompson-Rosch believe that the organism, based on its own repertoire of actions, *brings forth* its own world, which, in this sense, is not to be understood as already given, but as enacted. This means that the organism and related significant structures in the environment emerge on the basis of dynamic processes. It is precisely these structures that are considered to be cognitive. In this sense it is possible to speak of co-production between organism and environment.

The attempt by the authors of *The Embodied Mind*, however, would not simply be directed toward abandoning a dualist position in favor of a kind of monism, but would point toward a middle way, the very way that would allow them to avoid an idealist drift:

It is precisely this emphasis on mutual specification that enables us to negotiate a middle path between the Scylla of cognition as the recovery of a pre-given outer world (realism) and the Charybdis of cognition as the projection of a pre-given inner world (idealism). These two extremes both take representation as their central notion: in the first case representation is used to recover what is outer; in the second case it is used to project what is inner. Our intention is to bypass entirely this logical geography of inner versus outer by studying cognition not as recovery or projection but as embodied action.⁴⁰

For convenience of analysis are usually identified three main directions operating in the field of enactivism today: autopoietic enactivism, which is based on the life-mind continuity; sensorimotor enactivism, which focuses on the analysis of perceptual

³⁸ Varela, F., Thompson, E., Rosch, E., *The embodied mind*, p. 173.

³⁹ Di Paolo, E.A., Buhrmann, T., and Barandiaran, X.E., 2017. *Sensorimotor life: an enactive proposal*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 17.

⁴⁰ Varela, F., Thompson, E., Rosch, E., *The embodied mind*, p. 172.

experience in terms of sensorimotor activity; and radical enactivism, which focuses on the scaffolding process and aims to expunge representational residuals from any enactivist-type thinking.⁴¹

The aim of autopoietic enactivism⁴² consists in grounding cognition in the biodynamic processes of living systems. In the Preface of *Mind in Life*, Evan Thompson writes: “Where there is life there is mind, and mind in its most articulated forms belongs to life.”⁴³ Life and mind would share a core set of properties; those distinctive to mind would be an enriched version of those fundamental to life.

The notion of *autopoiesis* – from Greek *αὐτο-* (auto-) self, and *ποίησις* (poiesis) creation, production –, developed by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela against the background of the neo-cybernetic turn, plays a central role here. Although it is never present as an occurrence within the Varela-Thompson-Rosch text, it underlies many of its proposals.

Autopoiesis refers to the activity that characterizes the living and, more specifically, to that process of metabolic self-individuation of organisms that, through regulation of exchanges with the outside world, ensure their own subsistence despite the constant imbalance to which the environment subjects them. The classic example of an autopoietic system is that of the bacterium⁴⁴ immersed in a sugar gradient. Sucrose, according to which the hydromechanics of the flagella varies, has *value* and *meaning* for the unicellular organism:

although sucrose is a real and present condition of the physicochemical environment, its status as food is not. That sucrose is a nutrient is not intrinsic to the status of the sucrose molecule; it is, rather, a relational feature, linked to the bacterium's metabolism. Sucrose has significance or value as food, but only in the milieu that the organism itself brings into existence.⁴⁵

The organism changes the physical world into an environment of meaning and valence, creating an *Umwelt*⁴⁶ for the system. This process of realizing cognitive structures is called *sense-making*⁴⁷ by autopoietic enactivists. We speak of *sense-making* whenever

⁴¹ For a detailed and up-to-date account see: Ward, D., Silverman, D., Villalobos, M., 2017. “Introduction: The Varieties of Enactivism.”

⁴² Varela, F., 1997. “Patterns of life: intertwining identity and cognition.” *Brain Cognition* 34(1), 72-87; Weber, A., Varela, F.J., 2002. “Life after Kant: natural purposes and the autopoietic foundations of biological individuality.” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 1, 97-125; Thompson, E., *Mind in Life*; Di Paolo, E., 2005. “Autopoiesis, adaptivity, teleology, agency.” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 4, pp. 441-442; Di Paolo E., 2009. “Extended life.” *Topoi*, 28, 9-21.

⁴³ Thompson, E., *Mind in life*, p. IX.

⁴⁴ See Varela, F., “Patterns of life: intertwining identity and cognition.”

⁴⁵ Thompson, E., *Mind in life*, p. 158.

⁴⁶ See Uexküll, J. von., 1934. *A foray into the worlds of animals and humans. With a theory of meaning*. Tr. O’Neil, J.D., University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

⁴⁷ See Weber, A., Varela, F.J., “Life after Kant: natural purposes and the autopoietic foundations of biological individuality.”; Thompson, E., Stapleton, M., 2009. “Making sense of sense-making: reflections on enactive and extended mind theories.” *Topoi*, 28(1), 23-30; Di Paolo, E.A. and Thompson, E., 2014. *The enactive approach*. In Shapiro, L. A., (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of embodied cognition*. Oxford, UK, Routledge, pp. 69-77.

an agent treats the perturbations it "encounters during its ongoing activity from a perspective of significance which is not intrinsic to the perturbations themselves."⁴⁸ Based on this notion, the further notion of *participative-sense making*⁴⁹ has been developed within the study of social relations, through which an attempt is made to explain how cognition and *sense-making* involve the activity of others.

One of the central questions for autopoietic enactivists is to understand what kind of biodynamic process is needed to account for the cognitive organization.

Since the notion of autopoiesis would seem to be particularly useful in describing the mechanisms that regulate organism preservation, Ezequiel Di Paolo attempted to enrich it by proposing the notion of *adaptability*, which would consist of the ability of the autopoietic system to prevent potentially harmful situations through the attribution of meaning to the processes underlying autopoiesis itself.

With the notion of *adaptability*, according to Di Paolo, it would be possible to better account for the fact that cognition requires the organism's capacity to *actively* modify its relation to the environment, rather than simply regulate its interaction with it for the purpose of subsistence: "adaptive regulation is an achievement of the autonomous system's internally generated activity rather than merely something that is simply undergone by it."⁵⁰ According to Di Paolo, the environment becomes significant to the extent that the organism through "plastic attunement"⁵¹ adapts to it.

Contrary to the autopoietic approach, sensorimotor enactivism⁵² first proposed by Kevin O'Regan and Alva Noë in a 2001 article, "A Sensorimotor account of vision and visual consciousness", is limited to analyzing perceptual experience rather than developing a general theory of cognition. Issues concerning biodynamic processes and the continuity between life and mind do not play a relevant role here.

The central idea of sensorimotor enactivism is that perception does not happen within our brains; rather it is something we do. O'Regan and Noë would later develop divergent perspectives, and both would maintain some ambiguity regarding the role played by internal representations.

In the early pages of the 2004 essay, *Action in Perception*, Alva Noë offers a kind of manifesto of sensorimotor enactivism:

[...] perceiving is a way of acting. Perception is not something that happens to us, or in us. It is something we do. [...]. What we perceive is determined by what we do (or what we know how to do); it is determined by what we are ready to do. In ways I try

⁴⁸ Froese, T., Di Paolo, E.A., 2011. "The enactive approach: theoretical sketches from cell to society." *Pragmatics and Cognition*, 19(1), 1-36, p. 9.

⁴⁹ De Jaegher, H., Di Paolo, E. A., 2007. "Participatory sense-making: An enactive approach to social cognition." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 6, 485-507; Fuchs, T., De Jaegher, H., 2009. "Enactive Intersubjectivity: Participatory sense-making and mutual incorporation." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 8(4), 465-486.

⁵⁰ Froese, T., Di Paolo, E.A., "The enactive approach: theoretical sketches from cell to society", p.9.

⁵¹ Di Paolo, E., "Autopoiesis, adaptivity, teleology, agency." pp. 441-442.

⁵² See Hurley, S.K., *Consciousness in Action*; O'Regan, J.K., Noë, A., 2001. "A sensorimotor account of vision and visual consciousness." *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, 24, 939-1031; Noë, A., 2004. *Action in perception*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; O'Regan, J.K., 2011. *Why red doesn't sound like a bell. Explaining the feel of consciousness*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

to make precise, we enact our perceptual experience; we act it out. To be a perceiver is to understand, implicitly, the effects of movement on sensory stimulation.⁵³

As is evident from this passage, there are two focuses of Noë's attention: 1) perceiving is a way of acting, and at the same time; 2) perceiving is understanding (implicitly) the effects of action on sensory stimulation.

One of the central questions posed by Noë relates to the problem of *perceptual presence*: how do we account for the fact that we experience an object in its entirety, although only a portion is exposed to our sense organs? This is possible because our perception, as anticipated, rests on an implicit knowledge of sensorimotor contingencies, where sensorimotor contingency refers to the “structure of the rules governing the sensory changes produced by various motor actions.”⁵⁴ This means that perception depends not only on sensory impulses – an issue on which all enactivists agree – but also on the implicit understanding of how exploratory movements give rise to changes in sensory stimulation. In practice, as Noë shows in *Action in Perception* based on rich scientific literature, the sensory stimulus is insufficient to account for our perceptual experience. Perception is not merely undergoing sensory impressions but having sensations that one understands.

Concerning how to understand sensorimotor contingencies, there is disagreement within sensorimotor enactivism. In the classic formulation of the sensorimotor approach, O'Regan and Noë⁵⁵ locate the dimension related to sensorimotor contingencies at a subpersonal level; Noë in *Action in Perception* shifts the emphasis to the personal level while other proposals of sensorimotor enactivism⁵⁶ will consider both types of approaches for different explanatory purposes.

In recent years, Noë has increasingly placed artistic practices and how they would be able to reorganize our forms of life at the very heart of his research. Crucial in this regard is his 2015 essay, *Strange Tools*, in which, in a nutshell, he distinguishes between activities that organize our forms of life and practices of reorganization that challenge the way we are organized and thus enable us precisely to remake ourselves.

Strange Tools places at the center of the debate concerning enactivism the question of our experiences related to artistic practices, but in doing so, Noë, do not use art as a pretext to endorse already pre-established theses, rather artistic practice is considered on a par with philosophical reflection, they belong in fact to the same genus, they are precisely reorganizational practices. As Noë states: “[t]hey are practices (not activities)—methods of research—aiming at illuminating the ways we find ourselves organized and so, also, the ways we might reorganize ourselves.”⁵⁷

⁵³ Noë, A., *Action in perception*, p.1.

⁵⁴ O'Regan, J.K., Noë, A., “A sensorimotor account of vision and visual consciousness.” p. 941; emphasis in the original.

⁵⁵ O'Regan, J.K., Noë, A., “A sensorimotor account of vision and visual consciousness.”

⁵⁶ Hurley, S.L., *Consciousness in Action*; Hurley, S. L., Noë, A., “Neural Plasticity and Consciousness.” *Biology and Philosophy*, 18, 131–68.

⁵⁷ Noë, A., 2015. *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*, Hill and Wang, New York, p. 17.

On the side of Radical Enactivism (REC), Daniel Hutto and Erik Myin aim to RECTify the existing varieties of enactivism and other cognitive approaches to strengthen them to oppose a unified front against the classical ways of thinking about mind and cognition.

Just like the sensorimotor approach, authors working within radical enactivism do not address the phenomenological and metaphysical issues dear to autopoietic enactivists. Rather than defining a new direction, radical enactivism aims first and foremost to cleanse enactive approaches of any residual representationalism. In this sense, the sensorimotor approach is the object of careful criticism. Particularly problematic for Hutto and Myin is the way O'Reagan and Noë let perceptual processes rest on an implicit understanding of sensorimotor contingencies. The mediating role assigned to sensorimotor understanding, although O'Reagan and Noë emphasize that it is a type *ci* implicit and practical understanding, would leave too much room for a cognitivist analysis in terms of internal rules and representations. Moreover, this approach would tend to overintellectualize perceptual processes while leaving the notion of sensorimotor contingency obscured. REC, carefully avoiding internal representations, leverages embodied robotics and dynamical systems theory to account for how intelligent behavior emerges based on environmental interactions.

In rectification (*RECTify*), the autopoietic approach is also reviewed, although the authors see room for an alliance here. Criticism is directed at the attempt to ground intentional relations with the environment in the biodynamic dimension. For example, Hutto and Myin, impatient with “extravagant claims”⁵⁸ as *bringing forth* or *enacting* one's world, find it unacceptable that adaptive regulation related to autopoietic dynamics constitutes a form of *sense-making* through which meanings and values would emerge. In practice, it would be misleading to speak of cognition, interpretation, *sense-making*, understanding, and even emotion in describing the responses of simple living systems such as bacteria. The source of their disagreement is related to the anti-representationalist scope of the radical proposal. Hutto and Myin agree with autopoietic enactivists that biodynamics underlies cognition, but not with the outcome they arrive at. The evolutionary history of an organism's adaptive interaction capacities can ground a teleological relationship, but without determined content. In this direction works the notion of *Ur-intentionality*,⁵⁹ which refers to the content-free intentionality characterizing *basic minds* – phylogenetically and ontologically simple minds. To develop the notion of *Ur-intentionality*, Hutto, and Myn go through the *RECTification* of teleosemantics – appropriately transformed into teleosemiotics – whose original goal⁶⁰ was to naturalize representational content by appealing to biological functions.

Cognition, therefore, is to be understood by REC in terms of the interaction of biological and sensorimotor dynamics with social dynamics by which basic minds are introduced into the realm of content-rich cognition.

⁵⁸ Hutto, D., Myin, E., 2013. *Radicalizing enactivism*, p. 5.

⁵⁹ See Hutto, D., Myin, E., 2017. *Evolving enactivism: basic minds meet content*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

⁶⁰ Millikan, R., 1984. *Language, thought and other biological categories*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

It should be noted, however, that for REC “it is possible to go quite a long way, cognitively speaking, without involving content,”⁶¹ in fact, it is not necessary to refer to them in every kind of culturally supported (scaffolded) cognitive process; in this sense there would be, according to the authors, forms of perception, imagination and basic memories which may take the form of embodied activities or reenactments devoid of content.

My explorations, as already repeated, start from a radically embodied approach, namely the ecological-enactive. To delineate it broadly is the main purpose of this introduction. What I have drafted so far in outline, including the brief general nod to ecological psychology that follows, has the limited purpose of situating this new approach within a more comprehensive debate. The ecological-enactive, as we shall see, combines some insights from enactivism and ecological psychology in a unified post-cognitivist framework.

5. Ecological psychology

James Gibson's posthumous work published in 1979, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, as Anthony Chemero notes, is perhaps the only book on perception to devote almost half of its pages to analyzing the nature of the environment that animals perceive.⁶² This, in addition to being indicative of where the focus of attention is aimed – not exclusively on the animal nor on the environment – introduces us directly to the heart of the ecological approach: cognition and perception are to be understood based on the action of the animal exploring the environment.⁶³

Perception is not intended as an internal process of an inferential nature to the exclusive cuteness of the brain but rather as the ability of the whole animal to directly pick up information available in the environment. If perception is essentially an exploratory activity, then the kind of information Gibson refers to is certainly not what classical cognitivists talk about. According to cognitivism, since there is a gap between the quality of information extracted from the environment and what we experience, bridging this gap are complex cognitive processes. In the ecological approach, on the other hand, the information the organism needs to guide its action is already there. Animals, thus, can rely on information to guide action “without complex processing, without mental gymnastics.”⁶⁴ Ecological information is understood as invariant patterns in energy arrays – light, sound waves, and pressure patterns on tactile receptors. To better grasp the shape of an object, for example, we can further sample the optical array, which means we can move around it.

⁶¹ Hutto, D., Myin, E., *Evolving enactivism*, p. 13.

⁶² Chemero, A., *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science*, p. 106.

⁶³ For a good and up-to-date introduction to the history and philosophy of ecological psychology see: Lobo, L., Heras-Escribano, M., Travieso, D., 2018. “The History and Philosophy of Ecological Psychology”, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 1-15; see also Heras-Escribano, M., 2019. *The Philosophy of Affordances*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland.

⁶⁴ Chemero, A., *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science*, p.134.

In this sense, the organism, engaged in the exploratory activity, grasps environmental differences and gradually attunes to them. In the case of humans, exploration of the environment is often guided by "more experienced hands." In this case, we speak of *education of attention*:

The state of a perceptual system is altered when it is attuned to information of a certain sort. The system has become sensitized. Differences are noticed that were previously not noticed. Features become distinctive that were formerly vague. But this altered state need not be thought of as depending on a memory, an image, an engram, or a trace.⁶⁵

Scottish anthropologist Tim Ingold, who, in a series of essays published in 2010, works extensively on the Gibsonian legacy, resorts to a very effective example to account for the process of *education of attention*:

The novice hunter learns by accompanying more experienced hands in the woods. As he goes about, he is instructed in what to look out for, and his attention is drawn to subtle clues that he might otherwise fail to notice: in other words, he is led to develop a sophisticated perceptual awareness of the properties of his surroundings and of the possibilities they afford for action. For example, he learns to register those qualities of surface texture that enable one to tell, merely from touch, how long ago an animal left its imprint in the snow, and how fast it was travelling.⁶⁶

Education of attention, following Ingold more precisely in this case, means, therefore, that process by which, making their way in the company of "experienced hands," novices "grow into the knowledge of their predecessors"⁶⁷ through a process which, using the expression of Zukow-Goldring & Ferko, the Scottish anthropologist defines as "guided rediscovery."⁶⁸

In ecological psychology, the most influential concept is *affordance*, a neologism first used by Gibson in a 1966 essay⁶⁹ and derived from the English word *to afford*. Related to this notion is a radical redescription of the environment that an organism can perceive. According to Gibson, an animal's environment is not the world described by physics; what is perceived by the organism are not objects, but rather affordances, or possibilities for action.

⁶⁵ Chemero, A., *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science*, p.134.

⁶⁶ Ingold, T., 2011. *The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*. Routledge, London, p. 37.

⁶⁷ Ingold, T., 2013. *Making. Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*. Routledge, New York, p. 110.

⁶⁸ Zukow-Goldring, Ferko as quoted by Ingold, T., 2013. *Making*, pp. 184-185.

⁶⁹ Gibson, J.J., 1966. *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*. Houghton-Mifflin, Boston, Massachusetts.

The first definition found in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* that Gibson gives of the central notion of ecological psychology is as follows:

The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill.⁷⁰

Thus, an *affordance* would seem to be, at first glance, simply a *resource* that the environment offers to any organism capable of grasping it, a *property* of the environment considered in relation to an animal. After a few pages, Gibson would seem to complicate matters:

an affordance is neither an objective property nor a subjective property; or it is both if you like. An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer.⁷¹

Given the ambiguity of the notion, there is no agreement regarding the ontological status of affordances.

Early post-Gibsonian attempts led to defining *affordances* as properties of the environment related to animals.⁷² In particular, Turvey and colleagues understood affordances as *dispositional properties* of the environment complemented by *effectualities* or dispositional properties of animals. The weakness of this proposal, as Chemero points out,⁷³ would seem to be related to the fact that *dispositions* do not fail to actualize on the basis of certain circumstances, whereas this is not the case for *effectualities*. The disposition of a piece of paper, for example, is to catch fire if we place it near a flame, and so it invariably happens, while, on the other hand, although I can walk, this does not mean that I will never fall or slip. Within the dispositional address, therefore, the dimension relating to the exercise of abilities is not satisfactorily included.

An alternative proposal is that of Anthony Chemero, who understands affordances as relations between the animal's abilities and *features* of the environment. This position,

⁷⁰ Gibson, J. J., 1979/1986. *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ, p. 193.

⁷¹ Ivi, p.196.

⁷² Turvey, M. T., Shaw, R.E., Reed, E.S., Mace, W.E., 1981. "Ecological laws of perceiving and acting: In reply to Fodor and Pylyshyn." *Cognition*, 9, 237-304; Michaels, C. F., Carello, C., 1981. *Direct Perception*. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, N.J.; Heft, H., 1989. "Affordances and the body: An intentional analysis of Gibson's ecological approach to visual perception." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 19, 1-30; Heft, H., 2001. *Ecological Psychology in Context: James Gibson, Roger Barker, and the Legacy of William James's Radical Empiricism*. Erlbaum, Mahwah, N.J.; Turvey, M., 1992. "Affordances and prospective control: An outline of the ontology." *Ecological Psychology*, 4, 173-187; Reed, E., 1996. *Encountering the World*. Oxford University Press, New York; Michaels, C. F., 2000. "Information, perception, and action: What should ecological psychologists learn from Milner and Goodale (1995)?" *Ecological Psychology*, 12 (3), 241-258.

⁷³ Chemero, A., *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science*, p.145.

however, would seem to imply a betrayal of Gibsonian realism. The solution to this possible objection can be found in the proposal of Rietveld and Kiverstein, who, as we shall see, have developed, over the past few years, a Wittgensteinian reading of *affordance* that would allow them to use the notion not only as has been done by most Gibsonian readers, in relation to the motor possibilities that the environment offers the animal, but for “whole realm of social significance for human beings.”⁷⁴ It would thus seem possible to leave behind interpretations that tend to flatten the notion on the two opposite poles – *resource* of the environment (Turvey, Reed) or *relation* between environmental features and the animal's abilities (Chemero) – by considering affordance as both a *resource* and a *relation*.

It is precisely from an enriched conception of affordance that the ecological-active proposal of Rietveld and colleagues is articulated.

6. The ecological-enactive approach

In recent decades, as we have seen, the role of the body and its relationship to the environment has been looked at with increasing attention in cognitive science. While some proposals have continued to operate within the cognitivist framework, several authors have articulated an entirely different approach in an attempt to produce a radically new picture of the mind compared to the classical paradigm. Some of these more radical forms of embodied cognition, enactivism and ecological psychology have developed independently of each other, and, from the outset, authors of both approaches have first and foremost emphasized their divergences.

In the 1991 essay, Varela, Thompson, and Rosch refer to Gibson's ecological psychology in this way:

[...] whereas Gibson claims that the environment is independent [It is independent from the animal's guided perceptual activity], we claim that it is enacted (by histories of coupling). Whereas Gibson claims that perception is direct detection, we claim that it is sensorimotor enactment. Thus the resulting research strategies are also fundamentally different: Gibsonians treat perception in largely optical (albeit ecological) terms and so attempt to build up the theory of perception almost entirely from the environment. Our approach, however, proceeds by specifying the sensorimotor patterns that enable action to be perceptually guided, and so we build up the theory of perception from the structural coupling of the animal.⁷⁵

From the front of ecological psychology, on the other hand, the enactive approach has often been accused of idealism, and it has even been argued that the assumption that an organism enacts its own world involves a "solipsistic epistemology."⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Gibson, J. J., *The ecological approach to visual perception*, p. 128.

⁷⁵ Varela, F., Thompson, E., Rosch, E., *The embodied mind*. p. 204.

⁷⁶ Swenson, R. 1992. “Autocatakinetics, yes – autopoiesis, no: Steps towards a unified theory of evolutionary ordering.” *International Journal of General Systems*, 21(2),207-228., p. 207.

At the same time, however, the two accounts share an anti-representationalist approach to cognitive processes, a more or less overt influence of the pragmatism of Dewey and James and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. Both addresses radically reject the Cartesian epistemological subject/world separation to resort, rather, to how a body actively interacts with its environment.

Quoting Gibson:

[...] it is often neglected that the words animal and environment make an inseparable pair. Each term implies the other. No animal could exist without an environment surrounding it. Equally, although not so obvious, an environment implies an animal (or at least an organism) to be surrounded.⁷⁷

As Varela-Thomson-Rosh write:

The key point, then, is that the species brings forth and specifies its own domain of problems to be solved by satisficing; this domain does not exist "out there" in an environment that acts as a landing pad for organisms that somehow drop or parachute into the world. Instead, living beings and their environments stand in relation to each other through mutual specification or codetermination. Thus what we describe as environmental regularities are not external features that have been internalized, as representationism and adaptationism both assume. Environmental regularities are the result of a conjoint history, a congruence that unfolds from a long history of codetermination.⁷⁸

However, the two approaches tend to explain cognition by emphasizing two different aspects: enactivism starts from the side of the body, and ecological psychology from that of the environment.⁷⁹ For Varela-Thompson-Rosch, a predetermined environment "out there" is incompatible with the world enacted or "brought forth" by the organism. For Gibson, on the other hand, the environment offers unlimited possibilities for different ways of living.

Just in recent years, work is being done in an attempt to reconcile enactivism and ecological psychology in the direction of a unified post-cognitivist approach.⁸⁰

The ecological-enactive account proposed by Rietveld and colleagues constitutes a promising attempt since it would, as we shall see, allow for the accounting of both the objective existence of environmental *affordances* and the fact that individuals enact their world.

Building on an expanded notion of *affordance* developed in Rietveld and Kiverstein's essay "A Rich Landscape of Affordances," Rietveld and colleagues, in parallel with the

⁷⁷ Gibson, J. J., *The ecological approach to visual perception*, p. 8.

⁷⁸ Varela, F., Thompson, E., Rosch, E., *The embodied mind*, p. 198.

⁷⁹ See Baggs, E., Chemero, A., 2021. "Radical embodiment in two directions." *Synthese*, 198, 2175-2190.

⁸⁰ See Heras-Escribano, M., 2019. *The Philosophy of Affordances*; Baggs, E., Chemero, A., "Radical embodiment in two directions."

work conducted by the interdisciplinary group RAAAF [Rietveld Architecture-Art-Affordances], have been focusing over the years on the analysis of skilled agency, on the scalability of the affordance, and recently on change-ability⁸¹ as skilled ways of coordinating with a rapidly changing world.

The central idea brought forward by Rietveld and colleagues is that the affordances of the environment depend on the abilities possessed by the animal. Since, within our *form of life*, the abilities we dispose of are extremely varied, the landscape of affordances we inhabit turns out to be rich and resourceful. The authors investigate the entire variety of human actions, including social interaction, creativity, imagination, planning, memory, and language use. This conceptual framework includes complementary instances from philosophy, ecological psychology, emotion psychology, and neurodynamics to explain how we respond to environmental invitations.

What makes Rietveld and colleagues' proposal particularly useful for my research is that providing an articulated understanding of the relational nature of affordances allows us to investigate, without resorting to "mysterious internal resources," how new ways of extending our openness to available resources emerge.⁸² In this sense, it will be possible not only to investigate "how broad is the class of affordances we can perceive"⁸³ but also, crucially, to explore how we can extend that class. This is precisely the purpose of the monstrous practices I will consider in this thesis; through them, I will try to investigate how *we work together to open ourselves to the world*: to do so, sometimes, *we enact monsters*. As we shall see, working at such openness constitutes the possibility of transforming practices taken for granted.

The notion of *affordance*, as we have already mentioned, is complex and debated, but there is general agreement on its basic definition:

*an affordance constitutes a possibility for action provided to the animal by the environment – by substances, surfaces, objects and other living creatures.*⁸⁴

Understanding it, however, as has usually been done, simply as a possibility for action, runs the risk, as Rietveld and Kiverstein point out in "A Rich Landscape of Affordances," of obscuring the complexity of the Gibsonian proposal and cutting off the "whole realm of social significance"⁸⁵ with the implicit question regarding the normative dimension. Starting, then, from the Gibsonian notion of *niche* and taking the idea that the same "natural environment offers many ways of life, and different animals have different ways of life,"⁸⁶ seriously, the solution proposed by Rietveld and Kiverstein, to do justice to the variety of practices available to our species, is to situate the notion of *affordance* in the Wittgensteinian notion of *form of life* (*Lebensformen*):

⁸¹ Rietveld, E., 2022. "Change-Ability for a World in Flux." *Adaptive Behavior*, 30(6) 613-623.

⁸² Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., "A Rich Landscape of Affordances." p. 327.

⁸³ Ivi, p. 325

⁸⁴ See Chemero, A., *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science*; Chemero, A., 2003. "An outline of a theory of affordances." *Ecological Psychology*, 15(2), 181-195; Heft, H., 2001. *Ecological Psychology in Context*; Reed, E., 1996. *Encountering the World*.

⁸⁵ Gibson, J. J., *The ecological approach to visual perception*, pp.127-128.

⁸⁶ Ivi, p.128.

The form of life of a kind of animal consists of patterns in its behavior, i.e., relatively stable and regular ways of doing things. In the case of humans, these regular patterns are manifest in the normative behaviors and customs of our communities. What is common to human beings is not just the biology we share but also our being embedded in sociocultural practices: our sharing steady ways of living with others, our relatively stable ways of going on.⁸⁷

To consider the different grains of analysis of "our stable ways of going on," Rietveld and Kiverstein refer to William Whyte's documentary, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, in which a time-lapse camera is used to film the way people sit in New York City squares. In an episode related to Paley Park, William Whyte uses both overhead and an eye-level perspective. From the Olympic perspective, it is possible to pick up regularities such as those indicating the tendency of men to sit in the front row and women in the back. However, this is a partial view. Going down to eye level, one will no longer see regularities but an "amiable miscellany" as people sit this way and that, "choices are always opening up."⁸⁸ According to Rietveld and Kiverstein, the two perspectives just mentioned reveal different but complementary aspects of behavior. From above we can grasp the general pattern, while if we zoom in we can encounter "a great variety of ways in which people engage with the various action possibilities the park offers."⁸⁹ *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* thus provides an example for considering at least three grains of analysis based on which the ecological-enactive approach of Rietveld and colleagues operates: 1) the human form of life in general – zoom out: regularity, the persistent practices, that is, the stable patterns of behavior that characterize the form of life; 2) a particular sociocultural practice – zoom in: the dynamics of relatively regular patterns of behavior unfold as observed from the perspective of a scientist; and finally 3) the engagement with relevant affordances by each individual – actor's lived perspective. In this sense, Rietveld and Kiverstein combine these different granularities to get a complete picture to understand a wider range of human involvement in ecological terms.

To account, then, for the variety of practices we have and the normative dimension, the definition Rietveld and Kiverstein come at is as follows:

affordances are relationships between aspects of the sociomaterial environment and the abilities available in a life form.

In the case of humans, abilities are acquired through a history of interactions in sociocultural practices, which means we learn to act appropriately according to the norms of context-sensitive practices.

To better understand what abilities are, Rietveld and Kiverstein first look at the broader world of nonhuman animals. Their starting point is the proposal of the anthropologist Tim

⁸⁷ Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., "A Rich Landscape of Affordances." pp. 228-229.

⁸⁸ William Whyte as quoted by Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., "A Rich Landscape of Affordances." p. 329.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

Ingold. Specifically, they refer to Ingold's description of how the weaverbird builds its nest. Much like the human string bags maker, the weaverbird's abilities are developed through an active exploration of the possibilities offered by its surroundings – which is linked to the animal's choice of materials and bodily capabilities. Crucially, as Ingold points out, successful nesting is linked first and foremost to the animal's ability to regulate its movements in relation to the evolving shape of its construction.⁹⁰ Man, like the weaverbird, “coordinate their movements with the material aspects of available affordances.”⁹¹ Through skill acquisition we learn to identify relevant affordances (solicitations) with respect to our engagements related to a particular practice. In this sense, through training, an architect, for example, can respond to environmental solicitations differently from someone who has not been trained to recognize certain sociomaterial invitations. Just as seen in reference to *education of attention*, the novice hunter is subject to normative evaluation based on his or her engagement in a specific situation. In this regard, Erik Rietveld speaks of *situated normativity*⁹² since it is the concrete situation that makes an individual's activity appropriate. Acting properly, to possess a skill, then requires the ability to be in “correspondence” with both others and material things. Skillful agents, through their engagement in shared practices, have acquired abilities by which they are able to “cooperate” with the sociomaterial environment. What matters then for successful coordination is the ability to adapt to a sociocultural practice but also to the specific details of the particular situation.

As we have already mentioned, a relational definition of affordance could undermine its objective reality and compromise its value as a resource available to the individual. To avert this possibility, Rietveld and Kiverstein, propose a distinction between two levels of description:

- 1) the form of life in which individuals have the potential to engage skillfully with affordances;
- 2) the actual ability of a particular individual to use affordances.

In this way, the existence of an affordance is not made to depend on an individual's current engagement with it, but rather its existence is relative to a broader form of life. Thus, not only is the objective reality of environmental invitations secured, but innovative behaviors and, therefore, new types of affordances are taken into account.

According to Rietveld and Kiverstein, it is possible to create or collect new affordances on the basis of abilities and possibilities already available in various practices, exploiting “the rich potentialities the environment already offers, for instance by making new

⁹⁰ Ingold, T. as quoted by Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., “A Rich Landscape of Affordances.” p.331.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

⁹² See Rietveld, E., 2008. “Situated normativity: The normative aspect of embodied cognition in unreflective action.” *Mind*, 117(468), 973-1001.

combinations.”⁹³ Just think, as the authors point out, of the practice of oil painting made possible by the invention of a new technique. The point is that the innovative technique in question was developed through the unusual combination of already available substances, namely by mixing a colored pigment with oil. The ability to mix pigments with liquid substances (egg yolk or glue) was already available within the scope of painting practice, so the existence of linseed oil already provided the possibility of action. However, it had not yet been picked up.

In this sense, the discovery of new affordances or the collection of unconventional ones can be fostered by stimulating the application of existing abilities to different aspects of the environment. This is made possible by the fact that affordances exceed those available to an individual both on the side of skills available in a life form and on the side of the sociomaterial environment:

The variety that manifests itself in both *relata* of the definition of affordances, i.e. both in the sociomaterial environment and in the abilities available in a life form, allows us to see the human ecological niche as a rich and resourceful landscape of affordances.⁹⁴

Each individual, based on the process of *attention of education* and his or her own history of interactions with the sociomaterial environment, is selectively open to the field of affordances that constitutes a portion of the rich landscape available to the life form. In this sense, we speak of *skilled intentionality*.⁹⁵ Through this notion, Rietveld and colleagues try to account for why we are prompted by some affordances rather than others in a given situation. First, let us clarify the distinction between *affordances* and *solicitations*. *Solicitations* are *affordances* that show up as relevant to a situated individual and generate a state of bodily reactivity in him or her. The right level of analysis for *affordances* is the form of life while for *solicitations* it is an individual in a concrete situation. If I am sitting at my desk, for example, the glass in front of me constitutes an affordance to drink, but that affordance will be relevant, so it will be present in my field, only when I am thirsty. An affordance becomes a solicitation as the result of a process of self-organization through which an animal, from a position of disequilibrium, tends toward an optimal grip to re-establish relative balance. To better define such an attempt, it is more correct to speak of a tendency toward an optimal *metastable zone*.⁹⁶ *Metastability* refers to the property of coupled dynamical systems in which, over time,

⁹³ Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., “A Rich Landscape of Affordances.” p. 338.

⁹⁴ Rietveld, E., Denys, D., van Westen, M., 2018. *Ecological- Enactive Cognition as engaging with a field of relevant affordances. The Skilled Intentionality Framework (SIF)*. In Newen, A., De Bruin, L., Gallagher. (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 46.

⁹⁵ See Bruineberg, J., Rietveld, E., 2014. “Self-organization, free energy minimization, and optimal grip on a field of affordances.” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8 (599), pp. 1-14.; Kiverstein, J., Rietveld, E., 2015. Kiverstein, J., Rietveld, E., 2015. “The Primacy of Skilled Intentionality: On Hutto & Satne’s The Natural Origins of Content.” *Philosophia*, 43(3), 701-721.

⁹⁶ Bruineberg, J., Rietveld, E., 2014. “Self-organization, free energy minimization, and optimal grip on a field of affordances.”

the tendency to integrate and separate coexists.⁹⁷ Disequilibrium or lack of adequate grip can be described as affective tension that needs to be reduced. It could be said that an experienced individual can be “moved to improve”⁹⁸ his situation by being responsive to solicitations. In this sense, Rietveld and colleagues, based on the notion of situated normativity, use the example proposed by Wittgenstein concerning the gesture of discontent of the architect assessing the height of a door:

A door is appreciated as too low in its current context by an expert architect. The dissatisfied architect immediately and skillfully joins forces with one of the affordances offered by this aspect of the material environment: with the solicitation to increase the height of the door. [...] The architect’s discontent— directed at the door in its context— and, related to that disequilibrium, the solicitation of the relevant affordance, shows how lived affective experience and context-sensitive performance are two sides of the same coin in skilled intentionality.⁹⁹

The notion of *action-readiness* taken from the psychology of emotions developed by Nico Henri Frijda¹⁰⁰ helps define this perspective. *Action-readiness* is defined as a bodily phenomenon that is positioned between manifest action and ability. It is a form of readiness for action that consists of an individual's tendency to change the relationship between self and environment in a way that is in line with his or her own interests. This notion helps us complete the definition of *solicitation* to be understood, then, as that affordance that emerges as relevant to a situated individual and generates in him or her a bodily state of *action-readiness*. Thus, the commitment of Rietveld and colleagues to avoid resorting to “goals, tasks, or aims of some mysterious origin as the source of relevance”¹⁰¹ is clear. Instead, the emergence of the soliciting character of affordances is understood as the result of a process of self-organization. In this sense, on the level of neurodynamics, Rietveld and colleagues, incorporating Karl Friston's free energy principle,¹⁰² explain the reduction in disequilibrium within the brain-body-environment system as a reduction in the *dis- attunement* between internal dynamics, which includes the individual's states of readiness for action, and external dynamics, relating to the

⁹⁷ Kelso, J. A. S., 2012. “Multistability and metastability: understanding dynamic coordination in the brain.” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences*, 367(1591), 906-918.

⁹⁸ See Rietveld, E.,” Situated normativity.”

⁹⁹ Rietveld, E., Denys, D., van Westen, M. *Ecological- Enactive Cognition as engaging with a field of relevant affordances The Skilled Intentionality Framework (SIF)*, p.54-55.

¹⁰⁰ See Frijda, N. H., 2007. *The laws of emotion*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Mahwah, NJ.; Frijda, N. H., 1986. *The emotions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

¹⁰¹ Rietveld, E., Denys, D., van Westen, M. *Ecological- Enactive Cognition as engaging with a field of relevant affordances The Skilled Intentionality Framework (SIF)*, p. 52.

¹⁰² Friston, K., 2010. “The free-energy principle: a unified brain theory?” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 11, 127-138; Friston, K., 2011. *Embodied inference: or ‘I think therefore I am, if I am what I think.* In Tschacher, W., Bergomi, C. (Eds.), *The Implications of Embodiment (Cognition and Communication)*, Academic, Exeter, pp.89-125.

constantly changing landscape of affordances due to and independent of the individual's own actions.¹⁰³

As was noted by Alva Noë in his critique of Hubert Dreyfus' work, we should avoid “over-intellectualizing the intellect.”¹⁰⁴ This is the direction in which Rietveld and colleagues move in their attempt to account for “higher” cognition, which would be, according to Andy Clark, “representational hungry” and thus incompatible with a radically embodied approach.

It should be made clear at the outset that it is the very distinction between “higher” and “lower” faculties that is abandoned by Rietveld and colleagues. This alleged divide is considered a largely artificial and problematic dichotomy. The so-called “higher” cognitive capacities are rather to be understood in terms of “skillful activities in practices and in terms of the material resources exploited in those practices.”¹⁰⁵ In a nutshell, the proposal is to consider human activities traditionally characterized as ‘higher’ cognition in terms of engagement with affordances.

This is the case with practices related to giving and asking for reasons or of those cognitive abilities, such as thinking about what is distal, absent, and nonexistent, related to imagination and remembering. Take, for example, in reference to the ability to judge, the case used by Rietveld and Kiverstein of going out with friends to pick mint leaves. To prevent one of us from getting stung, we state: “That is not a mint leaf; that is a nettle.” In this way, we are acting skillfully because of the affordances that the nettle leaf offers: “this leaf affords judging correctly that it is a nettle in our form of life.”¹⁰⁶ What determines the correctness of a judgment will depend on both the material environment and sociocultural practice. It is correct to talk then about different kinds of constraints. A red pen, for example, does not offer the possibility of filling out a custom form with blue ink on the basis of two constraints, the constraint related to the material aspect of the color red and the constraint related to the practice that requires blue ink to fill out official documents. The constraint related to our perceptual judgments does not come from an internal experience but from the affordances present in our niche.

Starting with Rietveld and Kiverstein's 2014 essay, “A Rich Landscape of Affordances,” there has been work over the years defining the “scalability” of affordance. Two essays by Van Dijk and Rietveld, “Situated Anticipation” and “Situated Imagination,” from 2018 and 2020, respectively, are worth mentioning. I will briefly present the central themes of the former, which lays the groundwork for the proposal of a “radical situated imagination” elaborated in the later essay that will instead be the focus of intervention #1 and more in general of my entire thesis.

In “Situated Anticipation,” in order to explain how we relate to what is not present, Van Dijk and Rietveld, referring specifically to long-term anticipation, develop a process-

¹⁰³ See Bruineberg, J., Rietveld, E., “Self-organization, free energy minimization, and optimal grip on a field of affordances”; Bruineberg, J., Kiverstein, J., Rietveld, E., 2016. “The anticipating brain is not a scientist: the free-energy principle from an ecological-enactive perspective.” *Synthese* 195, 2417-2444.

¹⁰⁴ See Noë., A. *Varieties of Presence*, Cap 6.

¹⁰⁵ Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., “A Rich Landscape of Affordances”, p. 346.

¹⁰⁶ Ivi, p. 343.

based approach to affordances by proposing to consider situations and their affordances as the continuation of a history of practices in current situational activity.

In the context of a specific activity, the affordances as “nested” invite skilled participants to act further; through these invitations, from one situation, another emerges, thus giving rise to an ongoing process that creates the conditions for its own continuation. Crucial to this proposal is the idea that individuals engaged in situated activities “can be responsive to the direction of the process to which their actions contribute.”¹⁰⁷ Anticipation – of what is not present, nonexistent, or distal – by those who participate in this activity is an integral part of “keeping attuned to the movement of the unfolding situations to which an individual contributes.”¹⁰⁸

In everyday life, we continually adapt to various contexts by demonstrating that we are able to respond to the normative demands of specific situations as they unfold, often without explicit deliberation. Van Dijk and Rietveld suggest that expert agents can also act appropriately on larger time scales. If situated activity is explained in terms of responsiveness to relevant affordances on a short time scale, the same can be done in reference to affordances that unfold on much larger time scales. As Van Dijk and Rietveld try to show, the difference between anticipation of large-scale affordances and responsiveness to small-scale inviting affordances is a matter of degree, not type. The authors develop for this purpose “a process-based account of affordances in which affordances are determined in activity and intertwine across timescales.”¹⁰⁹ Activities performed by one individual or many take place over time and require an ability. Following Schatzki's proposal,¹¹⁰ Van Dijk and Rietveld define an action as the realization of an activity and the activity as the process of realizing the action. Within an activity, specific coordination of materials unfolds. Activities are often “nested” in other activities, i.e., following the example used by Van Dijk and Rietveld, who examine the practice of writing, in the pressing of a key is nested in the typing of a word, which is nested in the writing of a sentence, and the writing of a text. Increasing determinacy thus unfolds simultaneously across multiple time scales, and the continuation of an activity can backwardly change past actions and partially modify the activity that these actions helped to bring about. Activities occur within broader activities that extend over a larger scale, practices, which are to be understood as the previously established regular ways of doing things that allow activities on smaller time scales to continue. In this sense, the history of a practice establishes the terms from which the activity can unfold. The relationship between practices and activities is that activities continue a practice in specific ways in a particular situation. We might refer here to the example of the riverbed and the water flowing into it used by Wittgenstein. Our concrete activities flow in a riverbed of practices. These practices constrain the activities within them, just as the riverbed constrains the movements of water. At the same time, the movement of water changes the riverbed itself: “I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the

¹⁰⁷ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., 2020. “Situating anticipation.” *Synthese*, 198:349–371, p. 349.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁹ Ivi, p. 351.

¹¹⁰ Schatzki, T., 2012. *A primer on practices*. In Higgs, J., Barnett, R., Billett, S., Hutchings, M., Trede, F. (Eds.), *Practice-based education*. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, 13–26.

river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.”¹¹¹

As we will also see in intervention #3 in relation to the mask study, affordances have the same temporal relationship that action/activity has. In this sense, the 'backward-looking' character of actions is related to “materials” in the concept of affordances, and the "forward-looking" character of activities to the "invitational" character of the affordances that are being unfolded. What Van Dijk and Rietveld emphasize is that the temporal relationship between materiality and activity is not one of succession; rather “both materiality and activity take shape together within the same ongoing process.”¹¹² This turns out to be fundamental to the "scalability" of *affordance*. The proposal is “to think of materials/invitations on the one hand and actions/activities on the other hand as two sides of the same process of unfolding affordances.”¹¹³ Following the reasoning of Van Dijk and Rietveld:

The relation between the two is quite straightforward: in affordances the unfolded actions (previously) established in a practice form the terms in which materials currently invite further activity to continue that practice in a particular way.¹¹⁴

Having acquired skills within a specific socio-cultural practice allows one to be invited to perform the activity that will continue that practice. In addition, there is to be noted that affordances are often “nested” in the sense that by acting it is possible to implement, and determine to varying degrees, simultaneously multiple affordances on different time scales.

The skilled agent who participates in affordance experiences the determination of the activity as having a “direction.” On short time scales, this direction is expressed as: “knowing what to do, as seeing how to continue – or as simply continuing it.”¹¹⁵ On the other hand, large-scale affordances have a direction of unfolding that is more or less determined. Skilled agents have acquired “the responsiveness to attune to the direction of unfolding affordances along such larger timescales.”¹¹⁶ The crucial point is that, as Van Dijk and Rietveld reiterate:

the attunement to the unfolding situation does not have an ‘object’ to which it refers. Neither is this attunement dealing with some ‘absent’ end-state, because it merely requires the openness and receptivity to the movement of an increasingly determining situation [...].¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ Wittgenstein, L., 1986. *Philosophical Investigations*. Tr. Anscombe, G. E., Blackwell, Oxford.

¹¹² Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., “Situated anticipation.” p. 359.

¹¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁵ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., “Situated anticipation.” p. 362.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁷ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., “Situated anticipation.” p. 367.

Then, through a typically Wittgensteinian maneuver, it is possible to say that expressions sometimes used in situations of anticipation, such as “having an image in front of the mind,” do not refer to literally having an internal image that can be consulted but rather the phenomenon is to be understood as “an aspect of the skilled and attuned individual taken up in an unfolding and determining process.”¹¹⁸ It should therefore be understood as “an openness, an attunement to, the large-scale unfolding affordance that one is contributing to.”¹¹⁹

In engaging with an affordance that unfolds over a very large time scale, an individual is involved in multiple invitations, unfolding at multiple times simultaneously. What is thus required is not just an openness but a selective openness. In this regard, it is useful to refer to the neural and bodily dynamics that have developed from a history of past interactions and that in current engagement determine “boldly readiness to act in one way rather than another.”¹²⁰ This is precisely the work conducted by Bruineberg et al., to which we alluded earlier, whose purpose is to investigate the phenomenon of skilled intentionality from the perspective of the self-organization of the brain-body-environment system.

I conclude this general account of the enactive ecological approach developed by Rietveld and colleagues by referring to an example in which philosophical analysis is combined with a prolonged ethnographic study. The object of investigation is the actual practice of a group of architects creating an art installation. This example, in addition to exemplifying the situated approach – that in explaining cognition prioritizes the details of our concrete engagement –, at the same time, will allow me to link the introduction of the enactive ecological approach I have tried to outline so far in its general form with the monstrous practices I will explore. It is also no coincidence that I conclude with an example that exemplifies the philosophy of the particular since my approach will be of this type; my focus will be first and foremost on the – monstrous – practices and their unfolding in a particular situation through activities.

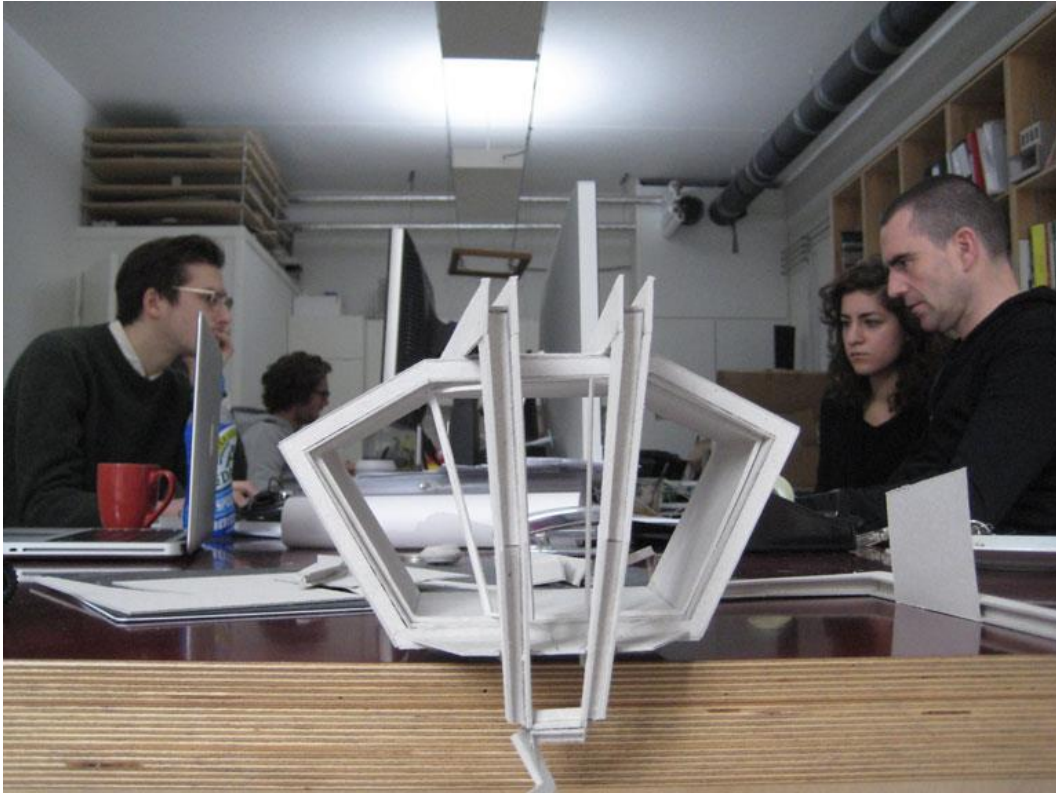
This study reveals that “in actual practice, situations of long-term anticipation or abstraction do not require less but more involvement, across broader, longer scales and more specialized activities; simultaneously engaging affordances on multiple timescales.”¹²¹

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹²⁰ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., “Situated anticipation.” p. 368.

¹²¹ Ivi, p. 369.



[A model of *Secret Operation 610* (RAAAF | Studio Frank Havermans) on the table in the RAAAF study.

Photography from Rietveld, E., Brouwers, A., A. (2017) "Optimal grip on affordances in architectural design practices: an ethnography," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 16:545–564].

In a 2016 ethnographic work conducted following the making of *Secret Operation 610* by RAAAF in collaboration with Studio Frank Havermans, Rietveld and Brouwers described how skilled individuals in architectural design proceed based on sociomaterial invitations:

Continuously adjusting their creations [in the design process] the architects seek insight into how they can advance the architectural art installation. They particularly do so through switching between different ways of visualizing the design, thus keeping the design ‘moving’, as they, repeatedly discontent with a new result, over and over again evaluate the different ways in which the design could be made. [...] After spending several days optimizing the sculpture’s rear wheel, AM and RR still experience discontent with its design and continue their search. They study the sketched design-possibilities for some moments before RR decides that he has to see the design in 3D [...] They immediately switch from the design as visualized on paper to the design as visualized in 3D in the CAD computer program [...]. The process resembles a kind of situation-specific improvisation in which they “join forces” (Ingold 2013) with the available affordances. They experiment by actively

manipulating aspects of the design, thus finding out what the design affords [...] In the episode, we highlight here RR is also unhappy with the 3D visualization as drawn in the CAD program. He concludes that it doesn't look good and that, in order to get insight into how this detail should be designed, they again need to visualize it differently – this time as a cardboard model. In such practices of switching between various visualizing forms the design evolves and takes shape. The architects move towards an optimal grip on their design.¹²²

Based on an enriched notion of affordance, and, as the above-proposed description of a process that would involve so-called “higher” cognitive properties highlights, from a focus on the whole system – brain-body-landscape of affordances – it is possible to account for an individual's ability to design, imagine and judge solicited by a material aspect without resorting to internal processes. Rather, we refer to a “selective engagement – in concrete situations – with the rich landscape of affordances.”¹²³ From here, it generates the necessity “for studying ‘higher’ cognition in the particular real-life contexts and situations in which it is deployed.”¹²⁴ This is precisely one of the central aspects of the *transformative interventions* developed here; to focus on the details of the imaginative processes by proposing real-life thinking models.

How, then, do architects use affordances to solve problems that arise in their design process? Thanks to the openness to affordances understood as an individual's readiness to engage in relevant opportunities for action:

openness to affordances consists of a readiness to act in ways appropriate to a particular concrete situation, something we are prepared for and know how to do due to the training one received in acquiring a skill.¹²⁵

What I am most interested in investigating, based on an understanding of the relational nature of affordances, is how this notion can account for the boundless possibilities of exploring new ways of increasing our openness to these available resources: “[b]y acquiring abilities that flourish in different sociocultural practices than one's own, one can come to see new possibilities for action provided by the material environment.”¹²⁶ As we will see through the interventions I will develop, some imaginative practices provide us precisely with the opportunity to open ourselves to materials and others.

¹²² Rietveld, E., Brouwers, A.A., 2017. “Optimal Grip on Affordances in Architectural Design Practices: An Ethnography.” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 16, 545-564, pp. 12-13.

¹²³ Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., “A Rich Landscape of Affordances.” p. 347.

¹²⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁶ Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., “A Rich Landscape of Affordances.” p. 327.



[*Secret Operation 610*, RAAAF | Studio Frank Havermans.
Photography: Michiel de Cleene, Raymond Rutting.]

As Ronald and Erik Rietveld write:

"When the ruthless doors of the Shelter 610 hangar have finally opened with a lot of noise, a *monstrous* black behemoth slowly emerges. The object revives the secretive atmosphere of the Cold War and the terrifying weaponry of the time."¹²⁷

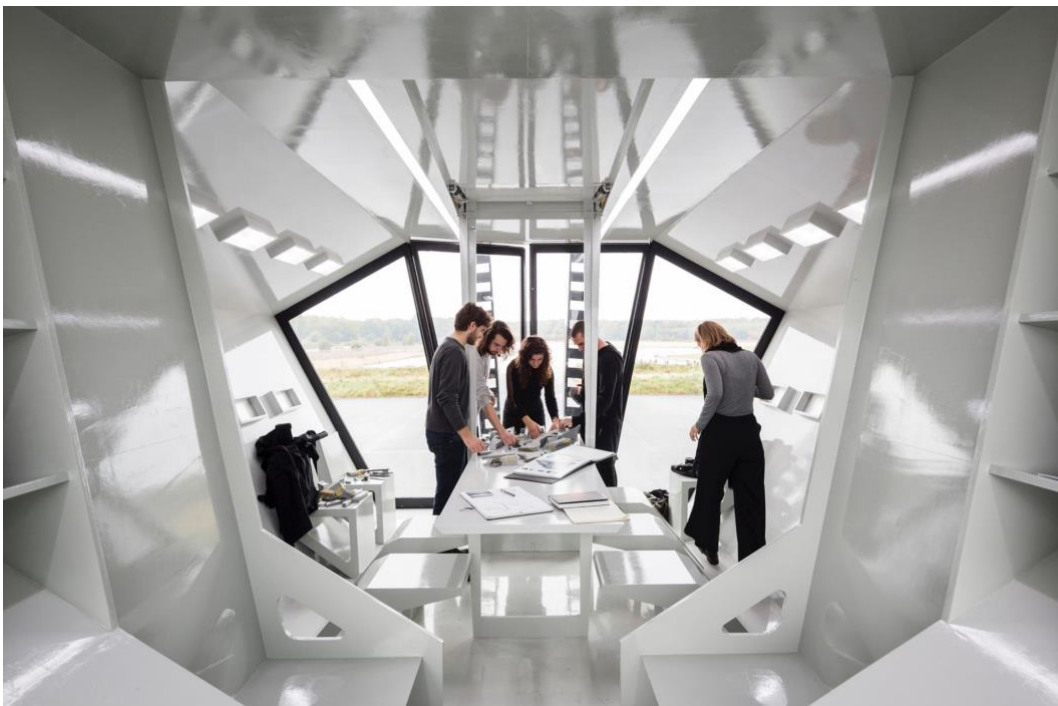
Engaged in a practice that lies at the intersection between visual arts and architecture, RAAAF works here to present a monster.]

¹²⁷ Rietveld, R., Rietveld, E., 2014, *Vacancy Studies*, naio10 publishers, Rotterdam, p. 88 (emphasis added).



[*Secret Operation 610*, RAAAF | Studio Frank Havermans.
Photography: Michiel de Cleene, Raymond Rutting.]

Secret Operation 610 is a sculpture that, moving through the peaceful landscapes of the now vacant Soesterberg Military Airbase (Utrecht), allows visitors to see their surroundings and the history of the airbase in a different way.]



[*Secret Operation 610*, RAAAF | Studio Frank Havermans.
Photography: Michiel de Cleene, Raymond Rutting.

Secret Operation 610 is also a research space that provides opportunities for scholars from different disciplines to develop innovative projects, such as the one at Delft University of Technology (Aerospace/CleanEra) that aims to rethink a type of aviation environmentally friendly "no noise, no carbon, just fly."

As I will define in intervention #4, this is a way of meeting *in the belly of a monster*. Monstrous practices, as I will develop them, are an opportunity to pool and cross-fertilize.

On heterogeneous occasions, we make appointments *in the belly of a monster* and not necessarily through recognized practices such as the arts or research.]

7. Monsters offering new possibilities

Through the following *transformative interventions*, I aim to explore those processes that lead to producing new affordances or collecting unconventional ones. As mentioned, my focus will be on the performing arts, which I will consider starting with those practices that I call monstrous through which we can remake our form of life. The possibility to reorganize ourselves goes through a *transfiguration* that involves a change at the personal level that can lead to a *transformation* involving collective behavior. The following interventions are ways of operating in the sociomaterial environment through which I will experiment with a new approach to philosophical practice. To do so, I have tried to dialogue with different practices thanks to the collaboration with landscape architect and researcher David Habets.

In intervention #1, by creating and designing a dystopian storyboard –*NASONAZI* –, an architectural intervention –*NOVA NAUMACHIA*–, and a performance –*DESERT BLOOM*–, I develop what I call the *transformative chain* that will underlie the unfolding of the entire thesis. I will also focus on the terms from which further interventions will start: "imagining the imagination differently" / "philosophy of the particular" / "real-life thinking model." Here I refer also to Frankenstein's *Creature* as a monstrous figure defining the contours of the "gray zone," a notion drawn from the field of studies related to artistic practices and expanded here. Thanks in part to the cue provided by the work of Italian radical architects SUPERSTUDIO, I will define the transition from the dystopian black zone to the dystopian gray zone.

In intervention #2, through a visual-imaginative ethnography, I define what I mean by a *dynamic imaginative niche*. Here the conservative features of monstrous practices and the

fundamental role of play in keeping the transformative component alive will emerge. This intervention will introduce an enactive conception of play that I will later take up in intervention #4. The monster is presented here as a trusted figure who can inhabit reality or be removed from it. In this way, I will try to emphasize the problematic *caesura* between reality and imagination.

In *intervention #3*, thanks to the analysis of a specific tool, the mask, I will try to explore the *transfigurative* and *transformative* potential of reorganizational practices. The mask will be an ideal ally for the appearance of ghosts understood as a “social figure.” The starting point is the Greek mask of classical tragedy whose cue will allow me to focus on an additional element within monstrous practices: “look how we are nested.” *Infinity Pool*, as real-life thinking, will tangibly constitute, through different sociomaterial invitations, a way to continue to engage on different time scales with the thoughts developed here.

In intervention #4, I will consider how we animate certain kinds of puppets – that I will call *participatory puppets* – and how we collaborate to do so. This will be an opportunity to explore how we augment our abilities through tools. Here I will finally have enough elements to define – although it is not my primary purpose – what I mean by monstrous practices and clarify their relationship to reorganizational in general and artistic ones more specifically.

Monstrous practices will then emerge as those ways we have at our disposal to remake ourselves. These allow us to follow imaginative suggestions by showing that imagination is not separate from reality.

Dancing skin, a proposal for a SCOPY puppet to be installed at Villa Mirafiori, home of the Faculty of Philosophy at *La Sapienza* University of Rome, will make tangible that play as practice offers a way to make ambiguous the possibilities that the environment offers, that is, to *open ourselves to multiple affordances*. *Dancing skin* will allow us to find ourselves *in the belly of a monster* to pool and cross-fertilize our abilities.

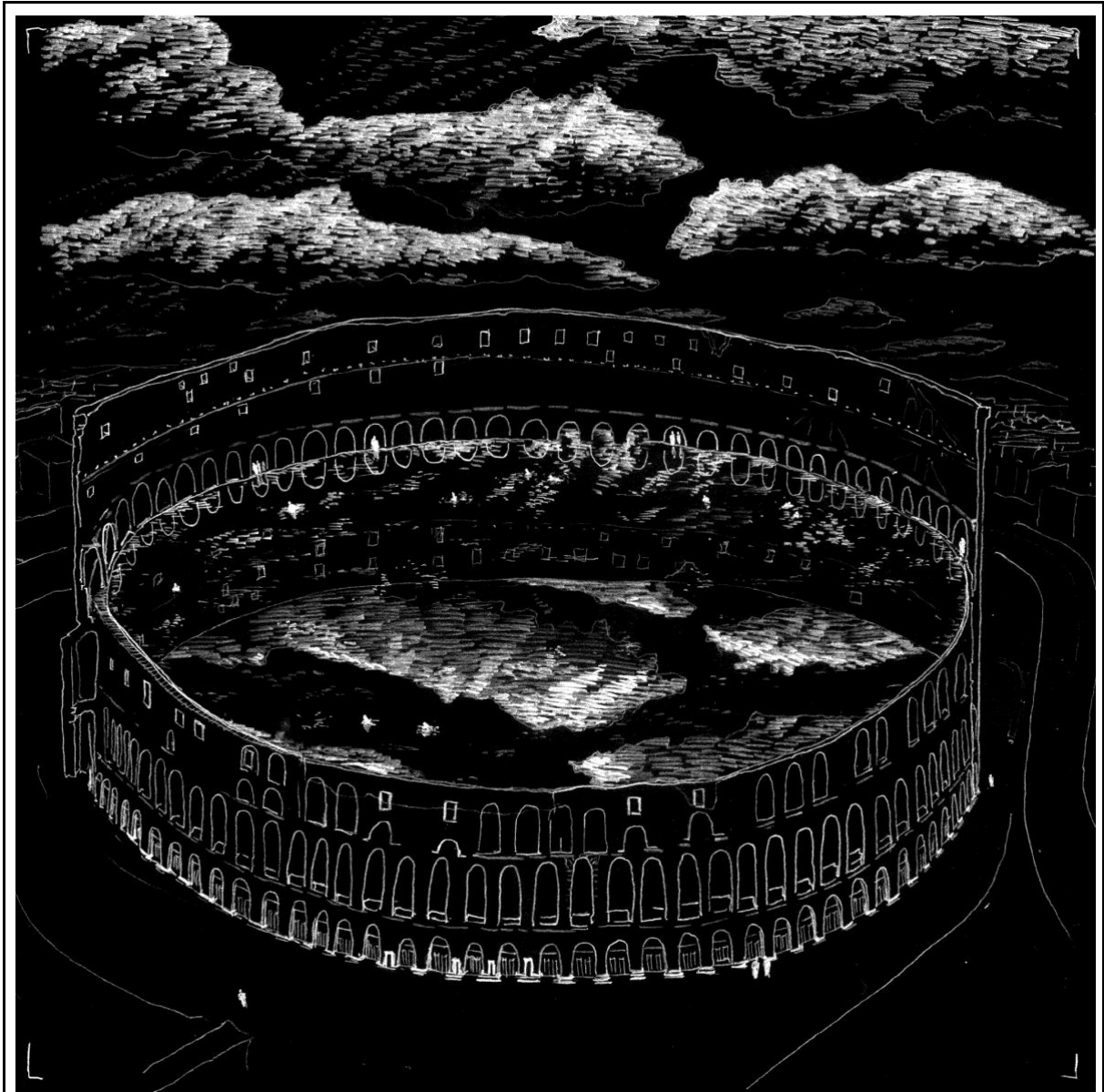
[transformative intervention # 1]

Enacting monsters¹²⁸

She said the mystery of life isn't a problem to solve, but a reality to experience. So I quoted the First Law of Mentat at her: 'A process cannot be understood by stopping it. Understanding must move with the flow of the process, must join it and flow with it.' That seemed to satisfy her.

Dune, Frank Herbert

¹²⁸ Part of this *transformative intervention* appeared in Ianniello, A., Habets, D., 2023. *Enacting Monsters*. In Morawski, T., D'Ammando, A., Velotti, S. (Edts.), *Forme di vita urbane*, Quodlibet, Macerata *NOVA MAUMACHIA*, *NASONAZI*, and *DESERT BLOOM* were produced in close collaboration with David Habets.



#1 NOVA NAUMACHIA

Nova Naumachia questions the failing accessibility to clean drinking water across the globe in times of climate change. Heat stress and lack of sustainable water sources are among the fastest-developing threats to large parts of the global population. *Nova Naumachia* is a proposal for an architectural installation re-enacting the Roman megalomaniac attempt to flood the Colosseum. It is a real-life thinking model to address neoliberal water claims.

[This imaginative effort started from a sketch for an architectural project flooding the Colosseum in times of drought, NOVA NAUMACHIA. The situatedness of this absurd display of neo-imperial power is developed in a graphic storyboard. Transgressing the reality of climate change on the Italian peninsula into a science fiction of life persisting in the face of hyper-controlled drought. There is no pretense of proposing empirical remedies to save us from the future threats spoken of. What is explored here

is the meaning of indeterminacy and the solicitations that the imaginative space of dystopia has to offer for reflection and transformation of our habitual ways in everyday life.]

We feed monsters to become monstrous to confront the Monsters that haunt us.

1. Intro

This intervention is articulated in three *real-life thinking models*: *NOVA NAUMACHIA* – a proposal for an architectural project in the Colosseum–, *DESERT BLOOM* – a concept for live work on the streets of Rome –, and *NASONAZI* – a storyboard for an impending climate dystopia on which the first two are grafted.

Based on a radical situated notion of imagination,¹²⁹ this intervention aims to bring out some aspects of the sociomaterial environment inviting large-scale actions belonging to that family of processes identified as imaginative. Who is involved in the artistic and philosophical engagement, and participants are all invited in a concrete situation to continue in the direction of a large-scale process. The act of making, thus, is crucial in this approach. By introducing concepts from the field of performance arts, several ways of extending the radically situated notion of imagination to the perception of dystopian narratives are suggested here. In this sense, the notion of *gray zone* has been stretched in the text, exploring the transition from dystopian black zones to dystopian gray zones.

As we shall see, focusing on a dystopian narrative will allow the development of what is called here a *transformative chain*, which is a way of fostering openness to the possibility of radically different sociomaterial practices and exploring unorthodox possibilities of living.

This exploration takes place in Rome in a decade where water shortages have become a yearly reality every summer. At the same time, it is situated in the practice of writing and drawing a storyboard. With this model, an attempt will be made to imagine the city of Rome as an epicenter of a climatic and democratic crisis.

With this and the next interventions, a twofold attempt is made: to contribute to the philosophical practice not only intended as “writing and reading” and “to start imagining imagination differently.”¹³⁰ Thus, this intervention, in addition to questioning, through a dystopian narrative, some of our taken-for-granted practices, also challenges academic philosophy. In this sense, it constitutes an attempt to experiment with a visual and non-textual way of doing philosophy. The aim is to explore other sociomaterial aspects of our environment rather than only written words.

¹²⁹ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., 2020. “Situated imagination.” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 1-23.

¹³⁰ Ivi, p.21.

To try “imagining imagination differently” we thus take imagination out of a decontextualized dimension and place it in the practical engagement of coordination with sociomaterial affordances. In this sense, re-imagining imagination is at one with the real-life thinking models presented here. The intent is to attune and open to unconventional possibilities that do not emerge in the head of an isolated agent but “it is a relational phenomenon, and so something that we can also materially scaffold.”¹³¹

The proposal developed here is that dystopia represents an exemplary group of solicitations that invite such openness.

Dystopian narrative enacts emotions of fear, despair, anxiety, and anger, a.o. for the participants entertained in the project, which, as an artistic practice, opens an imaginative set-up of possible futures and explores desirable and undesirable practices. Writing a storyboard helps us scaffold imaginative spaces in which we can cope with stresses future calamities, threats, and obstacles evoke, like the climate crisis or possible new mutations of the COVID-19 virus. This storyboard is a *resource for imagining together* – with others and materials –; its sociomateriality constrains the possible engagement and helps to form a temporary “social synergy.”¹³² Thinking and drawing are ways to experiment, with different materials, in our way of engaging imaginatively with our environment and learning how transformative practices can come into play. Thinking with this storyboard will be tried to define the *collective enactment in the gray zone*.

This intervention, therefore, begins with a focus on what I mean by developing an imaginative process with a real-life thinking model (2). To do so, I will first present the notion of radical situated imagination proposed by Van Dijk and Rietveld and address what is meant by “philosophy of the particular” (2.1). I will try to present a new way of understanding philosophical reflection using the notion of “reorganizational practices” proposed by Alva Noë, and thanks to the suggestion of Erik Rietveld, who, in connection with his work with the RAAAF, invites collaboration between philosophical and artistic practices. (2.2). I will then come to define what is meant by the “real-life thinking model” (2.3). At this point, I will introduce the NASONAZI storyboard (3). I can then turn to the notion of “gray zone” that, when compared with that of the “real-life thinking model,” will extend its scope by emphasizing its generative aspects (4). Thanks to the example provided by the Florentine architects SUPERSTUDIO collective, I will then be able to explore how “being a shepherd of monsters” can allow, through a dystopian real-life thinking model, to question established practices (5). I will then compare the gray and the black zones of dystopia, different places to confront monsters and become monstrous that will implicitly underlie subsequent interventions (6). At this point, I can develop the *transformative chain* and introduce the figure of the Frankensteinian *Creature* that will highlight some features of the transformative process related to the extended notion of *gray zone* (7). I will then present a further real-life thinking model of performative nature, *DESERT BLOOM* that will continue by other means the exploration carried out so far (8).

¹³¹ Rietveld, E., 2022. “The Affordances of Art for making Technologies.” *Adaptive Behavior*, 30(6) 489-503, p. 22.

¹³² Marsh, K. L., 2015. “Social ecological context of conversing.” *Ecological Psychology*, 27, 310-334.

I will conclude by reflecting on how it is possible to coordinate collectively in a gray zone by emphasizing the difference between transfiguration and transformation (9).

2. Imagining with real-life thinking model

2.1 Radical situated notion of imagination

In opposition to a conception of imagination often considered “the pinnacle of representational cognition,”¹³³ in their essay from 2020, “Situated Imagination,” van Dijk and Rietveld, examining the ethnographic details of imagining in context, contribute to question the representational view by proposing “a relational and radically situated alternative”¹³⁴. The imaginative process they consider is one of the architects that, in the making of an art installation, are able to coordinate the enactment of multiple affordances across different timescales. Van Dijk and Rietveld suggest that the indeterminacy of multiple affordances unfolding simultaneously in action can be experienced as imaginative. The indeterminate character of this coordinative process “allows activities to widen and open up, letting new possibilities for action enter into them.”¹³⁵

Their proposal revolves around the enriched notion of affordance by Rietveld and Kiverstein, who, as we have already seen in the introduction, suggest understanding affordances as “relations between aspects of the material environment and abilities available in a form of life.”¹³⁶ Defining *affordances* as belonging to a form of life, to “relatively stable and regular ways of doing things,”¹³⁷ is meant to emphasize that affordances are related to the practices in which people engage, rather than to an individual's ability. The concept of affordance is thus open-ended: affordances include new possibilities as practices change.

In the human form of life, the social and material are intertwined and best understood as sociomateriality.¹³⁸ This means that the affordances we encounter in our ecological niche are formed in our practices that unfold in a particular situation. The details of the situations in which we act matter because it is precisely in that context in which we develop our practices that one aspect of the environment presents itself as an opportunity to act. In a nutshell, between practice and affordance, there is a constitutive relation, they are interdependent, and there is no priority; practices and affordances are jointly unfolded in concrete situations in real life: “practices and affordances are two sides of the same coin,

¹³³ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., 2020. “Situated imagination.” p.1.

¹³⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁶ Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., “A Rich Landscape of Affordances.” P.26.

¹³⁷ Ivi, p. 328.

¹³⁸ See Suchman, L., 2007. *Human–Machine Reconfigurations*. Cambridge University Press, New York; Mol, A., 2002. *The body multiple*. Duke University Press, London; Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., 2017. “Foregrounding Sociomaterial Practice in Our Understanding of Affordances: The Skilled Intentionality Framework.” *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7(1969), 1-12.

i.e., of the same sociomaterial entanglement of people, activities, places, and things.”¹³⁹ This situated view of sociomateriality can extend ecological psychology’s reach to the domain labeled “offline” cognition, such as dealing with non-existent things, i.e. “representation hungry.”¹⁴⁰ The enriched notion of affordance used here is thus “scalable” and can account for activities generally regarded as part of ‘higher cognition’ such as reflection and imagination. In “Situated Imagination,” starting from a processual approach¹⁴¹ in which “affordances are determined in action over time,”¹⁴² the purpose of van Dijk and Rietveld is to highlight the richness of the situations in which imaginative processes take place. Since all affordances are to some extent indeterminate, our every engagement with the sociomaterial environment is in some sense imaginative.

An imaginative activity is thus intended as continuous coordination with large-scale processes in which the organism participates simultaneously. Affordances are actively determined in time and have a direction of unfolding;¹⁴³ these intertwine to form “(unfolding) situations”¹⁴⁴ with their own direction, which in turn intertwine to form a process of unfolding on a larger scale. At each scale, the many possibilities in which the material can still be coordinated and the activity can continue are defined in the only real way in which the material has been coordinated, and the activity has unfolded. This means that the activity gradually unfolds an inviting possibility that will be determined over time in a definite action and a constraining material environment.

As Van Dijk and Rietveld propose, by participating in unfolding affordances, organisms can perceive their unfolding direction as “anticipation.” At the same time, the individual’s contributions to unfolding cause the affordance to move forward in a way that invites further activity. That is, as already seen in the Introduction, affordances create the conditions for their own continuation by inviting participation. Regarding imaginative activities, crucially, the authors focus on the indeterminacy that the process of affordances unfolding across various time scales can have. Their proposal, as already mentioned, is that it is this indeterminacy that an individual participating in the multi-scale process can perceive and experience as imaginative. On another level, the indeterminacy of the process in its unfolding allows a new possibility of action always to enter.

In the process of coordination they examine, the notion of situated normativity allows them to account for the way skilled individuals, having grown up in a certain form of life, which in the case they consider is architecture, are able to develop a common project articulated at different time scales. Van Dijk and Rietveld observe how participants are invited, in a concrete situation – the creation of the art installation *End of Sitting* – to continue in the direction of a large-scale process while at the same time being sensitive to the direction of the smaller-scale activities that take place within the large-

¹³⁹ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., “Foregrounding Sociomaterial Practice in Our Understanding of Affordances: The Skilled Intentionality Framework.” p. 4.

¹⁴⁰ Clark, A., Toribio, J., 1994. “Doing Without Representing?” *Synthese*, 101(3),401-431.

¹⁴¹ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., “Situated anticipation.”

¹⁴² Ivi, p.3.

¹⁴³ Heft, H., 1989. “Affordances and the body: An intentional analysis of Gibson’s ecological approach to visual perception.” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 19, 1-30; James, W., 1912. *Essays in radical empiricism*, Longmans, Green & Co. New York, NY.

¹⁴⁴ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., “Situated imagination.” p.5.

scale process. As they note, if the large-scale process “is still strong” but the activities within it are diverging, the situation may invite, in the form of “directed discontent”¹⁴⁵ experienced by a skilled participant, rapid resolution when new possibilities become relevant, thereby allowing him or her to unreflectively perceive opportunities for improving the situation. If, however, activities have already deviated too strongly, the same situation unfolding on a large scale may begin to diverge, endangering the continuation of the entire process. In this case, the skilled participant will experience “directed discomfort”¹⁴⁶ as a “raw undifferentiated rejection”¹⁴⁷ concerning the situation’s direction. This kind of expression constrains the process by indicating how not to continue, and then invites the other architects, to “*open up* even further to consider (previously excluded or neglected) affordances that could be relevant in light of continuing the larger-scale process of making.”¹⁴⁸

Developing their philosophical ethnography, Van Dijk and Rietveld focus on how architects connect past actions to the process. In this particular case, during their creation of an art installation, an experienced architect shows an old photo of a model of the project and uses the expression: “[Well,] you should imagine that it is here.”¹⁴⁹ In this way, the image invites comparison with their position. As Van Dijk and Rietveld reiterate: “[n]ote that the image nests itself in the present situation, almost explicitly. But that in turn also situates the present activity in the whole process of making to which the photograph belongs.”¹⁵⁰ By responding to the invitation of the experienced architect, the present situation coordinates with the past, or rather “continues a past activity by coordinating with the photograph from a past situation.”¹⁵¹ This kind of coordination requires work on the part of the architects, who will actively relocate the old image in the larger-scale process. Van Dijk and Rietveld thus note that participation in the large-scale process and the ability to align current activity with it invited the use of the word “imagine.” This, crucially, involved engagement and coordination with the large-scale process *rather than detachment from current activity*.

A situated account, therefore, understands imagination as an integral part of a temporal process in which “inviting affordances across multiple timescales are constituted over time.”¹⁵²

As mentioned earlier, the process on any time scale has direction and can increase determination. The skilled individual is sensitive to a possible deviation in the direction of activities taking place on different time scales. As the authors point out, it is precisely “such diverging of the process at different timescales creates indeterminacy in the overall process.”¹⁵³ In the words of Van Dijk and Rietveld:

¹⁴⁵ Rietveld, E., “Situated Normativity.” p. 980; See Wittgenstein, L., 1967. *Lectures and conversations on aesthetics, psychology and religious belief*. University of California Press, Berkeley, pp.13-14.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁷ Rietveld, E., “Situated Normativity.” p. 930,

¹⁴⁸ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., “Situated imagination.” p.14.

¹⁴⁹ Ivi, p.15.

¹⁵⁰ Ivi, p.16.

¹⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵² Ivi, pp. 16-17.

¹⁵³ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., “Situated imagination.” p.17.

An active individual constitutively tied up in this process, coordinating to affordances across several timescales simultaneously, “indetermines” with it. That is, if the process diverges or comes undone, then so do the individual in so much as it participates in it. Imagination, we suggest, is an aspect of coordination with indeterminate processes that an individual participates in. Such coordination allows an individual to enact an affordance of one timescale in light of an affordance of another timescale.¹⁵⁴

If activities on different time scales proceed in the same direction, then participating in the process will have a strong anticipatory character whereas, if the directions between scales differ, coordinating with this indeterminate process can be experienced as imaginative. Thus, as mentioned, any engagement with affordances may be more or less imaginative depending on the determination already achieved. This indeterminacy is amplified by the multiplicity of affordances taking place simultaneously. In a nutshell, the less determined the unfolding of an affordance, the more the participation in the unfolding of those affordances can be experienced as imaginative.

Through a philosophical ethnography, thus, where observations and philosophical work are interlaced in a productive exchange, Van Dijk and Rietveld conduct a philosophical analysis of the details that matter for imagination in concrete situations. They develop a “philosophy of the particular” with which it is possible to disengage from a general characterization of imagination:

Scrutinizing the particular and concrete is not a standard philosophical strategy. We however believe that if we wish to move beyond the traditional dichotomy between abstract thought and concrete activity fully, as the situated approach to cognition professes, we need to resist reiterating the dichotomy as a prioritizing of either philosophy or observation in our theorizing, let alone equating the former with abstraction and the latter with the particular. By presenting prolonged observation of the abstract in practice we showed by example the possibility of a philosophy of the particular.¹⁵⁵

In a radically situated conception, then, rather than 'detaching' itself from the process, imagination is thought of as “opening up the participating individuals further to other affordances that the multi-scaled process of making also provides.”¹⁵⁶

Crucially, the possibility to transform our sociomaterial practices does not pass through detached vagueness but through situated openness, *to look around* (intervention #3) *to be open to others and materials* (intervention #2 – #4). *Enacting monsters* is one of the many ways to do this. This is the purpose of the storyboard proposed here –and the real-life thinking models scattered throughout this thesis—: to provide an opportunity for the

¹⁵⁴ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., “Situated imagination.” p.17.

¹⁵⁵ Ivi, p.21.

¹⁵⁶ Ivi, p.18.

development of an imaginative process in order to question taken-for-granted practices, and, at the same time, make tangible how an imaginative process works.

2.2 A new approach to philosophical practice

Through the *real-life thinking models* presented here, we also seek to contribute to a philosophical practice that is not only understood as "writing and reading" and also to promote fruitful cooperation between different kinds of reorganizational practices.

In his 2015 essay, *Strange Tools*, Alva Noë understands philosophy and art practices as part of the same genre, defining them as reorganizational practices. According to Noë, our lives are a complex network of what he calls organized activities by which we are "captured." Organized activities are specific to living beings; they have a biological character yet require exercise, are structured and unfold over time, are emergent – i.e., there is no individual to govern them – have an indeterminate purpose, and are pleasurable. To develop this notion, the American philosopher uses an analogy with the practice of breastfeeding, which characterizes us as mammals belonging to the species *Homo Sapiens* but which requires exercise and developed cognitive capacities. Relevantly, given the ineffectiveness of breastfeeding in humans compared to other mammals, the purpose of this activity would be not only to nurture but to create contact and an opportunity for constant negotiation between caregiver and infant.

Organized activities, which Noë defines as level-1, include, for example, talking, dancing, or seeing. From within these, starting with the material they provide, emerge the reorganizational practices, such as poetry, choreography, or painting, which he defines as level-2. The latter puts *on display* the way we are organized and thus, looping back down, reconfigure level-1 activities. To clarify how a reorganizational practice, e.g. choreography, puts *on display* the way we are organized, Noë considers, for example, as an estate agent shows a vacant unit used like a model inside a building: it is a model of what is available, identical in every way to a flat but is used to show what it would be like to live in it. Following Noë's example, the choreography is a *display model*, an exhibit that shows how dance organizes us, and the place it occupies in our lives. The pivot of our *organized activities* is the tool, for example, a hammer or a computer that we use for a specific purpose within common practices. Alva Noë defines a *strange tool* as the kind of tool, without a specific purpose, that operates at level-2 and whose main characteristic is to put on display and reshape how we are organized. For Noë, a *strange tool* is an "alien implement," it is an "instrument that has been denuded of its function."¹⁵⁷

Throughout this thesis, I discuss how monstrous tools, such as masks, puppets, or costumes, can help us, through monstrous practices, to explore imaginative dimensions that would otherwise be precluded to us. These monstrous practices – a certain specific type of reorganizational practices – are "outside practical or rational possibilities" and, thus, could help us explore and reorganize our own ways of living. Their characteristic feature, as I shall try to define them, is that if Noë, to explain the relationship between organized activities and reorganizational practices, must necessarily resort to a distinction

¹⁵⁷ Noë, A, *Strange Tools*, p.98.

between level-1 and level-2, the monstrous practices – although they do not blur into everyday life – cut across this separation, allow us to fully grasp the presence of imagination in reality. They help us to understand that “imagination is for real.”¹⁵⁸

However, the reason why I refer to Noë in this particular paragraph is that he suggests understanding philosophy and artistic practices as reorganizational practices that, as methods of research, operate in “different neighborhoods of our existence”¹⁵⁹ but have in common the aim of illuminating the ways we couple with the sociomaterial environment and thus how we can question them. I will follow him on this side. Philosophy, like art, then is “disruptive and destabilizing, and also that it is a mode of investigation, a form of research aiming at transformation and reorganization.”¹⁶⁰ Artists, like philosophers “refuse to play by rules, or rather, they invite you, with them, to make up the rules as you go along.”¹⁶¹

This belonging to the same genus that Noë emphasizes is therefore linked to the possibility of understanding philosophical practice differently, of considering it in intimate relation with artistic practices which are no longer connected to the former in an ancillary way. Crucially, artworks that question our conventional practices and norms can be seen as a way of doing philosophy. Noë speaks in this sense of “philosophical objects” that offer the opportunity to explore, investigate, and learn, that “excite us by letting us remember what it is like to discover the world through active living.”¹⁶²

A new approach to philosophical practice is further advocated by Erik Rietveld, who not coincidentally refers to Noë.¹⁶³

Rietveld, in speaking of “philosophy without text”, or “show, don't tell” philosophy makes an appeal:

Normally philosophers write texts without images. [...] Can we further develop this 'philosophy without text', an interesting 'show, don't tell' philosophy? Can academic philosophy be done in a non-discursive way, by visual means? Can philosophers join forces with visual artists to investigate non-verbally how we might live differently and

¹⁵⁸ Ingold, T., 2022. *Imagining for real. Essays on Creation, Attention and Correspondence*, Routledge, London.

¹⁵⁹Noë, A, *Strange Tools*, p. 17.

¹⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 73.

¹⁶¹ Ivi, p. 75.

¹⁶² Ivi, p. 79.

¹⁶³ Within the philosophy of embodied cognition numerous are the attempts to experiment with non-discursive approaches in which the more properly artistic explorations are “material propositions,” themselves, therefore, explorations of a philosophic character. An example is that of the *Strange Tool Lab* that Antony Chemero is pursuing at the University of Cincinnati or experiments such as that of Hummels et al. (Hummels C, van der Zwan S, Smith M, Bruineberg J., “Non-discursive philosophy by imagining new practices through design.” *Adaptive Behavior*. 2022;30(6),537-540), that are a proposal to practice philosophy through design. Both of these cases share the intention to take philosophy beyond text-based means of thinking and argumentation. Their conception of philosophy that is also embraced here in this thesis is not necessarily and exclusively related to an abstract theoretical activity, but can instead involve the practical activity of making objects that trigger interactions between science, engineering, design, performance practices, and philosophy. Testimony to this vibrancy is the project that Alva Noë himself is pursuing at the University of Berlin, *Reorganizing Ourselves*, where, with a group of researchers, he is precisely testing the possible collaboration between the philosophical research and artistic practices.

perhaps better? To explore and unlock its potential, I believe it is important for the practice of philosophy to develop the genre of philosophical art installations further in the future.¹⁶⁴

Philosophical explorations could be intended, thus, following Annamarie Mol's comment on Rietveld, as a way to “present alternative versions of reality by playing with stuff, by crafting things. By making materials that, rather than functional, are *generative*.”¹⁶⁵ Mol further underscores the transformative power that links philosophy and art practices, their “generativity” which is the openness that allows others and materials to be involved in unanticipated ways and thus foster new developments.

Philosophy and art are methods for “refusing the self-evidence of reality-as-it-is.”¹⁶⁶ To do this, as Moll reiterates: “why should philosophers only propose verbal inventions?”¹⁶⁷ In a certain sense, this thesis responds to this call by proposing several interventions in which are embedded as many artistic proposals best intended as *real-life thinking models*. It is precisely this term that forms the pivot for a new type of philosophy.

2.3 Real-life thinking model

Real-life thinking model is a term used by the multidisciplinary Amsterdam-based collective RAAAF [Rietveld Architecture-Art-Affordance]. The experimental studio operates at the crossroads of visual art, architecture, and philosophy. It makes location and context-specific work, real-life thinking models, tangible ways to question habits and open up new affordances for new abilities. A *Real-life thinking model* is an unorthodox landscape, that materializes a “philosophical worldview”¹⁶⁸ – not in words but in the form of an enactive art installation – that will be experienced by people understood as “embodied minds situated in a landscape of affordances”¹⁶⁹.

RAAAF practice develops through scientific research, spatial experiments, and *strategic interventions*¹⁷⁰. Among the exemplary works in this respect is *Bunker 599*, a typical *hardcore heritage*¹⁷¹ intervention in which cutting a seemingly indestructible World War II bunker in half questions the Dutch and UNESCO policies on cultural heritage:

¹⁶⁴ Rietveld, E., “The Affordances of Art for making Technologies.” p. 500.

¹⁶⁵ Mol, A., 2022. “Material philosophy and the adaptability of materials.” *Adaptive Behavior*, 30(6) 517-519, p. 518 (emphasis added).

¹⁶⁶ Ivi, p.517.

¹⁶⁷ Ivi, p. 518.

¹⁶⁸ Rietveld, E., 2016. “Situating the Embodied Mind in a Landscape of Standing Affordances for Living Without Chairs: Materializing a Philosophical Worldview.” *Sports Medicine*, 46, 927-932, p. 927.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁰ “Strategic interventions are precisely chosen and carefully designed interventions in city or landscape that set a ‘desired development’ in motion.” (Rietveld R., Rietveld E., Bey J., et al. *Vacancy studies*, p. 80).

¹⁷¹ Rietveld, E., Rietveld, R., 2017. “Hardcore Heritage: Imagination for Preservation.” *Frontiers in Psychology*.

The standard practice is to consider monuments as objects with a commemorative value that need to be protected and persevered. Cutting into and opening up such an object seems to contradict, and therefore question, this convention. By compromising the physical integrity of this historical object the artwork questions our understanding of what monuments are¹⁷².

Other paradigmatic interventions include *Trusted Strangers*, a project of a temporary floating park in the water city of Amsterdam that aims to emphasize how it is possible to develop “specific interventions in public space to solicit spontaneous interactions between people belonging to different sociocultural groups or subcultures;”¹⁷³ *The End of Sitting*, a sculptural investigation, a “metastable zone,”¹⁷⁴ that designing a chair-free working environment, points to our addiction to sitting. Rather than supporting the assertion that people are embodied minds situated in a landscape of possibilities, this real-life thinking model allows them to experience physically, through their active engagement, this standing landscape of affordances that invites them to embrace new possibilities for action to be explored.

As noted in the introduction, according to the enactive ecological approach on which my interventions rest, there are close links between affordances, practices, and skills.

Practices shape participants who thus acquire skills and a selective openness to the sociomaterial environment:

By means of a history of interaction with the given practice, the maker's body has been transformed. Acquired skills allow the maker to make meaningful interventions by being responsive to the affordances offered by their material.¹⁷⁵

Practices constitute a common way of engaging with certain possibilities rather than others and define the *education of attention* to which novices are subjected by more experienced practitioners who makes skill acquisition possible. The learning process changes a person's embodiment and affective sensitivity to the environment. This, as Rietveld shows, means that for those engaged in a particular practice, as in the case of the Wittgensteinian tailor, “some affordances have more significance or invitingness than others.”¹⁷⁶ The point I am interested in here, and that Rietveld often foregrounds is that skilled selectivity implies that some invitations from the sociomaterial environment are ignored by not inviting those who have participated in certain practices. Practices define

¹⁷² Rietveld, E., 2022. “The Affordances of Art for making Technologies.”p.491.

¹⁷³ Rietveld, E., Rietveld, R., Martens, J., 2019. “Trusted strangers: social affordances for social cohesion.” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 18, 299-316, p.306.

¹⁷⁴ Bruineberg, J., Seifert, L., Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., 2021. “Metastable attunement and real-life skilled behavior.” in *Synthese*, 199, pp. 12819-12842.

¹⁷⁵ Rietveld, E., Rietveld, R., 2020. *The Landscape of Affordances*, Black Paper Press, Amsterdam, p.16.

¹⁷⁶ Rietveld, E., 2022. “The Affordances of Art for making Technologies.” p.492.

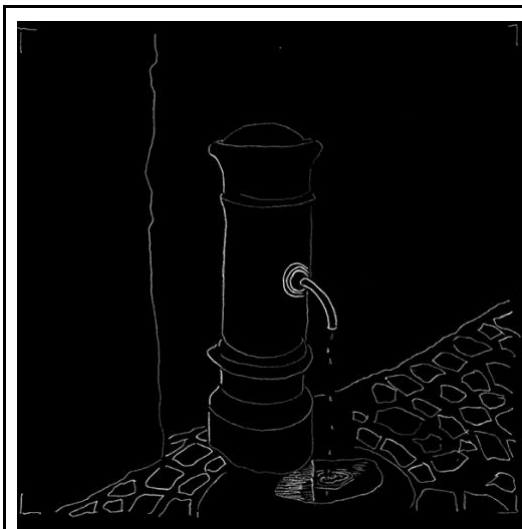
a selective openness to those affordances that allow us to go on according to shared norms, that is, like other practitioners, but “the cost of that conventional selective openness is that people also habitually ignore many of the more unorthodox affordances.”¹⁷⁷ Are precisely these unconventional possibilities that the monstrous practices, as we shall see, have the aim to bring out so that, once we collect them, they allow us to radically open our field of affordances and thus to see what we did not see before.

As we have seen, the *real-life thinking model* offers new possibilities for engagement with our sociomaterial environment. *NASONAZI* invites us to explore radically out-of-ordinary normativity, open ourselves to unexplored possibilities; enact monsters to cope with future threats.

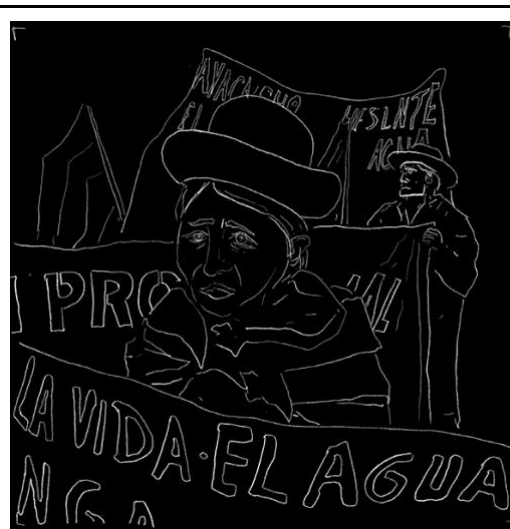
¹⁷⁷ Rietveld, E., 2022. “The Affordances of Art for making Technologies.” p.492.

3. NASONAZI

a storyboard for climate dystopia in Rome



#1 The nasone ran dry in the first decades of the 21st century. One by one, these public fountains were shut down. Lake Bracciano, Rome's ancient water reserve, was slowly being drained. When the nasone stopped working it was criticized by many. Rome's homeless, the birds, and other strays all relied on this fresh stream from these public fountains. An ancient stream of thought running dry.¹⁷⁸



#2 Desert Rome was an impending disaster waiting to happen. For decades, across the globe water became scarce, claimed by authority, and redivided among private contractors.

Everything began in Cochabamba, back in 2000. That was a real water war!

¹⁷⁸ “If we could say in English ‘it thinks’ as we say ‘it rains’ or ‘it blows’, we should be stating the fact most simply and with the minimum of assumption. As we cannot, we must simply say that *thought goes on*”. (James, W., 1890. *The Principles of Psychology Volume 1* London: Dover Books 1890, p. 224).



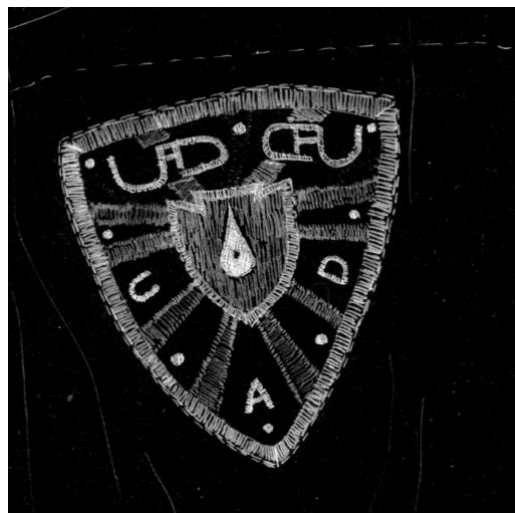
#3 An ancient flow of collective consciousness stopped. The never-ending trickle silenced. The dry noses of the fountains left a desolate feeling. It did not take long before the uprisings started.



#4 The Tiber ran dry for the first time in history. It was not for long before they re-appeared, the nasonazi. Their curved masks caught every last drop of moisture from their breath.



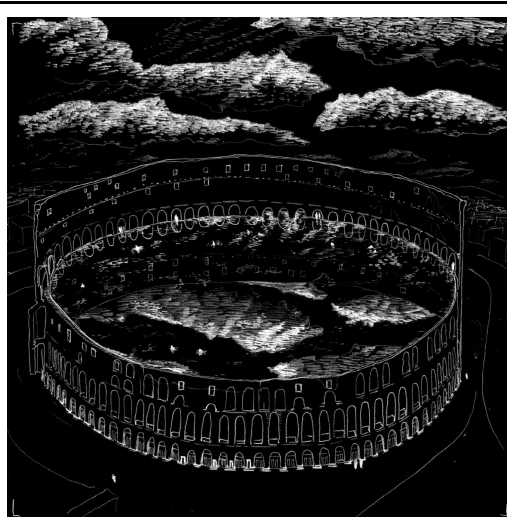
First, almost all the grazing mammals perished. Then the predators. As if 'frozen' – mice, lizards, wild boars, cats, dogs, seagulls, pigeons, rabbits – peacefully, during the night, gather around the dry "nasoni". At night citizens join them in something that may seem like a prayer. The animals and men frozen in front of a practice of drinking from a source of water, that is no more.



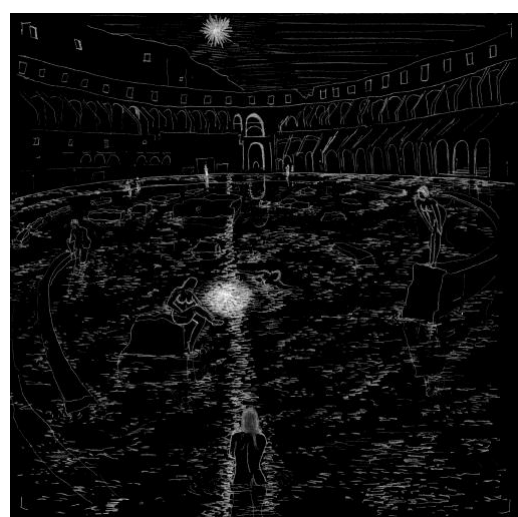
The U.A.D (Unità Armata Decoro / Armed Unit Urban Renewal) guards the nasoni. When the freezing dance is enacted –ordered by nasonazi– sanitize the zone. In the 20th century, they would have called it execution, but their absurd use of resources made them blind to self-destruction. Sanitization now means using corpses as a resource for manufacturing, redefining past life as pure raw material.



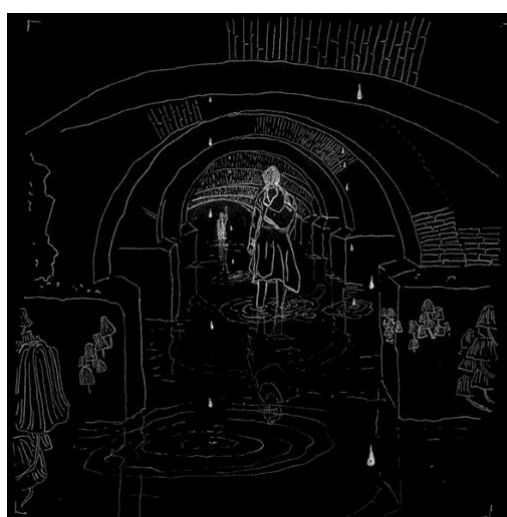
Faster than any predeterminate model was able to predict, strong winds from the Mediterranean killed all trees. The sun scorched the soil. Within a decade hills turned into dunes.



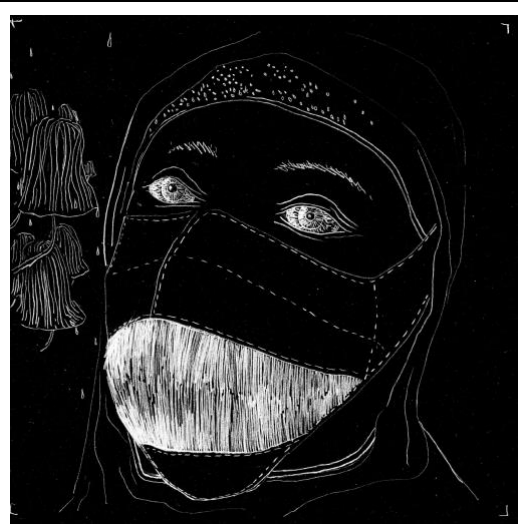
NOVA NAUMACHIA, was U.A.D. 's ultimate claim on Rome's water. The colosseum was flooded for the second time in history. A blinding symbol of power. A theater turned into a dam, a spectacle of engineering, to control the essential common.



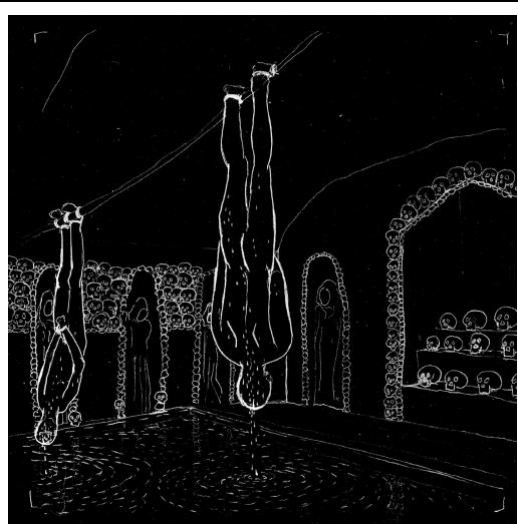
While thirsty bodies lay dying across the city, bathing was considered an ultimate replenishment for eternal life. It was the stage to recall that for a fair distribution central governance remained prevalent by a fraction of the population.



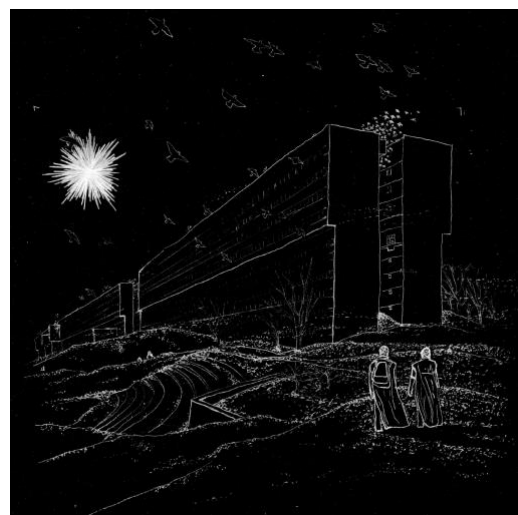
As with all totalitarian displays of power, this mobilization of resources caused spillovers. Unexpected leaks seeped into the caverns underneath the city. The dark and cool crypts, places of death, of mere infrastructure, now gave way to boasts of unforeseen living assemblages.



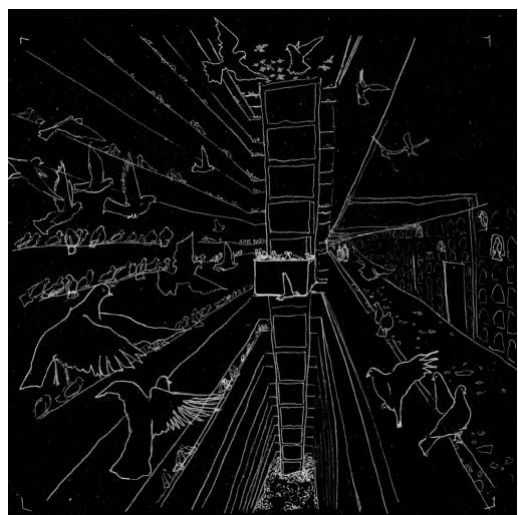
Dwellings of monstrous beings. Every breath they take, graphene baleens catch even the most minuscule droplets of water from the airflow. Like whales above water, it allowed unprecedented submersion into underground culture.



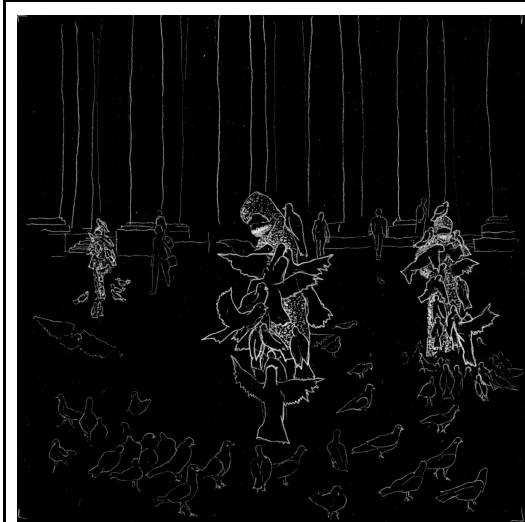
The human body is made up of over sixty percent of fluids. The only good way of dying left, in times of drought, is to be the spring of life for the ones that follow. In the cool crypts deep underneath the center of Rome, bags of life slowly drip into the afterworld.



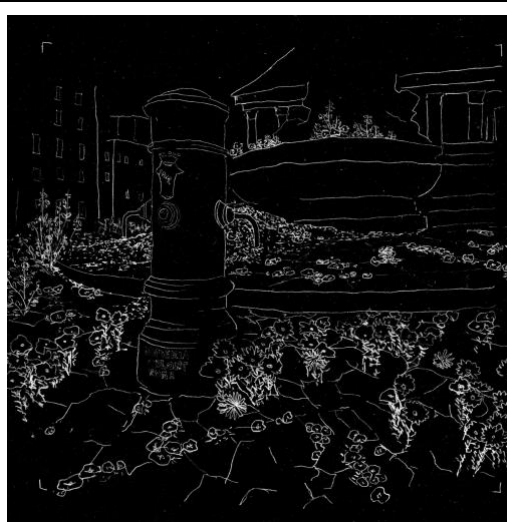
When Naumachia inevitably fell dry the crypts stopped dripping. Cover was found in the dust storms that raged through the modern extensions of the old city. Already the most persistent of animals took shelter in its dry architectural bones.



The flying rats that flocked in tourist swamped cities at the beginning of the 21st century came from a long evolutionary line of survivors. The rock pigeons, *columba livia*, can withstand high temperatures and extreme periods of drought. Making a life in what for others became desert.



A flog of martyrs arose from the outskirts. Cooled by the flapping *columba* wings, destined to spread the seeds that arrived from the Sahara. Their cloth was made, not of merciless labor, but of the seeds that germinate in the sand and dry mud. Their bodies as seedlings to generations to follow.



We feed monsters to become monstrous to confront the Monsters in our lives.

4. Gray zones

My proposal is that the real-life thinking models could be intended as gray zones where to be distracted and infected, that is, to pool and cross-fertilize abilities, and in which it is possible to catch ourselves in the act of doing so. Bringing the two notions into dialogue will allow me to extend both and, in particular, to emphasize the generative aspects of the real-life thinking model underdetermined by Rietveld in his original proposal.

More generally, I will intend the gray zone as a paradigmatic space where we can “mix with others” and contaminate, in short, to be monstrous.

Practically then, a gray zone is a space, more or less “trusted,” in which, given the suspension of behavioral frames of reference, we can renegotiate the object of our attention and pool our skills.

Gray zone, as used here, comes from performing arts studies. The British art historian Claire Bishop in her 2018 essay “Black Box, White Cube Gray Zone” analyzes the movement of performing arts from the black box of experimental theater to the white cube of museum space over the past 15 years.¹⁷⁹ This shift causes a crisis in the behavioral patterns at stake within museums by visitors:

When dance is inserted into an exhibition the viewing conventions of both the black box and the white cube are ruptured: a single-point perspective (seating in the theater, standing in front of a work) is replaced by multi-perspectivalism and the absence of an ideal viewing position. [...] Because of the spectator’s undefined position, the protocols surrounding audience behavior are less stable and more open to improvisation¹⁸⁰.

Bishop focuses on the type of hybrid performance that she calls *dance exhibition*, a paradigmatic *gray zone*, in order to try to comprehend how performance in the museum tells us a lot about the changing nature of spectatorship:

In these works, audience attention is oriented towards the performance, but not exclusively; we participate in a collective experience and its documentation, but selectively turn away from the performers to converse with our friends, virtually or in real life. [...] these works only externalize and make literal the mental drift that occurs whenever we watch any performance. Attention exists on a continuum of other states not necessarily attached to the optical, including trance, reverie,

¹⁷⁹ The *white cube* is the archetypal modern exhibition space, a global standard for art fairs, museums and alternative spaces alike characterized by neutrality, objectivity, “a paradoxical combination that makes claims to rationality and detachment” Bishop, C., 2018. “Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention.” *TDR: The Drama Review*, 62(2), T238, 22-42, p. 29; The *black box* is typical space of the experimental theater, which defines a dimension of immediacy, proximity, and communion.

¹⁸⁰ Bishop, C., “Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone.” p. 31.

daydream, hypnosis, meditation, and dissociation. These internal states were once thought essential to creativity, but today tend to be devalued as nonproductive time.¹⁸¹

An example of a hybrid performance that Bishop uses as a paradigm of the *gray zone*, is Anne Imhof's *Faust* presented in 2017 in the German Pavilion at the *International Art Exhibition-La Biennale di Venezia*.

As we will see in intervention #2, my proposal questions the "confinement" of monstrous practices to designated spaces. In the course of this thesis then, I will try to clarify the nuanced relationship between artistic and monstrous practices that fall under reorganizational practices. I believe that designing, through a live work, the possible emergence of a gray zone is itself a way of questioning "confinement." The performative examples I provide in this chapter and subsequent chapters work in this direction.

Returning to *Faust*, Anne Imhof had designed her work so that once entering the space in the Giardini, the viewer finds himself involved in an action already underway. There is a crowd, and it is not immediately clear who performs and attends the performance. The object of attention is to be negotiated with other visitors; we are called to move, to adapt to the presence of others, and to actively engage in defining the space of collective experience. The performers unfold actions, sing, play instruments, walk through the crowd of spectators, push their bodies against large glass walls, or take refuge under the thick glass floor. We are free to use smartphones to capture an image, send it, or post it on a social network: a public-private hybrid platform. What we are enacting here seems to be precisely a public-private space similar to a social network— the glass walls remind of a touch screen, as Bishop notices – where one is called to act collectively to get something out of the experience.

Keeping in mind the central role of mobile devices and networked technology within this hybrid zone,¹⁸² this notion, as already mentioned, will be expanded by trying to overlay it with that of the real-life thinking model and thus to other artistic practices than live arts.

Various references to the performing arts will be used as prods to analyze how we collectively enact the objects of our attention in a *gray zone*.

In accordance with the extension of the notion, a *gray zone* emerges when several individuals, on different time scales, meet and *collectively enact* their abilities without being able to rely on behavioral frames of reference that must be compulsorily renegotiated. This is the place of distraction, infection, monstrosity, and revolt.

¹⁸¹ Bishop, C., "Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone." p. 38.

¹⁸² Central to Bishop's definition is the role of new technology, and it is no coincidence that she identifies 2007 as the date of the emergence of the *gray zone*, which coincides with the first dance performance at Kunsthalle St. Gallen, and the market launch of the iPhone and iCloud. Rather than lamenting the all-pervasiveness of technology, Bishop tries to understand what these kinds of devices can tell us about the way we develop our experience and develop our educational patterns.

4.1 Trusted distraction: adult's education of attention

In the *gray zone* when someone engages in a practice, he or she structures the environment to invite further activities. The other participants may or may not grasp his *longitudinal path*.¹⁸³ Each indeterminate gesture that follows constitutes a further attempt to the *education of attention*. In other words, every unfolding activity enacted in the *gray zone* is potentially a way of "distracting" each other, that is, of mutually altering the field of affordances.

Affordance is the relation between an aspect of the sociomaterial environment and the ability available in a form of life. Related to the notion of ability is the Gibsonian one of *education of attention*. In acquiring a skill, as anticipated in the Introduction, we learn which places in the environment to find affordances relevant to our concerns and thus to which aspects of the surroundings to pay attention. In the process of *education of attention*, the novice is brought to a selected aspect of the environment that is significant to the practice in which he is being guided. In a nutshell, the subject learns to selectively grasp some aspects of the environment while ignoring others. Of the rich landscape of affordances, only some are solicitations; most will be irrelevant to the agent. The affordances on which we are normally inclined to act are those relevant to our concerns, emerging to the foreground because we might improve our grip on the situation through them.

The *gray zone* is precisely that space in which we are called to act without a determined purpose where, by being distracted, we can be prompted by invitations usually out of our field of affordances and observe at the same time how this happens, how collectively we negotiate the space of our attention and thus how potentially we can question and reorganize it. By distracting ourselves, we are introduced to new opportunities, and, at the same time, we can catch ourselves as open to new possibilities.

The term "distraction" is thus used here as a way for adults to educate each other to attention in a *gray zone*, where the object of attention is not predetermined and is not simply waiting to be picked up. Given the relational character of affordance, unforeseen possibilities of action could emerge if a new and unexpected element enters on the side of material aspect or the side of ability. The *gray zone* is an exemplary laboratory in this sense.

A *gray zone* opens the possibility of *education of attention* precisely because everyone is enacting a "distraction" that has a normative relevance. This kind of education, crucially, does not introduce someone to a new activity, or rather not only that but, as already mentioned, allows one to catch oneself as open to new possibilities.

Returning to the example of the performing arts, the case of PLASTIC, quoted by Bishop in her essay but for different purposes compared to mine, is extremely emblematic of understanding what is meant here by "distraction." In enacting her live work, the performer and choreographer Maria Hassabi is herself a "distraction." Hassabi's PLASTIC, developed in 2015 for the Stedelijk Museum, the Hammer Museum, and MoMA, is a live piece where the performers define their actions in slow motion crossing

¹⁸³ Ingold, T., *Anthropology and/as Education*. Routledge, New York, pp.25-26.

the different surfaces of the museum's space. Hassabi took two hours to slide down the stairs at MoMA, crucially from my point of view, constituting a "distraction" to those who were perhaps intending to visit an exhibition, for example, on the second floor. This is not just an obstacle but a 'distraction' that could open us up to different environmental invitations. What holds us back and distracts us, thus offering us the possibility of catching ourselves in the act of crossing this space, is not an object or an intervention on the physical structure, but rather and above all, another person. Hassabi, developing her performance very slowly, makes it clear that someone's presence, her presence, can hinder our goal of consuming a given object, in this case, and not marginally, a cultural object. In a space devoted to the consumption of new products of creativity, a body with its rhythm removed from productivity constitutes an annoying distraction.

Central to the *gray zone* is the (actual or remote) presence of others and their elusiveness, the unpredictable crossing of others.

To explore further what is meant here by "distraction" in the *gray zone*, it may be helpful to refer to durational forms of dance, theater, and opera. This is the case of another work by Hassabi, *TOGETHER*, viewed in Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome in 2019, where two performers coming from opposite sides of the gallery in an interminable slow motion, meet in the center of the space, almost screwing on each other and then leaving to continue in the two opposite directions. The performers wear T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers in faded mustard yellow. When they meet in the center and endlessly rotate around each other, they take on the appearance of a single body with multiple heads and multiple limbs, a body that is constantly transforming.

In this extremely long moment can happen that we catch ourselves looking around, observing others and the physical space; constraints of this situation. The major source of "distraction" here was the others and the space that are lit up as well as the performers and thus completely available to audience attention – I purposely do not mention the cell phone as the arrangement in the space, sitting in a semicircle, does not invite the audience to consult their devices as a certain type of theatrical behavioral pattern influences the economy of attention at stake. *TOGETHER* removes me from the tendency to focus exclusively on an object – a performance in this case – and opens me up to observing the constraints of this situation: to be together. The dynamic, composite body that presented itself in the form of a relationship that intertwines and then dissolves is a composite figure transforming through a relation. Hassabi enacts not only the encounter between two individuals but the encounter between spectators, who will be forced to look at each other sooner or later, and the encounter with the space that, in turn, is constraining our encounter; these "hidden dimensions"¹⁸⁴ that scaffold our way to be together. We are all *TOGETHER*.

Where can we still find places to (trustable) distract each other? As it should be clear so far, it is not meant here the kind of distractions typical of notifications on our digital devices that simply redirect us to the established interests in predetermined algorithmic bubbles¹⁸⁵. Distraction is meant here being confronted by something we did

¹⁸⁴ Hall, E.,T.,1969. *The Hidden Dimensin*, Doubleday, New York.

¹⁸⁵ Filter bubbles were first theorized in 2010, when a Net activist, Eli Pariser, defined filter bubble as personalized ecosystem of information created by algorithms.

not expect, something unanticipated, that can potentially transfigure us and maybe transform a practice. When we talk about transfiguration, as will become increasingly clear, we mean, for example, the situation involving the boy that starts dancing beside me so “distracting” me from my purpose of defining meaning when *Faust*’s performer begins to play the guitar. His dancing, a way to educate my attention, led me to be solicited by an affordance that until then was not available in my field: the music could also invite me to dance, reflect, and catch me dancing. Although I will not start dancing, this invitation allowed me to catch myself as *open to new possibilities*. In this way, transfiguration is about *opening me up to a different way of live together*. In Hassabi’s live piece, the dancers and the audience are doing something *together*: in a *gray zone* we are, opportunities for action for one another, “distracting” each other and opening our respective *fields of affordances*.

4.2 Infection: skillful co-presence

The *gray zone* is a place where one can become infected. The term *infection* is used here taking a cue from the way in which the theatrical experience has been described over the centuries. Particularly in the context of the debates conducted by the Church Fathers and the *Querelle de la moralité du théâtre* in the 17th century regarding bodily presence.¹⁸⁶ In a nutshell, the proximity and exchange of moods typical of the theatrical experience were to be considered highly contagious, the exchange would lead to uncontrolled transformation, change, and loss of identity. By extension, I mean *infection* not only in the sense of bodily contact due to the presence of others but as *the possibility of transfiguring each other through shared practices*, which involves the availability of skills in a form of life that could be enacted on different timescales. In this sense, I will talk about *skillful co-presence*. As we will see, *transformation* involves the practices, while *transfiguration* is the modulation of bodily or environmental aspects. *Infection* is a way of being transfigured and thus open to the possibility of transforming practices. Using a canonical example from performance art, when Marina Abramovich in *Lips of Thomas* transfigures herself, she invites the audience to transform the acquired practice of being a spectator. In *Lips of Thomas*, presented at the Krinzinger Gallery in Innsbruck on October 24th, 1975, the Yugoslavian naturalized American artist, on that occasion, developed a series of actions that were not intended to represent a fictional world but rather to transfigure her bodily state and the condition of the spectators. Entering the space, Marina Abramovic, first of all, stripped off her clothes, then hung a photo on the back wall, sat at a table eating a one-kilo jar of honey, and drank a bottle of wine from a crystal goblet which she then shattered with her right hand, thus beginning to bleed. The actions of self-referral continued with the engraving on the belly of a five-pointed star and with the practice of self-flagellation. At this point, the artist stretched herself out on

¹⁸⁶ See Fischer-Lichte, E., 2008. *The Transformative Power of Performance*. Tr. by Saskya I. J., Routledge, London-New York.

blocks of ice and remained, in pain, in that position for about half an hour until the public intervened, taking her away and thus ending the performance. Marina Abramovich's transfiguration spreads *infection* and causes transformation.¹⁸⁷

As intended here, *infection* occurs not only based on physical contact but thanks to skills¹⁸⁸ and relevant social affordances. The intersection of concerns, styles, and how one *brings forth* life, establishes one's relationship with the available possibilities his or her environment has to offer.

In this sense, the gray zone is where we can experience how to *transfigure* and *infect* ourselves, in the presence (current and remote) of others, where the outcome is indeterminate.

According to German theater scholar Erika Fisher-Lichte, co-presence and contact is the possibility of infection that characterizes the indeterminacy of a performance. The term *infection* used here is indebted to and is an extension of the notion of *co-presence* developed by Fisher-Lichte. Although the concept of skillful co-presence differs from that of the German scholar, I follow her in reflecting on what she calls the *autopoietic feedback loop*.¹⁸⁹ With *autopoietic feedback loops*, Fisher-Lichte defines the "self-referential, autopoietic system enabling a fundamentally open, unpredictable process."¹⁹⁰ The *autopoietic feedback loop* works as a self-organizing system within which new unplanned elements are continuously integrated and emerge from time to time. It is essentially constituted by the actions and reactions of the participants in the event, and, although it is precisely performance art that thematizes it, it is present in a minimal form in every spectacular event, even the most formalized. Precisely because all participants – actors and spectators – are included within a system in progress that produces itself, the performance arts offer everyone the opportunity to undergo change and transfigure themselves.

It was the indeterminacy of the play that emerges through the *autopoietic feedback loop*, which was to be minimized with various strategies between the late 18th and 19th centuries. An important role in this process was played by the invention of the gaslight, which was used to avoid the exchange of glances between spectators by lighting the stage and darkening the auditorium. From the 1840s onwards, the English actor and director Charles Kean started to immerse the audience in darkness until the German composer Richard Wagner completely left the stall in obscurity at the Bayreuth Festival for the premiere of his *Der Ring* in August 1876. As Fisher-Lichte says "these measures aimed at interrupting the feedback loop."¹⁹¹ For the premiere of *Der Ring*, Wagner's intention was simply to dim the lights in the auditorium but a technical problem constricted him to leaving the audience in the dark. The intention to control the effect on the audience collided with the unexpected determining a more radical form of control, even if

¹⁸⁷ For a more in-depth discussion of this see Ianniello, A., 2021. "Enactivism and Performance art: Putting on display our perception." *STUDIA UBB. PHILOSOPHIA*, 66(2) Supplement, 121-129.

¹⁸⁸ "If the skills needed to pick up a feature are absent, then the feature is not present in our experience" Noë, A., 2012. *Varieties of Presence*, p.132.

¹⁸⁹ See Fischer-Lichte, E., *The Transformative Power of Performance*.

¹⁹⁰ Ivi, p. 39.

¹⁹¹ Fischer-Lichte, E., *The Transformative Power of Performance*, p.39.

unintentional. In subsequent performances, dimness was restored, and Bayreuth's theater did not reach true darkness until the end of the century.

In the darkness, there is nothing to see except what is purposely shown, what can be controlled by the artist within a minimal degree of unpredictability.

In some ways, as we will see, the strategy of blacking out the audience is a way of hunting monsters rather than releasing them.

An article appeared in *The Times* (14 Jan. 1828: 3), referring to a removal of a central chandelier at the King's Theatre that contributed to darkening the audience, commented in this way:

To him who goes to the theatre only to mark the performance, this will appear to be an improvement; but to those who proceed thither 'to see and be seen' (a large part, we believe, of the audience), the innovation will not be considered an improvement.

As should be clear so far, as intended here, *infection* implies an intimacy that is not only given by the *co-presence* of bodies but by their possible movements, gestures, and suggestions. We lose intimacy if we don't have the skills and environments that let us attune to each other. I can be infected by reading a novel by an author who lived centuries ago, but I can remain indifferent to a caress if it does not fit into my trajectory in life. Sketching a dystopian *intervention* parallel to this text is an attempt to practice a form of intimacy.

Concerning the expanded notion provided here, thus, a real-life thinking model that is an opportunity to question acquired practices, in addition, is to be understood as a gray zone in which to distract each other and become infected on several time scales. What I will try to explore, thanks to the example provided by dystopia, is the transition from the gray zone to the black zone, where the possibilities of becoming monstrous are limited. It is suggested thus several ways of extending the radically situated notion of imagination to the perception of dystopian narratives.

5. Dystopia and changing socio-material practices

In NASONAZI the drained nasone is a place of conflict between different forms of life in times of disaster. Since "maintaining the identity of objects requires a continuing effort,"¹⁹² we could imaginatively enact here what Charis Cussins calls "ontological choreography."¹⁹³

The nasone enacts fear, disgust, and anger for the privatization and the imperial claim on one of the most essential commons, water. The nasone affords discontent for giving up

¹⁹² Mol, A., 2002. *The body multiple*, Duke University Press, London, p.,43.

¹⁹³ Cussins, C.,1996. "Ontological choreography." *Social Studies of Science* 26, 575-610.

democratic and publicly available resources. The dry nasone enacts a space of execution, death by thirst, in a future Rome.

Dystopia is a word composed of the Ancient Greek terms “δυσ-” (dys) which means bad, abnormal, diseased, and “τόπος” (topos) which stands for place. The first recorded use dates back to 1868 and is found in a parliamentary speech by John Stuart Mill, in which he proposed a term to define a perspective opposed to that of utopia. Utopia was usually understood as "too beautiful to be practicable," so dystopia was "too ugly to be practicable"¹⁹⁴.

The Florentine radical architecture¹⁹⁵ group SUPERSTUDIO,¹⁹⁶ active from 1966 to 1978, developed a series of paradoxical mechanisms intended to highlight the contradictions of the urban forms of life and architectural practices in Italy during the “Economic Miracle.” Many of their early projects (1969-1971, like *The Continuous Monument, Histograms, and Twelve Ideal Cities*) can be read as an architectural dystopia. They were means of SUPERSTUDIO to elicit habitual trades in which the practice of architects got stuck. Using typical tools of the architect, like the photo collage and the hand drawing, they depicted horrific architectural future explorations. Often, until today, these have been misunderstood as megalomaniac architectural expressions of modernism. It is exactly this confusion, the ambiguity of creating a dystopian imaginary, that moves us to call these future explorations, *gray zones*.

With SUPERSTUDIO’s unconventional interventions (posters, performances, stories, installations, design objects, storyboards in the key architectural magazines of that era), they invited debate among architects to rethink their practice collectively by making provocative architectural dystopia. For example, in *Twelve Ideal Cities*, a collection of stories accompanied by images, they describe as many cities like, among the others: one made up of cells inhabited by a single individual whose, brain impulses are constantly picked up if caught in “absurd thoughts of rebellion”¹⁹⁷ is crushed by a press from above; a spiral-city that twist in the earth; a cube city covered with quartz tiles; a spaceship city whose crew members “sleep uninterruptedly from birth to death enclosed in their cabins and enveloped by the cables and conduits that regulate their existence”¹⁹⁸;

¹⁹⁴ Mill, J. S., 1988. *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill: Public and Parliamentary Speeches Part I November 1850-November 1868*, ed. Robson, J.M., Kinzer, B.L., University of Toronto Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, Toronto and London, Vol. 28, CAP. 88, ‘The State of Ireland 12 March, 1868.’

¹⁹⁵ The term “radical architecture” was coined by Germano Celant in his 1971 essay *Senza titolo* (Untitled), published in the magazine “in” edited by SUPERSTUDIO and ARCHIZOOM. (Celant, G., 1976. *Senza titolo*, Bulzoni Editore, Roma)

¹⁹⁶ Adolfo Natalini and Cristiano Toraldo di Francia formed the original’s SUPERSTUDIO core group in 1966, which was later joined by Roberto Magris, Gian Piero Frassinelli, Alessandro Magris and Alessandro Poli. SUPERSTUDIO is a collective– the prefix “super” indicates “above”, “addition”, “excellence”, “extraordinary” but also “excess” or “overflow”, something that surpasses the normal configuration of things – which contains within it subjectivities with very heterogeneous interests and skills. Suffice it to say that Adolfo Natalini comes from painting, Toraldo di Francia is a photographer, and Frassinelli has interests related to anthropology. Different or even conflicting views lead Natalini to speak of a “bipolar personality disorder” (“Una storia a più finali. Conversazione con Adolfo Natalini” in SUPERSTUDIO, 2015. *La vita segreta del Monumento Continuo, Conversazioni con Gabriele Mastrigli*. Quodlibet, Macerata, p. 48.)

¹⁹⁷ SUPERSTUDIO, *Opere 1966-1978*, 284. transl. in Eng. by the author.

¹⁹⁸ Ivi p. 291.

a city as crystal tops; a ribbon city of continuous production; a city of splendid houses where the only purpose of the inhabitants is to own the most beautiful house; a book city where the citizen in every situation is required to observe the rules written in the book that hangs around his neck. After cataloging the monstrous projects in hallucinatory detail, a test is presented in which it is asked how many of the twelve cities governed by aberrant values and structures one would like to exist. In this provocative way, they demonstrate that there is no way out between being a zombie, a golem, or a mutant – the actual outcomes to which the possible answers to the test led; in addition, those who believe they are excluded from the game are simply idiots since they have not understood that “the descriptions do not represent imaginary cities but your city, now and all cities.”¹⁹⁹ The only hope for salvation may lie in understanding the game. Basically, one is a zombie, golem, or mutant if one is unable to question a practice but an idiot if you treat the *Twelve Ideal Cities* as fantasy games and do not use them as invitations to observe the present sociomaterial environment: it is not just fantasy, it is for real. This radical project is not about mental wanderings but imaginatively educating about the worst consequences of our acquired practices– in this case, the practice of designing cities and those related to living in them.

Their negative explorations of the future were through “feeding the monsters.”²⁰⁰ According to SUPERSTUDIO, only in horror resides the hope of transforming reality; only in this way is it possible

to provoke awakening; [...] In anti utopia we nurture the monsters that crawl and coil in the dark recesses of our homes, in the dirty corners of our streets, in the folds of our clothes and to the mystery of our brains. In the cradle of anti utopia we try to make them grow and become enormous, and the dust and the darkness can no longer hide them, so that everyone, even the most short-sighted, can see them, enormous Kafkaesque cockroaches, in all their simplest and most mysterious forms.²⁰¹

To be “shepherds of monsters”²⁰² is the process that defines a dystopian *real-life thinking model* that aims to bring about a radical change in human behavior. *Twelve Ideal Cities*'s horrific thinking models, through reactions of disgust and anger, force us to look at the present horror we are enacting.

¹⁹⁹Ivi, p. 315.

²⁰⁰SUPERSTUDIO, Utopia, “Antiutopia, Topia”, in. *Argomenti e immagini di design*, 7, 1972, p. 42, third monographic issue dedicated to the theme *Distruzione e riappropriazione della città*. SUPERSTUDIO, *Opere 1966-1978*, p. 362.

²⁰¹ SUPERSTUDIO, *Opere 1966-1978*, pp. 362-364.

²⁰² *Ibidem*, p 364. The expression “shepherds of monsters,” as it appears in the SUPERSTUDIO’s essay *Utopia Anti-Utopia Topia*, was proposed by Pier Carlo Frassinelli and was probably inspired by some illustrations by Karel Thole who was the author of the covers of the Italian science fiction monthly *Urania* of which they were all readers in those years (private conversation with Pier Carlo Frassinelli).

6. Black zone dystopia

We seem to live in times of perpetual crisis, being the climate, medical, nuclear, economic, humanitarian, and or professional. It is suggested here that in coping with this volatile cycle, we have a tendency to be attracted to dystopian narratives. We consume dystopia almost daily, sitting behind our screens through movies, tv-series, and documentaries. Since dystopian narrative stages catastrophes or political situations that can only be confronted through a collaboration between us, other animals, things, and technologies, it conveys a paradox to consume an invitation for collective enactment of the future, in almost solitude.

Why do we continue to visit dystopia? Why do we surround ourselves with films, TV series, and comics that tell of horrific futures? In facing planetary destruction, we seem to feel not to be alone in facing these threats. Despite the fear and despair, they offer us pleasure and relief. During the recent COVID-19 lockdowns, one could feel a similar conflicted pleasure. The pandemic could not be acted upon individually; a collective response was urgent and necessary, renouncing the drain on freedom of movement and interaction for a moment.

Although we became physically isolated from one another during the pandemic, this isolation did not uphold collective changes in behavior. The crisis would remind us of our interdependencies, for better or worse. Despite limited interaction, we rapidly depended on our abilities to work remotely, transform our homes into workspaces, and sustain work relations and friendships. The pandemic called for the reinvention of individual practices to allow for massive changes in collective behavior. It called for openness to unconventional affordances our homes had to offer us; this took effort and energy for many of us.

In NASONAZI, drought leads the protagonists to develop individual technologies to capture water straight from every breath, like the graphene baleen masks. If everyone would reduce their water dependency, disaster could perhaps be diverted. The 'imperial' forces would try to prevent these individual practices at all costs. Their power is based on maintaining 'thirsty bodies'. By eliminating possibilities of chance and unexpected encounters with the freely moving protagonists, they create a black zone.

It is suggested here an analogy between the strategies used in the nineteenth century to isolate the viewer by placing him in the dark and streaming websites like Netflix. It seems that dystopia is waiting to emerge from the isolated, dark space in which it is confined, from a philosophical *black zone*.

With Netflix, non-calculated (pre-determined) invitations to action are reduced to a minimum: the more one isolates oneself in a *black zone*, the more the possibility of *infection*, collective action, is minimized. Although always present (in abilities that use sociomaterial invitations on different types of time scales), the risk of encountering what was not foreseen is reduced to a minimum. The meeting with the future is then determined, similar to the assigned seats from which we do not dare to get up. In addition to the problem of isolating oneself from unwanted and distracting contact, there is the

problem of being isolated in a bubble that shapes our desires based on what we have already wanted.

Chance, or the encounter with what was not previously acquired, the unanticipated, is largely eliminated.

Can we create dystopian spaces that allow us to become monstrous ourselves, that do not contain us in self-revolved black zones, that do not stop at transfiguration but that invite transformative practices? This is a question that I will ask throughout all the interventions developed here.

7. Becoming monstrous

In dystopia, as writers and audiences, we feed monsters and become the “shepherds of monsters.” In order to cope with real-life threats, we call upon our protagonists to become monstrous. In this sense, the narrative solicits visiting those places where we are called to become monstrous, where we can freely transform ourselves, mix, and share: dwell in the *gray zones*.

The narrative development being defined here, *Monster – monster – monstrous*, is an attempt to analytically grasp the transformative process being focused on with the notion of the *dystopian grey zone*. It is a transfiguration of real-life threats so as to elicit everyday practices.

Monsters = catastrophes, future treats

monsters = imaginative creatures, imaginative threats

monstrous = *enacting monsters*, transformative practices, the process of mixing abilities, “infecting” each other, hybridizing with materials, pooling and cross-fertilize

Opening those suspended spaces –present and remote– that here are defined as *gray zones*, is a crucial imaginative practice in times of crisis.²⁰³

If we do not transform our practices and radically remake ourselves by pooling and cross-fertilize skills, if we do not become in this sense *monstrous*, then the future we are enacting will be inhabited by the Monsters that hunt us, ready to threaten our form of life in the form of environmental disasters, viruses or wars over resources.

We feed monsters to become monstrous to confront the Monsters in our lives.

In order to trace the *Monster-monster-monstrous* chain, the cue was taken from the appearance of extraordinary creatures in the rituals and traditions of folklore. The

²⁰³ The *real-life thinking models* present throughout the thesis are used here as possible illustrations of such practices. See Ianniello, A., Habets, D., 2023. *Enacting Monsters*.

presence of the out-of-ordinary and *more-than-natural* within the public domain through the figure of monsters²⁰⁴ arises in tales, dances, songs, and rituals across all of our history. Death and rebirth are recurrent cross-cultural themes²⁰⁵ and, in practice, embodied by a monster's radical transformation. The monster resembles an irrevocable change that threatens to destroy the entire community and wreak havoc. Among many more, the figures of walking plants, deer men, giants, and multi-headed beings have been enacted in communities to celebrate fertility and abundance rites or to avert calamities, propitiate rains, and accompany novices or the dead. In many places across Europe, these practices are still kept alive as folklore traditions and contemporary adaptations.²⁰⁶ The monster can embody abilities that lie outside the norms of everyday life, is enacted by unknown forces, uses his body in opposition to the laws on which our beliefs rest, can carve its own or other people's flesh, propitiate unheard-of encounters, have sex with living creatures of different species, or mix with natural elements. A monster is the "form of fear"²⁰⁷ and not a mere invention that, coming from the ineffable domain of imagination, provokes mere reactions.

In considering the public entry of monsters, I do not join sides with monsters, nor do I mock them;²⁰⁸ I try to place the enactment of contemporary dystopia in a historical perspective of public monstrosities to understand better what happens if someone develops a monstrous practice within the public domain. By *monstrous practices*, I do not mean to speak of supposed occult forces but of unconventional practices. The distinction from ordinary life does not lead to a "beyond" but allows for openness to further solicitations that are potentially available to each individual. I believe in monsters as the form of inarticulable fear. In the present moment, we need to develop abilities in modeling monsters to cope with the fears we are encountering. Through them, we could develop new practices to deal with the nightmares that chase us. In this sense, enacting the monster is not a way to re-enchantment, rather it is an attempt to re-articulate our practices, welcome processes of cross-fertilization, and re-organize our form of life. The monster is the form of fear but also of trust and transformation.

The dystopia, as used here, is an affective set-up for a *gray zone*, it invokes a space of contagion, the entry point for monstrous practices. We find the catastrophe in the form of the unexpected (the presence of others) that distracts and transfigure us, solicits out-of-the-ordinary tasks and habits, and affords the possibility to change abilities and meet new styles and ways of behaving. The *gray zone* is the space where to be transfigured and infected, join skills and postures, mix styles of openness, hybridize with materials,

²⁰⁴Ingold, T., 2013. "Dreaming of Dragons: On the Imagination of Real Life." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, 735-736; for an account of the monster figure see: Asma, S. T., 2009. *On monsters: an unnatural history of our worst fears*, Oxford University Press, New York.

²⁰⁵ See Frazer, j. G., 1953. *The Golden Bough; a Study in Magic and Religion*, The Macmillan Company, New York.

²⁰⁶ See Fréger, C., 2011. *Wildermann*, Dewi Lewis Publishing, Heaton Moor.

²⁰⁷ Ingold, T. "Dreaming of Dragons: On the Imagination of Real Life", p.737.

²⁰⁸ See Wittgenstein, L., (2020) *The Mythology in Our Language. Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*. Tr. Palmié, S. Ed. by Giovanni da Col and S. Palmié, Hau Books, London.

devices, and technology, to become monstrous: here I can clearly see how “my boundaries are crossed”²⁰⁹ and how I’m impure.

7.1. The *Creature*

A classic example of transfiguration and of “impurity” that agglutinates in it is the *Creature* of Frankenstein, a monster made from pieces of corpses, against whom stones and rifle bullets are thrown in order to remove the unpredictable horror of the transfiguration itself, the contamination, elusiveness, the mixing, the hybridizations and the various abortions it produces.

As will emerge from these *interventions*, monsters do more than scare us. They are a way to explore, criticize, mock, organize, and reorganize the world. Their meaning can be shown to be very complex. This makes the monster, or the monstrous, an important part or way of changing ourselves, a very old and time-tested way, and continually rediscovered to remake our lives.

I will focus here on the *Creature* of Frankenstein, a prototype of the outsider, an exemplary outcast. I will propose him as the monster guarding the *gray zone*:

Nay, these are virtuous and immaculate beings! I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on. Even now my blood boils at the recollection of this injustice.²¹⁰

This is the fatherless and motherless character, abandoned, confined to the periphery, the figure of the monster used over the centuries as a space of contention to racialize and exclude, to make abject and therefore dispensable, but also to expand and include, to make manifest wounds and abuse. The *Creature* is the monster that challenges and claims a non-marginal space; it is the monster that embodies the expectations of those who excise it by making itself both a mirror and bogeyman. It constitutes an unexpected product, an uncontrollable force.

This monster is the product of the *hubris* of Dr. Victor who specializes in scientific knowledge and lacks the humanistic one in which the *Creature* is interested, however.²¹¹ This makes the doctor as robotic and rigid as his monstrous offspring. In this sense, the *Creature's* presence in the interventions developed here sheds light on the larger project pursued by my thesis about the proposal for a reflection that joins forces with heterogeneous artistic practices.

²⁰⁹ Mol, A., 2021. *Eating in Theory*. Duke University Press, London, p. 39; the model of the person who inhabits the *gray zone* must not be that of the one who walks, as used by Merlou-Ponty, but of the one who eats: “as a walker I move through the world, when I eat, it is the world that moves through me” (Mol, A., *Eating in Theory*, p.49). The point is that in the *gray zone* we do not always know what we are eating and we might even “poison” ourselves.

²¹⁰ Shelley, M., 1818/2017. *Frankenstein, annotated for scientists, engineers and creators of all kinds*. (Eds.) Guston, D., H., Finn, E., Robert, J., S., MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p. 115.

²¹¹ Doctor Frankenstein reads Paracelsus, Agrippa while the *Creature* educates himself on Milton, Goethe and Plutarch.

Mary Shelley's Gothic masterpiece is often considered the founding text of the science fiction genre.²¹² The subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*, refers to the theme of science gone mad, foreshadowing a dystopia.²¹³ The story of Frankenstein, which first appeared in Shelley's 1818 novel and was made famous by James Whale's 1931 film, tells of a monster, assembled from corpses and reanimated that violently rebels against its creator. Mary Shelley's story, as already mentioned, has lent itself over the centuries as a political metaphor for purposes of both liberation and racial or sexual oppression.²¹⁴ In the background of the novel's production are British debates on slavery, abolition, and racial mixture, as well as revolution and class conflict. As Chris Baldrick states, the story of Frankenstein is about humanity sizing responsibility for "recreating the world, for violently reshaping its natural environment and its inherited social and political forms, for remaking itself."²¹⁵

Following the American scholar Elisabeth Young, I will distinguish three distinctive elements of the Frankenstein story²¹⁶ that overlap and illuminate three aspects of the *gray zone* and, thus, the real-life thinking model's notion. These three aspects will run, more or less explicitly, throughout the thesis.

The *Creature* enacts *amalgamation*, *reanimation*, and *revolt* against a creator:

- The *Creature* is amalgamated from different bodies; it is an impure mix of different kinds of scraps and materials. Focusing on the racial aspects of the Frankenstein metaphors over the centuries, Elisabeth Young points out that the *Creature*, invoking racial uprising, also suggests contemporary fears about the racial mixture. At the time of the novel's writing, "amalgamation" referred to the interracial combination of which the monster is the embodiment and recalled "horror excited by the possibility of infinite intermixture" as Gobineau called it.²¹⁷

²¹² See Baldick, C., 1987. *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing*. Clarendon Press, Oxford; Turney, J., 1998. *Frankenstein's Footsteps: Science, Genetics and Popular Culture*. Yale University Press, London.

²¹³ See Claeys, G., 2010. *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. Cambridge University Press, New York, CAP 5; Claeys, G., 2017. *Dystopia: A Natural History*, Oxford University Press, New York, CAP 2.

²¹⁴ There is a large body of analytic literature on how works like Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Maturin's *Melmoth* or Lewis's *The Monk*, reflect the central tensions in times of social liberation and political revolution of the 19th century. Responses to societal notions of racial inequality, however sometimes unconsciously, are clear lines of development in the narrative structures of these novels. Especially in the case of Frankenstein, I recommend Malchow, H., 1993. "Frankenstein's Monster and Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain." *Past & Present* 139-1, 90-130 and the very interesting work from which my reflection starts by Young, E. 2008. *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor*, New York University Press, New York.

²¹⁵ Baldick, C., *In Frankenstein's Shadows Myth, Monstrosity and Nineteenth Century Writing*; Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1987, p. 5.

²¹⁶ Young expands on Chris Baldick's definition that the "myth of Frankenstein" has two elements: "(a) Frankenstein makes a living creature out of bits of corpses" and "(b) The creature turns against him and runs amok" (In *Frankenstein's Shadows Myth, Monstrosity and Nineteenth-Century Writing* [Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1987], 3). According to Young, "amalgamation of body parts and reanimation from the dead are distinct enough to constitute two features rather than one." (Young, E., *Black Frankenstein* p. 232).

²¹⁷ As quoted in Young, R., G., C., 1995. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory Culture and Race*. Routledge, London, p. 113. See also Malchow, H.L., 1996 *Gothic Images of Race*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, p. 176; Mellor, A., K., 2001. "Frankenstein, Racial Science, and the Yellow Peril." *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, 23, 22-23.

Moreover, as Robert Young points out, the mulatto, the fruit of amalgamation, was considered by some to be a scientific and social anomaly. According to the pseudoscience of polygenesis, blacks, and whites, belonging to different species, could give rise to sterile offspring. Traces of this hypothesis can be found in the monster's inability to reproduce and in his request to Victor Frankenstein to build him a mate. Infertility is a characteristic of the monster and the *gray zone*. The monster is destined to get “lost in darkness and distance”²¹⁸, the *gray zone* produces nothing concrete, does not have a precise function or a definable outcome, but could reorganize our form of life. Within the framework used here, agglomeration can be understood as the monstrous practices in which we engage;

- The *Creature* is reanimated from corpses. Shelley when narrating how Frankenstein animates the monster refers to a “spark”. The author almost certainly alludes to the idea, relatively new at the time, of using electricity to reanimate a body. In the late 18th century, Luigi Galvani (1737-1798), experimenting on frogs' legs demonstrated how the use of electricity could activate muscles. Today these principles are still used in medical practices. Electrical stimulation keeps millions of humans alive through defibrillators or pacemakers and, through treatments for paralysis, enables them to move.

Reanimation finds here its connection with exploratory behaviors within a *material playground*. This notion is used to define one of the three phases of the RAAAF group's creative process in which “opening up in an experiential way to unexplored or unconventional possibilities”²¹⁹ is fostered. Material playgrounds offer the opportunity to probe freely and playfully without worrying about potentially instrumental outcomes. This means that playful exploration may run out of steam in the exploration itself or can lead to surprising discoveries of new possibilities and meanings that had not previously been considered.

- The *Creature* engages in revolt against a creator. Due to the double meaning of the word “revolting,” a monster can be repulsive and rebellious. This last characteristic links with the practices of inversion, misrule, and excess theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin as the *carnavalesque* and so with *parody* and *grotesque*.²²⁰ The *Creature* through his attempts to imitate the community around him, at the same time exercises an unintentional parody of the customs. According to Bakhtin the parody “degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh.”²²¹ Moreover, the grotesque body of the *Creature* with its scars and stitching “ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences... and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s limited

²¹⁸ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, annotated for scientists, engineers and creators of all kinds*, 115. p.187.

²¹⁹ Rietveld, E. “The affordances of art for making technologies,” p. 496.

²²⁰ As we will see in *intervention #3 and intervention #4*.

²²¹ Bakhtin, M., 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Tr. Iswols, H., Indiana University Press, Bloomington, p. 20.

space or into the body's depths."²²² In the *gray zone* there is a strong link between the grotesque individual and the larger body politic.²²³ The revolt is understood here as transformation and change, a way to question our practices.

As Young states: "since the monster is himself a remade body, his story suggests in particularly self-reflexive terms the political strength of the idea of remaking."²²⁴ A body, made up of scraps – bodies of disenfranchised and forgotten beggars like ghosts – through its hideous figure, non-normative, constitutes a revolting horror that revolts. The *Creature* thus embodies the possibility of "remaking," that is, reorganizing our practices.

In a scene of Mary Shelley's novel where its only possible link with the society of men is broken, the grotesque, horrific but intelligent and sensible *Creature*, dancing furiously in the woods, producing destruction, sets up a dystopian *gray zone*.

In his dance, the *Creature* warns and invites us:

My protectors had departed, and had broken the only link that held me to the world. For the first time the feelings of revenge and hatred filled my bosom, and I did not strive to controul them; but, allowing myself to be borne away by the stream, I bent my mind towards injury and death. [...] As night advanced, I placed a variety of combustibles around the cottage; and, after having destroyed every vestige of cultivation in the garden, I waited with forced impatience until the moon had sunk to commence my operations.

As the night advanced, a fierce wind arose from the woods, and quickly dispersed the clouds that had loitered in the heavens: the blast tore along like a mighty avelânche, and produced a kind of insanity in my spirits, that burst all bounds of reason and reflection. I lighted the dry branch of a tree, and danced with fury around the devoted cottage, my eyes still fixed on the western horizon, the edge of which the moon nearly touched. A part of its orb was at length hid, and I waved my brand; it sunk, and, with a loud scream, I fired the straw, and heath, and bushes, which I had collected. The wind fanned the fire, and the cottage was quickly enveloped by the flames, which clung to it, and licked it with their forked and destroying tongues.²²⁵

In the *gray zone*, as we have seen, we distract each other in order to lead us out of our respective *metastable habitual zones*,²²⁶ our habits, and find new ones, provisional and

²²² Bakhtin, M., *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 317–18.

²²³ Stallybrass, P., White, A., 1986. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York.

²²⁴ Young, E., *Black Frankenstein*, p.14.

²²⁵ Shelley, M., *Frankenstein, annotated for scientists, engineers and creators of all kinds*, p. 115.

²²⁶ Bruineberg and at. argue that both the sensitivity to novel situations and the sensitivity to a multiplicity of action possibilities are enabled by the property of skilled agency that they call "metastable attunement." In metastability the realization of two competing tendencies is expressed: the tendency of the agent to express their intrinsic dynamics and the tendency to search for new possibilities. Metastably attuned agents are ready to engage with a multiplicity of affordances, allowing for a balance between stability and

always revisable. These are collective metastable attunements that rest on the possibility of distracting each other. To be monstrous in this sense is to enjoy the monstrous solicitation, to be distracted by what is usually not relevant to us.

7.2 The *Creature* and the revolting vision

The *Creature*, as a monster, puts a complex play of visions to work. The word “monster” comes from the Latin *monstrare*, to show or display, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* explores the practices of vision in multiple directions. Throughout the novel, there is a strong emphasis, for example, on the face-to-face confrontation between the *Creature* and Victor, the monster and its creator, on the scientist's fright at what he has created, and on his disgust following the vision. Numerous episodes revolve around the question of seeing. As noted, among others by Elisabeth Young, in reading the story, we go through the narration of secret moments of surveillance, such as the monster's examination of William; those related to self-education through the observation of the habits and social life of the members of a community, as in the part devoted to the monster in the cottage; that related to visual blocking, as in the case of the blind father De Lacey who cannot see the monster; the examination of visual models, such as the miniature portrait of Victor's mother. In a very eloquent way, Shelley combines some of these elements in the famous passage when the *Creature* looks into the water's mirror and the vision frightens him:

I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers —their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions: but how was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity.²²⁷

This fright pulls him away from his image, from a revolting mask literally sewn on him, to run toward a possible community that can welcome him or reject him, a “precious stranger.” His face is not destined to be framed in a pool of water, but, fixed above a disproportionately yellowish body, he is meant to disgust others to provoke a possible revolt.

In the *Creature* story, vision is closely linked to revolt which is another way of saying transformation, change, a way to question and subvert our practices. Something was seen

flexibility; See Bruineberg, J., Seifert, L., Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., “Metastable attunement and real-life skilled behavior.”

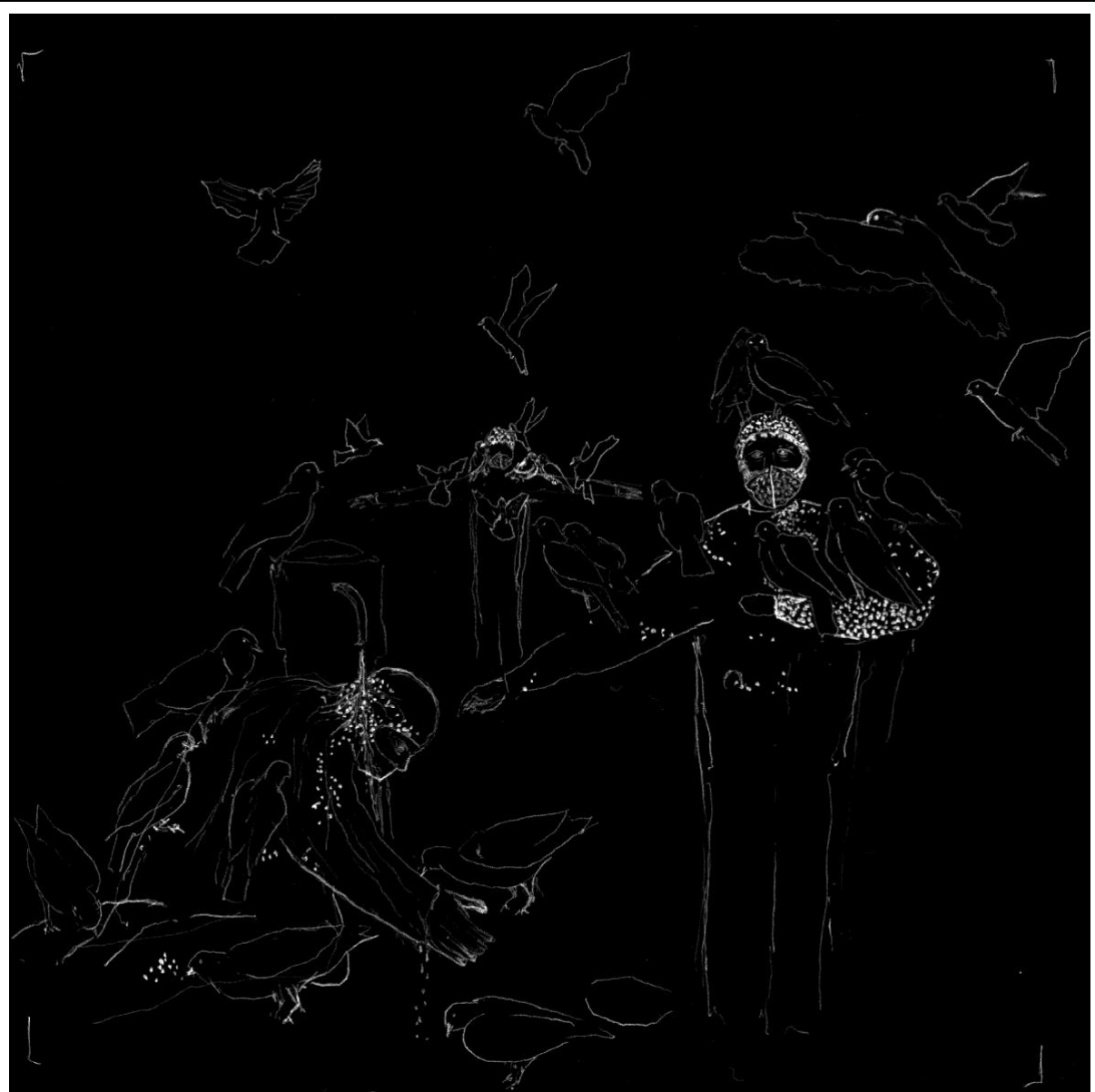
²²⁷ Shelley, M., *Frankenstein, annotated for scientists, engineers and creators of all kinds*, p.93.

that was not seen before, and we are therefore put in a position to be able to question it and change it.

Vision as a revolt passes through the ability to move from “not seeing to seeing,” and the monster is a proven ancient strategy that very effectively enables this transition.

The repertoire of various monstrosities explored in this thesis constitutes an extremely rich reservoir of unconventional modes of exploration in order to open us up. Enacting monsters is a way to see what was previously precluded.

8. *DESERT BLOOM*



#1 *DESERT BLOOM*

To be among the free.
To revive the source that has fallen dry.
To invite the pests into our streets.
To have a thousand wings.
To be monstrous.
To let the desert bloom.

Performance for three people. Transfiguration into multi-winged beings among the tourist swamped in Rome's city center.

With the proposal for the live work *DESERT BLOOM*, *halfman-halfpest* figures as exemplary multi-species agglomerations persist during the climate crisis. Three performers will wear a tight-fitting jumpsuit made of seeds, move around a *nasone* wetting their garment and then begin to cross the city.

The suits are intended to attract pigeons that could thus make up the half-man, half-pest figures. Through a coalition with the “sky rats”, it will be possible to capitalize on the excrement of birds useful for the cultivation of delimited areas, and, at the same time, protect themselves from high temperatures thanks to feathers. Imaginative future inhabitants of Rome will thus be able to let the desert that has at that time conquered the whole of Southern Europe to bloom. This out-of-the-ordinary practice, in the now, attempts to open a gray zone where it will have to renegotiate the distinction between man/animal, waste/resource, weed/plant, and pest/ally.

The performers are asked to stage their own vulnerability²²⁸ and allow the parasite monstrosity to persist, while the participants define the object of their own attention: curse, be disgusted, film and share with their cell phones, walk with the *halfman/halfpest*, feed in turn the pigeons, call it senseless, look where others look, watch the dance of the flock of birds, consider their place in urban space, get attacked by the pigeons, run away, chase away them to try to save the performers, play with the pigeons or feed them. *DESERT BLOOM* is meant as a “generative” proposal that has an open-ended character that should enable *openness to others and things* (#4) in a new and unconventional way, and thus set new developments in motion. People with different interests and concerns will have different experiences of the meaning of this live work which means they will experience different fields of relevant affordances. This is because any person has their own history of engaging with the world and a skillset acquired in different practices. Designing *DESERT BLOOM*, in starting from a set of problems that are meant to be questioned, one is certainly not underestimating the open and generative aspect; indeed, the distinction already given in the Introduction between *field* and *landscape* of affordances –and so between relevant or inviting affordances and affordances– may be helpful here:

Certain relevant affordances stand out to the individual as inviting in part because of the person’s past history of engagement with the world. In engaging with a work of art, a visitor may get a surprising insight that transforms his or her world view. Relevant affordances may be an important part of the explanation for the surprising insights a person can hit upon that allows them to depart from—and maybe even

²²⁸ “In theatre and performance art, the infinitely reproducible images of technical and electronic media stand in opposition to the unique becoming of the human body – especially the suffering, sick, injured, or dying body. Suffused by light and ‘glorious as on the first day’ it appears despite its insufficiencies.” (Fisher-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, p. 93).

question—more conventional understandings of the world. A skillset acquired in the past may allow a person to come up with unconventional responses in the particular situation. Sometimes other people may also start responding in similar ways, which can eventually lead to changes in practices (and of socioculturally established meanings). So [...] the meaning of the artwork originates partly from the artwork in its sociomaterial context and partly from the individual experiencing it. To use Pols' insightful way of putting it, collaborators and visitors “expand” the artwork (its materiality and its meaning) “by taking it up in particular ways” (Pols p.5).²²⁹

The primary *DESERT BLOOM*'s aim is in evoking peripheral action of the ‘others’: the pigeons (and naturally other birds) and people on the streets. So, like the *Creature*, this live work is not completely under the control of any of the participants, and by participants is meant performers, spectators, and other life forms. Attempts to accommodate pigeons could fail as well as the pigeons themselves could occupy uncontrollably in the action space.

The alliance with the animal is a way to mix and be impure as well as a strategy to bring elusiveness to the center of the space. The performers' bodies, in symbiosis with those of the animals, are presented as uncontrollable material from which would be impossible to eventually produce an enclosed and defined work. The presence of the animal calls into question the ordering capacity of humans thus constituting an internal principle of revolt: no pre-ordained course can be guaranteed. The animal in cahoots with man thus opens up the *dystopian gray zone*: we don't really know what will happen but if we continue like this it will be terrible.

Spontaneity and predictability cannot be defined, yet openness can be inscribed and designed into the constitutive aspects of the live work. Any activity that tries to break conventions is an attempt of opening *gray zones*, and in this sense, the storyboard *NASONAZI* and proposals for interventions *NOVA NAUMACHIA*, and *DESERT BLOOM*, represent a multi-level attempt at inviting monstrous practices. These are real-life thinking models to imagine transformative dystopian spaces.

When we participate with a *dystopian real-life thinking model*, we are invited to imagine how the activities in which we are habitually absorbed, if collectively perpetuated at the current rate, could tragically redefine our living environment. The process of education of attention developed through this kind of model is not directed at the scope of the action of the individual but, on a large scale, at practice in general, yet the means are affective experiences that move the individual to act or rather solicit action readiness. The transformative chain of *Monster - monster - monstrous* moves the attention from a response to a distant threat to problematic existing practices. The individual confronted with the impending need for a transformation of established practices is driven to develop a monstrous transfiguration such that it radically redirects the course of things.

²²⁹ Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., “Reflections on the genre of philosophical art installations.” *Adaptive Behavior* 2022, 0(0) 1-14, p.3.

In other words, the individual grasps an indeterminate invitation on which he is called to act collectively.

Through the collective enactment of dystopia, any kind of *crisis* can potentially be explored. This is because the dystopian narrative, on the basis of an irremediable catastrophe, summons, on different temporal scales, “unconventional” communities that do not yet exist to prepare to act in ways not yet foreseen. In the dystopia is inscribed the invocation of cooperation, yet often we continue to encounter dystopia mostly in solitude.

9. Collective enactment in the gray zone

Visiting dystopia may push us to imaginatively *run away* from our monsters:

1) into a *black zone* where the contagion is minimized. A *black zone* is a place of comfort, where sociomaterial affordances are predetermined and we rely on familiar and established behavioral frameworks. Following the theatrical analogy, the seats have been assigned here and the lights show us precisely where to look. As mentioned, an exemplary place of the *black zone* is the consumption of dystopia on streaming platforms plunged into the comfortable darkness of our homes. Unpredictability is limited in its algorithmic bubble.

There is no to argue, here, that there is absolutely no room for contagion in the black zone. The bubble can burst, like the empathy and understanding we feel for the monsters in books, movies, and tv-series, that offer us the possibility to reflect on our own ways of living on their terms. Yet the way that a *black zone* is structured minimizes possibilities for infection and interaction.

In the *black zone*, the chain from Monster ends in the imaginative threat of the monster, in a transfiguration of real-life threats and concerns. The despair, fear, and anxiety they can provoke are dealt in the familiar and emotionally regulative space of our homes²³⁰. In sum, we transfigure but not transform;

2) into a *gray zone* where we infect ourselves and become monstrous in the face of our monsters. By *monstrous* I mean at the same time both actual transformative practices and the way dystopian fictional inhabitants infect each other, transforming by joining forces to face the threat. It is precisely the latter that serve as models of possible transformative practices through imagination. The point is that the transformative process is unpredictable and boundaries between relevant and irrelevant solicitations, between threat and coping are permeable. The imaginative situation affords openness to solicitations in the rich landscape of affordances that therefore were irrelevant, inappropriate, even monstrous. Through this gained openness to multiple affordances transformation of existing ‘real-life’ skills and practices can be set in motion. I don’t

²³⁰ Krueger, J., Colombetti, G., 2018. “Affective affordances and psychopathology.” *Discipline Filosofiche*, 2, 221-247.

speak of practices in the sense of solutions, fixes, or remedies to the threats faced. Embodying imaginative monsters, gaining monstrous skills enables us to radically break with practices we normally take for granted. This *intervention* aims to provoke a questioning attitude and thus provides an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between the possibilities offered by the environment and the behavior that is enabled and constrained.

There is no absolute distinction between *black* and *gray*, they fade into each other and a clear line need not be drawn: there are degrees of contagion on basis of the varieties of presence²³¹ and skills. The distinction is made in how freely the space is designed for infection and interaction to take place.

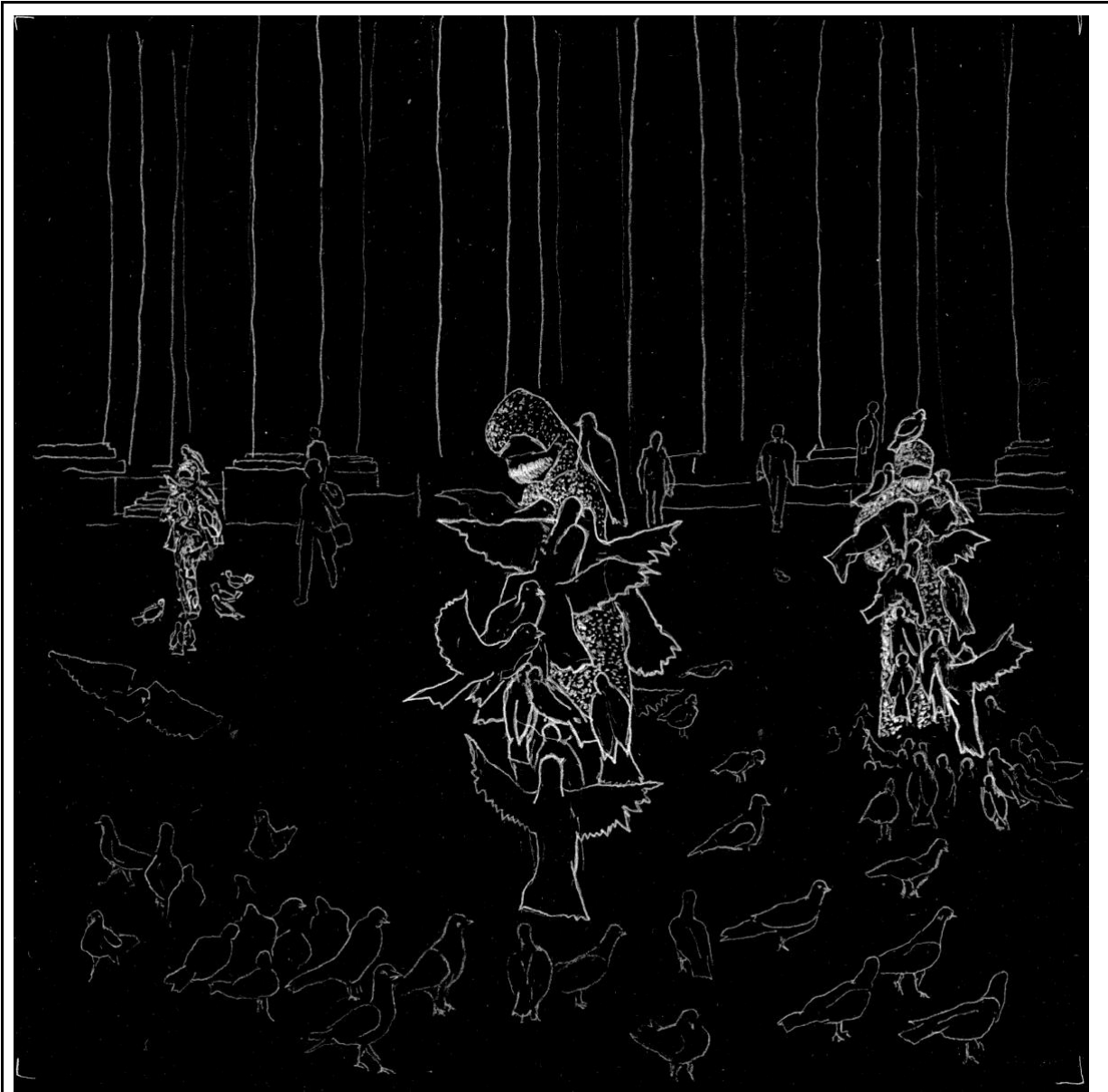
In the *gray zone*, the *skillful co-presence* of others solicits our form of life to potentially open up to monstrous affordances. Transformation follows when one's own practices are seen as non-normative, for example as “threatening,” “killing,” or “disgusting.” Beyond changes in perspective, a *gray zone* offers a transformative practice that is a *monstrous practice*.

*The imaginative effort of this storyboard is indebted to a possible future in which it is a necessity to drink our waste, drink blood, kill to survive, mutating our tissues and entire biological conformation. The monster of dystopia is the one that straddles the ill-defined boundary between us and the monsters. The human protagonists of a zombie movie, for example, almost always bring the external threat –that of being eaten– to an internal dynamic –that of eating, more or less metaphorically, each other.*²³²

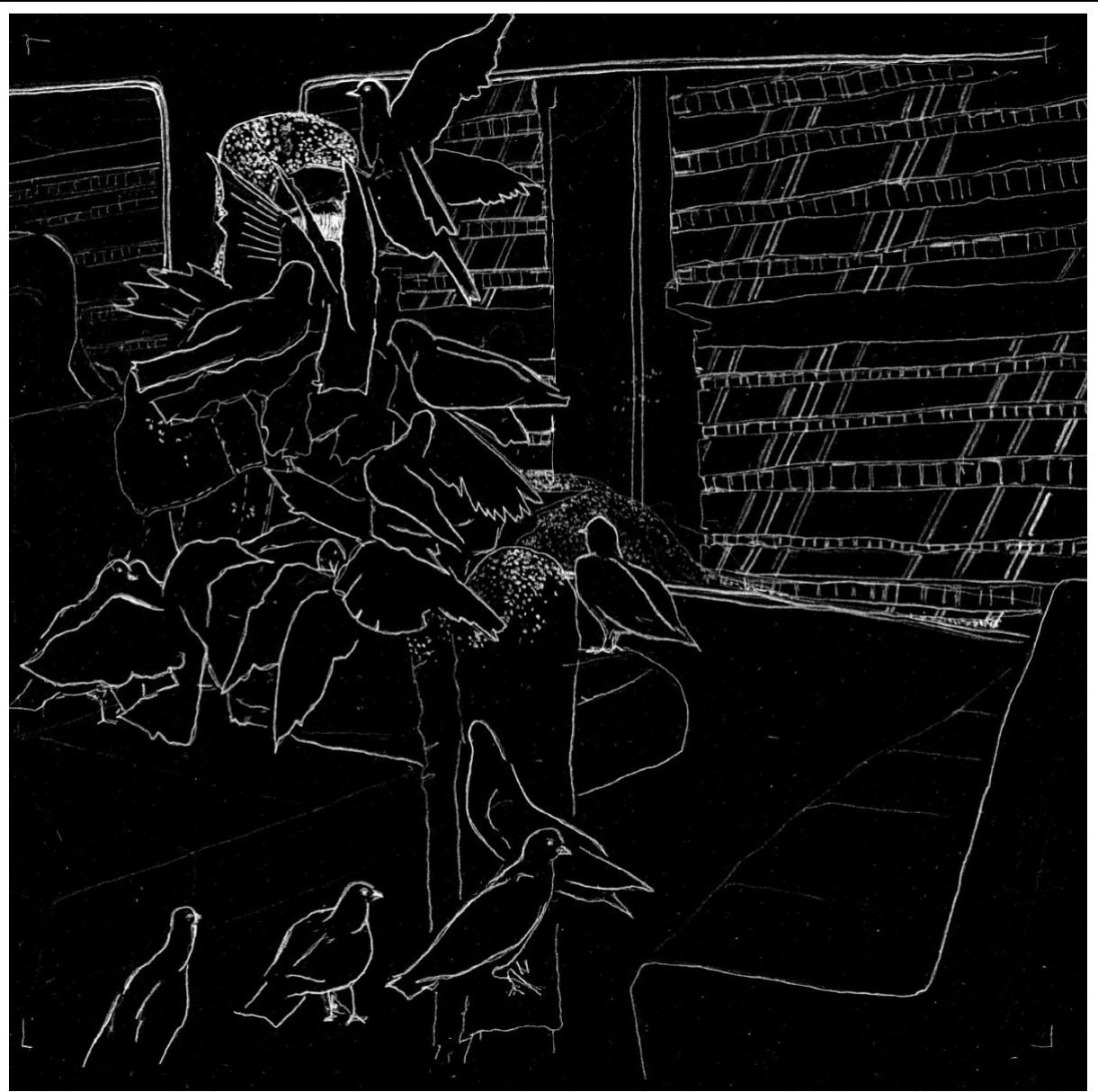
²³¹ See Noë, A., *Varieties of Presence*.

²³² I think of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) directed by George Romero, where the small multiracial community that concentrates in one house to escape zombies and thus to avoid being eaten ends up being shaken by violent internal conflicts of a racial character as well; A slightly different but very interesting interpretation from Elisabeth Young links this movie with the story of Frankenstein as developed in the cinematic field: “The most trenchantly antiracist horror film of this era, with its own allusion to Frankenstein, was the low-budget effort of a white filmmaker. In George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), cannibal zombies terrorize an isolated group of white people whose leader is a black man; as Richard Dyer argues, the film’s racial significance inheres not only in its representation of a heroic black protagonist but also in its sustained negative depiction of white people and its depiction of whiteness itself as a kind of death. *Night of the Living Dead* unmistakably alludes to Whale’s *Frankenstein* films in its opening scene, when the first of the zombies, a tall, mute, pale man, chases a woman across a graveyard with the posture and gait of Boris Karloff’s Frankenstein monster. This moment uses the iconography of Karloff to establish the film’s governing equation: The monsters in this film are white, not black. If *Bride of Frankenstein* and *Blackenstein* attempt, with uneven success, to humanize the black man made monstrous by a white world, Romero engages in a complementary project of turning the cinematic gaze back against the world of white people. Using the imagery of Frankenstein to deepen white self-critique, *Night of the Living Dead* suggests that white people make themselves into their own monsters: self-sustaining and self-replenishing but ultimately self-consuming.” (Young, E., *Black Frankenstein*, pp.197-198). As Young underlines this resemblance is noted by Waller, who describes the zombie as “running with a lurching, pigeon-toed gait so that he seems almost a caricature of the creature in James Whale’s *Frankenstein*” (Waller, G., 1986. *The Living and the Un-dead*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana, p.272).

In short, visiting a dystopia, we are not simply called to identify with our own form of life, but imaginatively mix the skills of humans and or non-humans, and form unexpected and seemingly impossible alliances, imaginatively opening up our anticipated field of affordances by enacting elusive real-life threats as monsters, and be monstrous, enacting openness toward future Monsters. This emotional space helps us gain openness to multiple affordances and thus enabling the transformation of our habitual practices.



#2 *DESERT BLOOM* – enacting monsters in the public domain.



#3 *DESERT BLOOM* – in transit.

[transformative intervention # 2] Dynamic imaginative niches²³³

[W]e demand rigidly defined areas of doubt and uncertainty!

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, Douglas Adams

²³³ This *transformative intervention* appeared in a shorter version, in Ianniello, A., Habets, D., 2021. "Participative Monsters." *Pólemos*, 2. The visual ethnography was produced in close collaboration with David Habets. When I seldom use the pronoun *I* I always mean a *we* that includes David but is not exhausted in him but in a thick crowd of people, animals, things, and monsters near and far whose thoughts, lives, and materiality has crowded this research path. Like the multi-headed monstrous process in the streets of South Tyrol that I will consider here, every form of writing is like a Frankenstein's *Creature* struggling to transform something.

1. Intro

How can we see that what is elusive and as endlessly complex as life itself, yet still gives us a feeling of threat, fear, and anxiety? How can we grasp for a grip on life when the future itself feels uncertain? In order to see what was unseen, or seemingly impossible to see, one must not simply redirect one's perception but enable to transform the forms of life, the practices one is engaged in. I suggest that in playing together, in participating collectively in playful activities, we are grasping for grip in a world of uncertainties. For transformation to take place we must submerge ourselves in uncertainty to see what was unseen.

“Again and again I must submerge myself in the water of doubt”²³⁴

It is not a matter of changing perspectives or roles, but of letting things, people, and places emerge from our “real imagination.” This does not mean that we are separated and irretrievably distant from each other, on the contrary imagination takes place in the world and makes it possible to learn new practices and thus transform “seeing into seeing differently.” So, in order to see what we did not see before, we undergo a process of transformation.

The imaginative-visual ethnography²³⁵ that unfolds through this *transformative intervention* will follow actors, performers, monsters, and spectators as vectors of transformation that do not introduce us to a specific practice (at least not only that) but open up possibilities for transforming and reorganizing our lives.

The use of an ethnographic process – although here we come to play imaginatively with some materials – aims to connect a zoomed-in perspective on concrete situations to regularities at the level of sociomaterial practice as a whole, that is a zoomed-out view on the form of life.²³⁶

In this *intervention*, it will be described real and imaginative situations in which the transfiguration of a body is the invitation to different forms of participatory play.

The drawings and descriptions are a form of play in themselves. Here we play with graphic, visual, and conceptual materials trying to open up different ways to think about

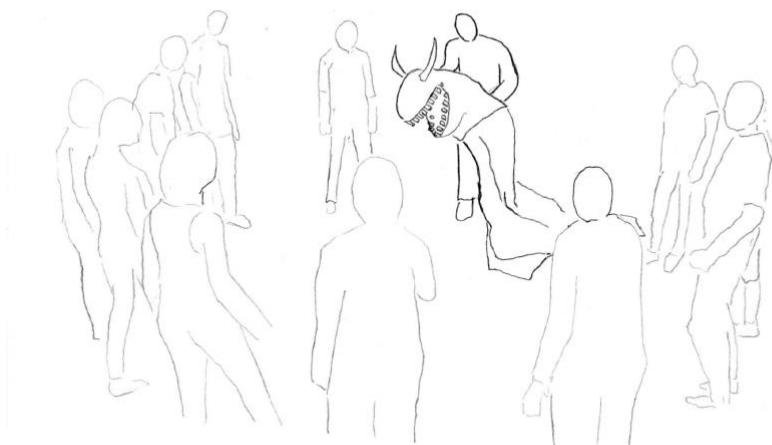
²³⁴ Wittgenstein, L., *The Mythology in Our Language. Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, p. 32.

²³⁵ “Visual ethnography [...] does not claim to produce an objective or truthful account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers' experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, the embodied, sensory and affective experiences, and the negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced.” (Pink, S., 2001 *Doing visual ethnography: images, media, and representation in research*, Thousand Oaks, Calif, Sage, London, p.18); “There is no essential hierarchy of knowledge or media for ethnographic representation. Rather, different epistemologies and technologies complement each other as different types of ethnographic knowledge that may be experienced and represented in a range of different textual, visual and other sensory ways.” (Pink, S. *Doing visual ethnograph*, p.5.)

²³⁶ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., “Foregrounding Sociomaterial Practice in Our Understanding of Affordances: The Skilled Intentionality Framework.”

the role of imagination in the process of writing about performance theory and enactive cognition.

In this introductory section (1) I will elaborate on my conception of the radically situated imagination and introduce the notion of the “affective niche” proposed by Colombetti-Krueger from which this *intervention* of mine begins. I will then introduce the figure of the Trusted Monster (2) and consider the appearance of a specific one from northern Italian folklore, the Schnappvicher, which will allow me to develop what I mean by dynamic *imaginative niche* (3). The same monster will present itself not embedded in playful practices but animated by National Socialist propaganda (4). At this point, I can begin to play with the graphic material and introduce the figure from the performing arts world of the Pioneer Monster (5). I will conclude by considering an attempt implemented in the live arts, to let a monster emerge by making it disappear.



[People play a game in a circle. They are passing around a monstrous costume. The costume has a mouth full of teeth and horns; held by one individual, it lies partly on the ground, inviting - to be worn.

Only the monster is clearly delineated; there are no faces depicted to characterize individuals, only the character of a group joining in a circle. The monstrous costume lying in folds

on the floor affords multiple solicitations, seemingly inviting the group to play with its meaning.]

In an exercise in theatrical improvisation, pupils standing in a circle pass an object to each other which they have to manipulate by transforming it imaginatively. Originating from a classic French mime exercise where students sat in a circle and passed a mimed object from one to the other, it was, as the pioneer of improvisational theater Keith Johnstone reports²³⁷, the English playwright John Osborne who introduced a real object into the circle.

Let us suppose that a pupil rolls up a piece of cloth and begins to rock it, passing a child to look after to his neighbor who, after some caresses, unrolls the cloth and rolls it up again to stretch it like a rope that his neighbor can pull. This one, after pulling a bit, then trying to make a big knife out of this cloth with which to stab his neighbor, the game immediately disappears as the cloth, its materiality, does not support such an imaginative use. At this instant, some have lost their *correspondence*²³⁸ with matter and others. As Johnstone interestingly writes:

I like to work with a heap of props at the side of the stage, and their transformations can be magical. A bench can become a canoe; a sofa can become a pool to dive in to; a boat can be up-ended and used as a shrine. Handle the objects, instead of thinking what to change them into, and they'll change of their own accord.²³⁹

An openness to multiple affordances can emerge only in correspondence, in that circle that could be expanded on the basis of new participants, new abilities, and new kinds of materials. The play is interrupted when the imaginative cue does not find a real foothold in the object. It is not the teacher's authority that decrees failure, but rather the pupils who, based on the available object and the proposed use, are no longer activated in the game. You simply can't play stabbing with a cloth.

This exercise is paradigmatic for the understanding of affordance. As repeated, an affordance is an invitation to action offered by the environment. In the enriched version used here, affordance is the relation between an aspect of the sociomaterial environment and an ability available in a form of life. In manipulating the sociomaterial environment through collective imaginative action, as the exercise described above, we allow the situation to develop by opening up ourselves *with* matter and *with* others. When I twist a piece of cloth, my neighbor will not immediately understand it as a child. However, my activity – cradling it, caring for it, making noises – will ensure that we can open up to new aspects of the sociomaterial environment together. Where the piece of cloth folds, it is possible to see a mouth that can stimulate different types of activity. Here the

²³⁷ Johnstone, K., 1999. *Impro for Storytellers. Theatresports and the Art of Making Things Happen*, Faber and Faber Limited, London, p. 304.

²³⁸ See Ingold, T., *Imagining for real. Essays on Creation, Attention and Correspondence*.

²³⁹ Johnstone, K., 1999. *Impro for Storytellers*, p.306.

transition that allows someone to perceive differently is linked to the *collective manipulation of imaginative sociomateriality* that brings into stake different skills. It is an opening up to unconventional aspects of the environment: nobody dreams of cradling a piece of cloth, yet by doing so we can play together and tell stories. In playful activities, we can participate in each other's imaginaries; this participation takes place through the scaffolding of collective imaginative niches.

An imaginative process is, therefore, not something that develops in the mind of an isolated individual but a system's relational feature that emerges from the encounter of several people with an aspect of the sociomaterial environment. A rolled-up piece of cloth is not enough to become a child, just as the simple –supposed– intention to turn a piece of cloth into a knife is not enough if it does not accord with the material and a form of life. Rather than a *hylomorphic* model, according to which through an intentional process a preconceived abstract form would be imprinted in the inert matter, it might be useful here to refer to a *hylonoetic field*²⁴⁰ (*hylonoetic* comes from the Greek words *hyle* – matter – and *nous* –mind), “a mindscape quite literally extending into the extra-organismic environment and material culture.”²⁴¹

Rather than isolating some event of an imaginative nature, the interest here is directed at defining fields of tension in which a process that sets in motion unexpected and unconventional relationships takes place.

It is described in this intervention multiple situations in which the “monstrous costume” can be used to open up radically different *imaginative sociomateriality*. The notion of participation used here is relational, depending on the ways the environment, including the other participants, solicits manipulation of a shared imaginary sociomateriality. This notion is indebted to the development of Collombetti-Krueger's adaptation of Sterelny's framework of the scaffolded mind.²⁴²

²⁴⁰ “I have depicted human cognitive processing as a hylonoetic field—a mindscape quite literally extending into the extra-organismic environment and material culture. This is not simply the view—much more compatible with common sense—of a cognitive agent that depends heavily on external props and tools, as when we use pencil and paper to do a large multiplication. Such a view would simply recognize the importance of mediation in human thinking—a proposal already put forward, most famously by the psychologist Lev Vygotsky, in so-called cultural-historical activity theory, decades before the cognitive revolution of the 1960s began. Nor was it simply my intention to rehearse the well-known criticisms of the computational ideal of mind as an algorithmic, rule-governed, and sequential representational engine (an ideal that is characteristic of “good old-fashioned artificial intelligence”). Instead, the chief innovation of this book lies in the more radical idea that human cognitive and emotional states or processes literally comprise elements in their surrounding material environment. According to the hypothesis of the constitutive intertwining of mind with the material world [...] our ways of thinking are not merely causally dependent upon but constituted by extracranial bodily processes and material artifacts. Some people may find this stronger version of extended-mind theory hard to defend and difficult to embrace fully. Such a reaction is, of course, to be anticipated, because once the conventional demarcations of skin and skull are removed it appears that conventional cognitive science loses the analytical purity of its object of study. More important, as the philosopher Alva Noë points out (2009, 185), in view of the influential if not foundational role that the classical “internalist” plays in cognitive sciences, *whole research programs have to be set aside.*” (Malafouris, L., 2013. *How Things Shape the Mind*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, in Massachusetts, pp.227-228).

²⁴¹ Malafouris, L., *How Things Shape the Mind*, p.227.

²⁴² Sterelny, K., 2010. “Minds: Extended or scaffolded?” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 9, 465-481.

Following Sterelny, Colombetti-Krueger point at how “one can find many cases of environmentally scaffolded capacities that involve interactions of various individuals with collectively structured environments.”²⁴³ It is in reference to a study of Elizabethan and Jacobean theater by Evelyn Tribble²⁴⁴ who tries to show how, through a cognitively distributed theatrical system, the actors in early modernity were able to master a large number of roles in a short time and with very few rehearsals. Tribble’s main purpose is to analyze the “neglected question of how actors manage to remember their parts.”²⁴⁵ In the *Globe Theater*, tools, artifacts, and practices formed elements of a cognitive structure that, in constraining and limiting, also enabled extraordinary achievement. What Tribble will later call *distributed cognitive ecology*²⁴⁶ was composed of material artifacts – playhouse, plots, actor’s roles, playbooks – a theatrical system based on the uses of verses and gestures, social apprentice system, and the organizational practices of the companies. A *cognitive ecology*, as Tribble-Sutton say “are the multidimensional contexts in which we remember, feel, think, sense, communicate, imagine, and act, often collaboratively, on the fly, and in rich ongoing interaction with our environments.”²⁴⁷ Referring to Sterelny's work in turn Tribble states, in a more recent essay, that playing companies and the audience were building, through “distributed ecology of skills,”²⁴⁸ such structures “in an instance of cognitive niche construction.”²⁴⁹ Following this model, organisms construct environmental niches to which they then adapt; the processes of engineering the environment feed back to the organisms and transform them. A paradigmatic example is the dam-building activities of the beaver: changing the environment in which the beaver lives in turn influences the beaver's behavior and that of its offspring. Ecological psychologist James Gibson described the relationship between a form of life and the notion of niches as follows:

Ecologists have the concept of a niche. A species of animal is said to utilize or occupy a certain niche in the environment. This is not quite the same as the habitat of the species; a niche refers more to how an animal lives than to where it lives. I suggest that a niche is a set of affordances.

The natural environment offers many ways of life, and different animals have different ways of life. The niche implies a kind of animal [emphasis added], and the animal implies a kind of niche. Note the complementarity of the two.²⁵⁰

²⁴³ Colombetti, G., Krueger, J., 2015. “Scaffoldings of the affective mind.” *Philosophical Psychology*, 28 (8), 1157-1176, p. 1161.

²⁴⁴ Tribble, E., 2005. “Distributing Cognition in the Globe.” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 56(2),135-155.

²⁴⁵ Tribble, E., 2011. *Cognition in The Globe. Attention and Memory in Shakespeare’s Theatre*. Palgrave Mac Millan, New York, p 147.

²⁴⁶ See Tribble, E., *Cognition in The Globe, Attention and Memory in Shakespeare’s Theatre*; Tribble, E., 2017. *Early Modern Actors and Shakespeare’s Theatre*. The Arden Shakespeare, London-New York.

²⁴⁷ Tribble, E., Sutton, J., “Cognitive Ecology as a Framework for Shakespearean Studies.” *Shakespeare Studies*, 39, 94–103, p.94.

²⁴⁸ Tribble, E., *Early Modern Actors and Shakespeare’s Theatre*, p. 162.

²⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 4.

²⁵⁰ James J. Gibson, *The ecological approach to visual perception*, Psychology Press Taylor & Francis group, New York, 1979, p. 128.

Rietveld and Kiverstein's useful distinction between affordances and relevant affordances or “solicitations” is used here:

the affordances the environment offers are dependent on the abilities available in a particular ecological niche [...] the human ecological niche is shaped and sculpted by the rich variety of social practices humans engage in.²⁵¹

From the point of view of my research interest, the entire *Globe* could be seen as a scaffold of *playful sociomaterial practices*. It will be used as a simple starting cue to consider the constraints that a complex system can establish for a playful process. What is crucial for my purposes is that “the various environmental items in this example have not been adapted to a single individual [...] but to a group”²⁵² and the group that I am interested in, extends to all participants, including the roles that audience play in the process of collective attunement. The Tribble’s study is particularly interesting and it is no coincidence that the skill of playing roles is a central theme, it is a scaffold for the collective memory of a specific group of people, engaged in the practice of stage theater. Monsters, like ghosts²⁵³ (*intervention #3*), are collective agents of memory and operate by enacting particular sociomaterial aspects.

In extension to cognitive and sensorimotor skills scaffolded by the environment, Colombetti-Krueger developed a notion of “affective niches” that are “instances of organism-environment couplings (mutual influences) that enable the realization of specific affective states.”²⁵⁴ The way that things, places, and people can help regulate one’s emotional and affective states is most clearly elucidated in their example of the use of a handbag:

A handbag—including its contents—functions as a highly portable, self-styled collection of technologies specifically chosen for regulating affect: charms and tokens for good luck and peace of mind, which influence one’s appraisal of, and ability to cope with, specific situations; photos, assorted mementos (such as old theater tickets and restaurant receipts), snippets of notes, and letters from loved ones that bring about fond memories of individuals and elicit specific feelings; and small weapons or tools that affect one’s awareness of one’s action possibilities, which accordingly generate feelings of confidence, power, and security.²⁵⁵

By looking closely at examples from folklore rituals, Nazi propaganda, and contemporary art performances, the intention is to extend the notion of affective niches into the scaffolds of playful sociomaterial practices, which are called here *dynamic imaginative niches*, as

²⁵¹ Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., 2014. “A Rich Landscape of Affordances.” p. 326.

²⁵² Colombetti, G., Krueger, J., 2015. “Scaffoldings of the affective mind.” p. 1161.

²⁵³ Gordon, A., 2008. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, University of Minnesota Press; see *intervention #3*.

²⁵⁴ Colombetti, G., Krueger, J., “Scaffoldings of the affective mind.” p.1160.

²⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 1163.

means to regulate affective states and moods of a specific community on the long term; a form of play, that allows for communal emotional regulation in the face of remote, or future threats. To develop the understanding of these affective scaffolds better it will be adopted an enactive approach to playing as developed by Andresen and others.²⁵⁶ It will specifically hone in on environmental aspects that allow for the establishment of *affective trust* among participants. This notion of *trust*, it is suggested here, is an important environmental constraint for playful behavior to commence. This notion of *affective trust* is not uniform, nor neutral, it is relational and situated in the sociomaterial practice groups of people are engaged.

More precisely, the aim will be to try to observe how, in different historical contexts, the monster's figure has been used as a *form of trust*²⁵⁷ to produce a specific affective scaffold called here *imaginative dynamic niche*. The methodology to describe the trusted monsters in the situations they can be found will be a visual ethnography of a folklore ritual of a similar monstrous figure, the Schnappvicher, in radically different forms of play. In considering these public monsters is followed Ludwig Wittgenstein's in his insightful remarks on folklore in the work of James Frazer:

It is very strange to present all these practices, in the end, so to speak, as foolishness. But never does it become plausible that people do all this out of sheer stupidity.²⁵⁸

Meaning is to be found in the specificity and situatedness of the play. By means of a description of archival images of various periods and rituals, the attempt is to try to describe the specificity, non-objective and non-neutral character of participatory engagement and collective attunement. It will be found 'the monster' to be seemingly equally at home in a harvest festival as amidst a Nazi-parade. The aim is to describe the specific communities and situations of play that the monster sets in motion, to explore how it is possible to scaffold affect and cognition. By following it, a playful attitude will be activated so that we are transformed and immersed in unusual contexts.

2. Trusted Monsters

“on the seashore of endless worlds, children play.”

Tagore

²⁵⁶ Andersen, M. M., Kiverstein, J., Miller, M., Roepstorff, A., 2023. “Play in predictive minds: A cognitive theory of play.” *Psychological Review*, 130 (2), 462-479.

²⁵⁷ An alteration of Ingold's *form of fear* in “Dreaming of Dragons: On the Imagination of Real Life.” p. 737. The figure that I focus on here is the Schnappvicher, which is remotely based on the figure of the Dragon that Ingold elaborates on.

²⁵⁸ See Wittgenstein, L., *The Mythology in Our Language. Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*.

In the previous *transformative intervention* has been introduced *the monstrous chain* (Monsters – monsters – monstrous, or in other words ‘future threat – imaginative creature – transformative practice) as a specific creative practice to deal with remote threats through the form of science fiction, end-of-the-world-movies, performances, and folklore rituals. The *transformation*, through *transfiguration*, of threat into a monstrosity is a way of giving “form to fear”²⁵⁹ and collective anxieties.

By *transfiguration* it is meant here the act of altering the form and other aspects of the body or the environment through which an invitation for openness toward one’s field of affordances is enacted. Thus, to explore new affordances that lead to a process of *transformation*, in which habitual ways and the long-term sociomaterial practice can be altered. *Transfiguration is a means toward transformation*. For transformation in the face of potential catastrophes, future threats or other living altering events to take place, it is suggested here, it is crucial that a *transitional figure* is enacted through imaginative engagement with one’s surroundings (naturally including other people). This transfiguration not only gives a form to the ‘fear’ or ‘threat’ but sets into motion a form of play in which possible collective responses are being explored. This figure is a *trusted monster*. At present, it is suggested here that the notion of monsters is an extension of the scaffolding of the affected mind, extended to playful sociomaterial practices as a means of regulating the emotions of a specific community.

Play, as it is considered here, is understood as a practice that structures the mind-body-sociomaterial environment relations in the specific community involved in the activities. Within this *transformative intervention* it will be used the word ‘play’ in a broad sense like philosopher Johan Huizinga reckoned play an even older notion than culture:

however one’s understanding of culture, how incomplete its description, the animals did not wait on humankind, to teach them to play. In play, something “plays” along, that doesn’t immediately satisfy the needs for survival, that gives it meaningfulness. Every play is meaningful²⁶⁰.

Playing as a practice offers a way to render the possibilities the environment affords as ambiguous, or in other words, *one opens up to multiple affordances in the environment*. Like a glass that ordinarily is used for drinking out of, it can as well become a pendulum balancing on one’s nose, a dangerous projectile, a vessel for capturing flies, or a magnifying glass in the situation of the basic theatrical exercise described in the beginning, the possibilities an aspect of the environment has to offer can be tremendously rich when one is situated in a playful practice that invites exploring possibilities that in everyday life remain unexplored. Crucially, the others are part of the environment, and through play, we explore each other’s unexplored aspects. In other words, the ambiguity of the play opens up the boundless richness of possibilities an aspect of the sociomaterial

²⁵⁹ Ingold, T. “Dreaming of Dragons: On the Imagination of Real Life.” p. 737.

²⁶⁰ Huizinga, J., 1938. *Homo Ludens - proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur*. H.D. Tjeek Willink & Zoon N.V., Haarlem, pp.1-2.

environment has to offer. Through engaging in play, the normativity and habitual structure of the environment is altered, opening up possibilities for transforming practices in which we are involved. In the area of overlap between the playing of one and the playing of another person, there is a chance to introduce enrichments or distractions that may lead further and further away from norms that render appropriate behavior meaningful.

The possibility for enrichment emerges from the sociomaterial interweaving.

These monsters are a specific playful practice, a form of playing together, that allows for communal regulation in the face of remote or future threats. The monstrous play offers affective attunement intended not as a solution-based style of coping, but as a creative practice to navigate unexplored affective modes, or in other words novel embodied-coping-styles.²⁶¹ Looking at ‘monsters’ as such, one can read rituals in cyclical pastor-agriculture traditions, which are generally thought of as conservative, as transformative practices that help to reorganize the long-term sociomaterial practices that make up a community. As we will see this can be for the better or the worse. For playing with monsters to take place, the monster and other participants need to be in a state of

- (a) relaxation in conditions of trust based on experience
- (b) creative, physical, and mental activity manifested in play
- (c) the summation of these experiences forming the basis for a sense of self (in the world)

This sequence is taken from Donald Winnicott’s notion on playing and creative activity²⁶² through his work as psychoanalyst and therapist. The transformative process of creating “a form of fear” out of real-life remote, and often elusive threats, like disasters and crises, I think takes place along a similar sequence.

In his book *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott, following Johan Huizinga, states:

it is play that is the universal, and that belongs to health: playing facilitates growth and therefore health; playing leads into group relationships; playing can be a form of communication in psychotherapy; and, lastly, psychoanalysis has been developed as a highly specialized form of playing in the service of communication with oneself and others.

The natural thing is playing, and the highly sophisticated twentieth-century phenomenon is psychoanalysis.²⁶³

²⁶¹ Colombetti, G., Krueger, J., “Scaffoldings of the affective mind.” p. 1169.

²⁶² Winnicott, D. W., 1971. *Playing and Reality*, Tavistock Publications, London, p.75.

²⁶³ Winnicott, D. W., *Playing and Reality*, p. 56.

The British psychiatrist had already developed the dependence of play on a state of trust as described in 1971, back in his seminal essay *Transitional object and transitional phenomena* in 1953. As an example, Winnicott first describes early forms of playing by newborns. In these explorations of the “not me,” of the socio-material aspects of the world, by the child, it is the trustworthy and reliable relationship with parents that creates the possibilities for the child to explore the world through play. An infant’s tendency to weave ‘other-than-me’ objects into a personal pattern becomes vitally important for use at times of falling asleep and in defense against anxiety and fears. Parents recognize and safeguard these possibilities. Iconic is the stuffed animal, which, when it gets dirty, even smelly, the parents leave unwashed knowing that soap could introduce a break in the continuity of the child’s experience, breaking the “potential-space” in which illusion can take place, and rendering the stuffed animal meaningless. Both child and parents, from different perspectives, lay their trust in the stuffed animal to regulate the emotional volatility of the situation. In this space of unspoken trust, the stuffed soft material is friend, breast, animal, spit cloth, and projectile all at once. I want to draw attention to how this notion of trust is provisional for play, and makes space for “respected” interpersonal “illusions.”

It is an area that is unchallenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated...I am therefore studying the substance of *illusion*, that which is allowed to the infant (by the parents), and which in adult life is inherent in art and religion, and yet becomes a hallmark of madness when an adult puts too powerful a claim on the credulity of others, forcing them to acknowledge a sharing of illusion that is not their own. We can share a respect for *illusory experience*, and if we wish we may collect together and form a group on the basis of the similarity of our illusory experiences.²⁶⁴

Thus, for the monster considered here, to transform a situation into situated play there must be a sense of trust among the participants and in the environment in which none, monster nor others, claim the credulity of others. This “space of imagination” in which the playing takes place is neither questioned nor negotiated. For a specific monster to create these conditions, I underline that these are *trusted monsters*. Without trust, our fear of the monster would make us simply run away and forget about playing, thus missing the transformative opportunity that is a collective opportunity. As understood here, the possibility of transformation is given by the presence of others who are each an invitation and distraction for the other on the monstrous occasion.

These *trusted monsters* are enacted in times of communal anxiety (sometimes cyclical, like with the changing of seasons, for example, every solstice). As in infantile coping with anxiety, an explanation or a hypothesis of the situation does not suffice. Wittgenstein

²⁶⁴ Winnicott, D. W., *Playing and Reality*, pp.3-4.

described this as, in his remarks on Frazer's analysis of what I consider monstrous practice:

Every explanation is a hypothesis. But someone who, for example, is unsettled by love will be ill-assisted by a hypothetical explanation. It won't calm him or her.²⁶⁵

Beyond calming down, it does not afford space for creativity necessary to explore new ways of living to "outgrow anxieties." It also leaves no room for the possibility that the distraction of someone else could be an opportunity to accept unforeseen invitations. It is important here to emphasize the immediate sense of trust in play, in oneself and in the environment; this is a relational notion of trust. As Winnicott wrote, for a play to take place one must be in a state of "relaxation" in the condition of trust. This "state," is proposed here, can be understood as an "affective niche." From an enactive perspective, trust is thus immediately established in the actions we undertake in these self and collectively constructed niches. The scaffoldings of playful activities enable us to trust in opening ourselves up to new possibilities our environment has to offer us. In this sense, as we shall see, the monster is a trusted figure who opens us up to unforeseen invitations.

Recently Andersen et al. published an insightful paper on enactive play. Their notion revolves around a predictive processing framework²⁶⁶ of active inference, according to which the brain is a statistical organ engaged in a mechanism of prediction error minimization. According to the free energy principle, biological agents resist entropy in their interactions with a dynamically changing environment, maintaining themselves in expected sensory and physiological states given their embodiment and the niche they inhabit. In a nutshell, brains like ours are designed to minimize their long-term average surprise (prediction error) during our exchanges with the world. The more volatile the environment, the more this strategy fails, causing anxiety, stress and a feeling of loss of control. Very briefly, at first glance, this approach could lend itself to some criticism from an enactive address to cognition, but it may be an excellent ally with some modifications in order to specify that "the anticipating brain is not a scientist."²⁶⁷ Andersen et al. are on this track. The point is to consider Friston's proposal not in relation to the brain alone but to the brain-body-environment system. As already mentioned in the introduction, on the side of the ecological-enactive approach, an attempt has been made to incorporate Karl Friston's principle of free energy by framing it as the process of reducing the disequilibrium within the brain-body-environment system, i.e. as a reduction of the disattunement between the internal dynamics, which should be understood as the individual's states of readiness for action, and the external ones, relating to the landscape of affordances that are constantly changing due to the individual's own

²⁶⁵ Wittgenstein, L., *The Mythology in Our Language. Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, p.144.

²⁶⁶ Parr, T., Pezzulo, G., Friston, K. J., 2022. *Active Inference: The Free Energy Principle in Mind, Brain, and Behavior*, The MIT Press, Boston.

²⁶⁷ See Bruineberg, J., Kiverstein, J., Rietveld, E., 2016. "The anticipating brain is not a scientist: the free-energy principle from an ecological-enactive perspective."

action and independently of it. In this sense, Friston's free energy principle applied to living organisms is about the individual's *tendency toward an optimal grip* on the environment. Thus *prediction errors* –whose standard definition set aside here, is the difference between predicted and actual sensory input– “themselves trigger the right anticipatory pattern that makes the right affordance stand out and that minimizes free energy or, in more phenomenological terms, leads to an optimal grip on the organism’s environment.”²⁶⁸ In the phenomenological experience of the individual, the disequilibrium manifests itself as a solicitation and, at a different level of analysis, as a prediction error or disattunement between internal dynamics – action readiness – and external ones.

What particularly interests me for the purposes of this exploration is that Anderson et. al. propose play intended as a “variety of niche construction where the organism modulates its physical and social environment in order to maximize the productive potential of surprise.”²⁶⁹ In practice, humans play to surprise themselves and to try to respond to surprise. As Andersen et al. show, the unexpected element has to be not too predictable and not too overwhelming to enable a fun and rewarding play, and, crucially, playing is enjoyable because you reduce error prediction faster than expected that is you optimize your grip on the environment at a faster than expected rate. From an ecological-enactive perspective, what rate of change tracks are “affordance-related changes in states of action readiness.”²⁷⁰ An agent that is sensitive to rates of error reduction can optimize “on the fly” his engagement with a dynamically changing environment, and this allows him “to develop skills for adapting better and better to the unexpected, and search out opportunities for resolving uncertainty and progressing in its learning.”²⁷¹ Therefore, although the *search for or production of surprise* may seem to contradict the principle of minimizing the error of the predictive model, as Kiverstein and al say: “Sometimes it feels good for the agent to generate more prediction error in their interaction with the environment as a part of their epistemic foraging.”²⁷² We actively search for this potential space where errors are trusted, a ‘sweet-spot’, Anderson et. al call this behavior “slope chasing.”

Following Andersen and al., play is

a behavior in which the agent, in contexts of freedom from the demands of certain competing cognitive systems, deliberately seeks out or creates surprising situations that gravitate towards sweet-spots of relative complexity with the goal of resolving surprise. [...] play is experientially associated with a feel-good quality because the

²⁶⁸ Bruineberg, J., Rietveld, E., 2014. “Self-organization, free energy minimization, and optimal grip on a field of affordances.” p.9.

²⁶⁹ Andersen, M. M., Kiverstein, J., Miller, M., Roepstorff, A., “Play in Predictive Minds: A Cognitive Theory of Play.” p. 7.

²⁷⁰ Kiverstein, J., Miller, M., Rietveld, E., 2019. “The feeling of grip: novelty, error dynamics, and the predictive brain.” *Synthese*, 196, 2847-2869, p. 2866.

²⁷¹ Ivi, p. 2848.

²⁷² Kiverstein, J., Miller, M., Rietveld, E., 2019. “The feeling of grip: novelty, error dynamics, and the predictive brain.” p. 2863.

agent is reducing prediction error faster than expected. Such a strategy of seeking and creating surprising situations, we argue, is in many ways optimal for learning in that it not only maximises the speed at which learning takes place, but also enables optimised learning strategies, even in instances where opportunities to learn may be scarce.²⁷³

In this respect, the roller coaster ride is fun because they “create and resolve error faster than the family car.”²⁷⁴

With the monsters I follow through this visual ethnography, I want to draw attention to environmental aspects that allow for invitations for playful behavior. I emphasize that humans not only exploit environmental aspects in play but deliberately create them; we are not only “slope chasers,” but “slope-builders:”

Through these means, in a hunt for positive valence, children create and establish an environment tailored to the generation and further investigation of surprise and uncertainty. One could say that play is not only about epistemic foraging, it is also about epistemic farming.²⁷⁵

We actively create challenging situations for ourselves in such a way that we still *trust* in ourselves, others and the environment to play. What is relevant to the development of this exploration is the way “playful agents may create and establish an environment tailored to the generation and further investigation of surprise and uncertainty.”²⁷⁶ We will see how the element of surprise is regulated and amplified through monstrous practices by creating a trusted community of things, people, and places.

In the context of this *transformative intervention*, a monstrous practice is a “training for the unexpected”²⁷⁷ only if it enacts *trusted* surprises. The way Andersen et al. characterize the ‘sweet spot’ gives an opening toward a better understanding of the ways sociomateriality allows for play to take place. We will focus on describing the sociomaterial constraints of play, the scaffolded possibilities that enable us to constantly keep flexible, creative, and regulate our affective lives. These constraints are a scaffold of an immediate sense of *affective trust*. It should not be underestimated, that surprising ourselves may “galvanize the emergence of new behaviors which, if they persisted over time and were transmitted between individuals, could be added to the cultural repertoires

²⁷³ Andersen, M.M., Kiverstein, J., Miller, M., Roepstorff, A., “Play in Predictive Minds: A Cognitive Theory of Play”, p. 7.

²⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 8.

²⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 21.

²⁷⁶ Ivi, p. 1.

²⁷⁷ Spinka, M., Newberry, R. C., Bekoff, M., 2001. “Mammalian Play: Training for the Unexpected.” *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, 76(2),141-168, p.141.

of their populations.”²⁷⁸ Thus the transformation of the environment opens up possibilities for changing collective behaviors. In the long term, the “seemingly meaningless behavior” of play or as Huizinga called it, “that which doesn’t immediately satisfy the needs of survival,” helps us transform the practices that make up our lives. This means that regulating and amplifying the amount of surprise in play, will feedback and transform not only the individual but a group’s behavior.

3. A monster in the village square



[The following description of the enactment of the Schnappviecher is taken from a video clip named *Tramin*, of 1:10 minutes, uploaded on the 8th of March 2014 by Frank Pernstich, presumably filmed with a smartphone. Still taken at 0:06.

Seven monstrous figures around one and a half or twice the size of a human being swarm around each other. The monsters are made up of a horned and coated headpiece with large jaws lined with wooden or metal teeth. Under the head, a piece of rough linen

²⁷⁸ Andersen, M.M., Kiverstein, J., Miller, M., Roepstorff, A., “Play in Predictive Minds: A Cognitive Theory of Play.” p. 37.

makes up the body, though the feet and shoes are still visible. As they bounce up and down, their heavily toothed jaws close and open, making a snapping sound. A slit in the linen body sometimes reveals a face inside the monster's body.

The monsters are accompanied by men wearing hunters' heads. Armed with rope and sword, although clearly a less lethal interpretation of a sword, they try to contain the monsters in their bouncing and swarming. At around 0:08 seconds, there is an action by the swordsmen trying to slay the beast. On the right of the image, one of the monsters is lashed together with a group of people from the audience. As the video continues, more monsters gather around the group and push the captured boys and girls together. The other part of the audience is lined along the length of the street. The children in the audience bounce back as the monster bounces past and toward them.

The scene is set in what seems to be a backstreet in an Alpine village. The loud clapping of the jaws and something that sounds like rattling metal is heard throughout the scene. The laughing and excited 'ooehs' and 'aaaahhhs' amplify the feeling of the monsters being part of a festive parade passing by.]

The scene transcribed here is part of the Egetmann Shrovetide Pageant in Tramin that takes place every year before Ash Wednesday, as is one of the oldest carnival customs of South Tyrol. The Shrovetide Pageant is believed to be based on a pre-Christian tradition to chase away the winter and to welcome the spring.²⁷⁹ The monster described here is called a Schnappvicher. They are among several other 'wild men' that appear in the parade. One is covered by ivy (the strangler of trees, and green in winter) and the other is covered in rabbit skin with two holes for eyes (a corpse at the end of winter). The suggestion to explore Schnappviecher's monster was provided by the photography book *Wilder mann - the image of the savage* by Charles Fréger. It was the catalog for a photography exhibition in 2012 at the Musée international du Carnaval et du Masque in Binche, Belgium. The book explains how the hunters, named "butchers," slaughtered the Schnappviecher at every fountain as a gesture of the killing of winter. The amount of remaining European monsters gives the impression of a living tradition of pre-Christian beliefs and a 'culture of savages' in Europe that many generations before assumed to be lost. On closer examination the monsters that I recognized and knew seemed to be part of festivities where, as it seems to me, traditions are made into mere tourist attractions. The monsters, or "Wilder Mann," featured in the book are set against a background of the pristine European landscape. The context of the play they are part of is missing for the sake of rendering them visually comparable to isolated figures in nature. Reducing monsters to the ancient representation of Wild Mann, or vague figures of Winter to be

²⁷⁹ Fréger, C., 2011. *Wilder mann - the image of the savage*, Dewi Lewis Publishing, Heaton Moor.

chased away in the mind of the savage, or to a mere touristic and provincial carnival in the eyes of many art critics doesn't capture the lived experience of the monster in the past as well as in the present. There is no intent here to glorify folklore practices in any sense, yet regard them as part of a tremendously rich repertoire of practices that have helped and can help us transform the communities we live in, in the face of distant threats.

What is possible to first note watching these contemporary "walk-by" video recordings is the close physical contact and familiarity that seems to be at play. The audience is not focused on the "actors" and their "acting". Who plays the monsters are men from the village, dressed up and visually present every time the slit in the linen body opens during bouncing. This bounce allows the jaws to snap and, at the same time, gives us an emotional glimpse of the actor's face. In other words, jumping allows the Schnappviecher to produce his monstrous voice and at the same time shows to the audience who allows him to talk and walk. Whoever takes part in this procession rather than watching an actor perform might recognize a relative or acquaintance that gives his pace to a monster. The audience participates in being chased into laughter and loud screaming by the monsters that approach. Acknowledging the obvious, a villager has become monstrous.

3.1 Monsters in procession

In a wide variety of cultures, processions are one of the earliest forms of public performance. English anthropologist Victor Turner defined the procession as a public expression of *communitas*; it enacts a state of equality that fosters shared experience and is usually associated with a ritual of liminality and transformation²⁸⁰. Liminality literally is "being-on-a-threshold" (from Latin *limen* – threshold), it is a state of a labile existence, "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial."²⁸¹ The term liminality was coined by Victor Turner in reference to the works of Arnold van Gennep. The latter in his famous study of 1909, *Rites of Passage*, analyzing a large number of ethnological materials, defines the transitional rites through three phases: 1) the phase of separation in which the subject who is to be transformed is removed from his daily condition; 2) the threshold phase or transformation, where the subject is placed in the condition of experiencing completely new experiences; 3) the phase of incorporation, where the transformed subject returns to his daily life.

What interests me, using the words of the theatre's theorist Fisher-Lichte, is not a matter of considering "the transition *to* something and the resulting transformation *into* this or that"²⁸² rather it is about the transfiguration/transformation power of the passage itself that is crucial, for example, in the performative arts and is intrinsically connected with my *interventions*.

²⁸⁰ Turner, V., 1979. "Frame, flow and reflection: Ritual and drama as public liminality." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 6, 465-499.

²⁸¹ Turner, V. 1969/1979, *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, p. 95.

²⁸² Fischer-Lichte, E., *The Transformative Power of Performance*, p. 199.

Performance theorist Richard Schechner divides these early forms of public performance into two broad categories: “eruptions” and “processions.” An eruption is a static event presenting a “heated center and a cool rim.”²⁸³ It is characterized by spectators coming and going. An eruption occurs after an accident or during a predictable event such as an argument or the construction or demolition of a building. In contrast, a procession has a predetermined route and a known final destination. Within the route, there are pauses where performances are developed. Some spectators simply watch the procession go by while others join in. Participation in a procession is of a more active kind than in an eruption because, by its very nature, a procession requires a large number of partakers who, as they cross the public space, enact a transformation, thus enabling the emergence of the extraordinary at the heart of the ordinary. The spectators of the procession find themselves constantly changing their disposition in space. They can occupy a static position or move through various stations. Moreover, as the general flow of the procession defines porous but determined constraints, spectators may find themselves caught up in the general movement, moving then, like a swarm to the final destination.

The collective movement articulated within a processional route forms spatial configurations that define the relationships between individuals, between individuals and groups, and between different types of groups. Movement theorist Irmgard Bartenieff noted that these configurations define the constraints for developing action-interaction. Individuals within a certain group may be arranged in lines, rows, circles, or a variation thereof, and this basic configuration “will be fundamental to the nature of their confrontations with each other and their group's confrontations with another group.”²⁸⁴ According to Bartenieff, lines, in which participants line up one behind the other, constitute a configuration that results in a predominantly passive movement where someone follows a leader and so on in a chain that establishes minimal interaction. It is a configuration of compliance and control used with prisoners or slaves. In the row, on the other hand, individuals stand side by side. As Bartenieff writes “the row is a formation that conveys solidarity, advance and retreat, mutual reinforcement, often forming a wall against an intruder.”²⁸⁵ In the circle, finally, sharing can be even greater because it is possible to establish lateral contact and also a common relationship with the center of the circle. Here, moreover, it is easier to establish synchronicity: “A circle thus brings people together, it is one of the oldest forms of social congregation in dance.”²⁸⁶ Where processions stop at “processional eruptions,” the circle configuration tends to prevail. As writes Bartenieff:

Meeting front to front frequently triggers off a whole series of actions that may lead either to acceptance of each other or to fighting or to an attitude of extreme readiness to fight. Or, one may keep an adversary at reach space distance until a final resolution

²⁸³ Schechner, R. 2004. *Performance theory*. Routledge, London/New York, p.152.

²⁸⁴ Bartenieff, I., Lewis, D. 1980. *Body movement: Coping with the environment*. Psychology Press, Hove, UK, p.130.

²⁸⁵ Ivi, p.131.

²⁸⁶ Ivi, p.132.

of hostility enables each to enter the other's reach space totally for an embrace. Oblique interrelating, a deflection of straight confrontation, occurs occasionally between two participants. It lessens the tendency toward threat and fight because it offers more mobile options. An oblique approach may have a defusing function by combining head-on/forward with the sideward/opening. It allows for a wide territory around and in front, so it is less threatening than if the approach were just head-on/forward. These spatial attitudes are cooperative even without arm hand gestures. They are registered by the partner, whether or not he is consciously aware of the meaning or tendency of the other person's movement. In any interrelationship of two people, there are constant fluctuations between reach space and action space supported by locomotion. When the reach space is shared with particular effort elements by participants, the hostility, caution, or neutrality can be changed to trust.²⁸⁷

In a monstrous play, the participants are immersed in a whirlwind of trusted conflicts and resolutions – crossings, contacts, openings, inclusions, and exclusions – that allow them to experience *dynamic spatial configurations*. A participant can find himself as a passive member of a line that can turn into a row that becomes a circle or a line again. *Dynamic spatial configurations* are explored because there is a state of trust and creativity. In the military, for example, the rigidity of the row can only be suffered and perpetuated. When one plays with configurations in a monstrous procession, it is possible to explore their fluidity. In a monstrous play, there is the possibility to explore new styles of contact and conflict resolution.

Interestingly for my purposes, the new ability to reshape our way to meet the people around us is at once with the ability to face future threats thanks to a trusted monster. The indeterminacy and ambiguity of this play open up unexplored possibilities. Acquiring the ability to fluidize spatial conformations and thus reshape styles of contact and inclusion or exclusion is one and the same as following a monster through the alleys of everyday life. On the occasion of encountering a monster as a Monster, we agglomerate and revitalize a collective body. The space of the monstrous, in this case, acted out through a costume, also always opens up as an interpersonal space (such as in *intervention #4* where the monstrous is experienced right inside the monster's belly).

One can be educated to collectively attune through lines, rows, or circles but not to dissolve these spatial configurations and to recombine new and unmerged ones. The monster opens the space for a play that recombines different configurations inventing new ones.

The ambiguity of the monster, his call for *agglomeration*, *revitalization*, and *revolt* invites us to explore unexplored resolutions for trusted conflicts.

It is crucial to emphasize that switching between different configurations is not a reflexive choice in the strong sense, but it is a matter of being situated in a field of many soliciting affordances. In this sense “it is always possible to allow oneself to begin

²⁸⁷ Bartenieff, I., Lewis, D. 1980. *Body movement*, p.133.

something new, to be bound differently.”²⁸⁸ This means that we are not only attracted to the affordance we are engaged with but are also influenced to some extent by other significant affordances in the background. The structure of the field of affordances reflects the individual's dynamically changing concerns. As Rietveld points out in relation to his proposal of unreflexive freedom is that “the freedom characteristic of unreflective action is being responsive to a field of relevant affordances.”²⁸⁹ The transition from one spatial configuration to another in the monstrous procession particularly emphasizes how it is not based on explicit deliberation and, crucially here, also involves others that further dynamize the field of affordances.

3.2 Community monsters

Familiarity is the basis of *trust* in Schnappviecher's play. One gets the impression that the participant's trust in the play's outcome is based on trust by knowing *who* the monster is, not *what* the monster is. Watching the scene is possible to notice as people are squeezed and pressed together, which in many situations would lead to panic and anxiety. The play of the Egettman pageant offers the possibility of being closer to one another than normally acknowledged as comfortable or socially acceptable. In this sense, the monster alters the interpersonal safety distance.

Participating implies contact. This interactive physicality is a means to temporarily open up new possibilities for getting to know one another in the community. Reservations and appropriate distancing that takes place in everyday life are temporarily relieved. The monster bouncing and snapping his way down the street marks the moment in the play where the *trusted* can become *familiar* by the close proximity at which the monster brings one to another. Monster, spectator, and hunter forming a mashed-up temporal community, a *Frankensteinian agglomeration*.

Fear is often considered to be an ancient emotion that evolved to allow organisms to swiftly mobilize large amounts of resources in times of need.²⁹⁰ As an aversive and adaptive emotion significant to psychological well-being, fear prepares the body for actions of flight and retreat.²⁹¹ There is a certain distance at which a fight or flight reaction takes place,²⁹² this is accounted for by strangers or intruders. In social behavior, the proximity of the critical distance changes.²⁹³ When the other is recognized as familiar, the distance of approach shortens, even into touching with close relatives. In the monstrous play touching blurs the distinction between stranger/familiar, public/private.

²⁸⁸ Rietveld, E., 2013. *Affordances and unreflective freedom*. In Moran, D., Thybo Jensen, R. (Eds.) *Embodied Subjectivity*. Springer, New-York, p.31.

²⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁹⁰ Cannon, W. B., 1927. “The James-Lange Theory of Emotions: A Critical Examination and an Alternative Theory.” *The American Journal of Psychology*, 39, 106-124.

²⁹¹ Öhman, A., Mineka, S. 2001. “Fears, phobias, and preparedness: Toward an evolved module of fear and fear learning.” *Psychological Review*, 108(3), 483–522.

²⁹² Hediger, H., 1955. *Studies of the psychology and behavior of captive animals in zoos and circuses*. Butterworths Scientific Publications, London.

²⁹³ Hall, E. T., 1966. *The Hidden Dimension*. Doubleday, Garden City, NY, p.14.

Trusted strangers²⁹⁴ in the village all of a sudden come in close range; the physicality temporarily renders strangers as close relatives, thus transcending the belonging to their socio-cultural groups. In Schnappviecher's example, the experience is necessarily collective; no individual is isolated when facing the *form of fear*. As for the play to take place, the monster, made from wooden teeth and old linen cloth, is collectively acknowledged. New points of assembly and concentration of contact are constantly being created. In order to see the monster, one has to come into contact with others. In other words, to cope with a future threat, one has to touch and play with other people.

Here we can see *participatory sense-making*²⁹⁵ at work. Based on a notion central to enactivism, De Jaegher, and Di Paolo mean refer to

the coordination of intentional activity in interaction, whereby individual sense-making processes are affected and new domains of social sensemaking can be generated that were not available to each individual on her own.²⁹⁶

The co-construction of meaning during social interaction occurs through the coordination of utterances, gestures, and other bodily movements. The collective acknowledgment of the monster, in which no one lays a claim on its credulity, is meaningful as it creates the space in which *participatory sense-making* can exemplarily take place.

What is particularly interesting for the purpose of this *intervention* is that “through coordination of sense-making, one of the interactors is oriented towards a *novel domain of significance* that was part of the sense-making activity of the other.”²⁹⁷ In *monstrous practices*, there is a playful mutual modulation but without a specific purpose, collective surprises function as invitations in the creation of playful *participatory sense-making*, surprises that would not have originated in a condition of isolation. Interestingly, to emphasize the autonomy of social interactions, the authors state that the “interaction is not reducible to individual actions or intentions but installs a relational domain with its own properties that constrains and modulates individual behavior.”²⁹⁸ In the encounter in a narrow corridor between two individuals headed in opposite directions, for example, what often happens is that the two people who overcome each other instead of using complementary movements tend to move in a mirror fashion. This “specular dance” underlines that interaction is self-sustaining. At the same time, as De Jaegher and Di Paolo emphasize, although the corridor fosters coordination that leads the two individuals to move speculatively, it is always possible for the interaction to be interrupted, for example by someone stopping and inviting the other to pass. The autonomy that determines social interaction does not exclude the autonomy of the individual. I suggest that this “specular

²⁹⁴ See Rietveld, E., Rietveld, R., Martens, J., 2019. “Trusted strangers: social affordances for social cohesion.”

²⁹⁵ De Jaegher, H., Di Paolo, E. A., 2007. “Participatory sense-making: An enactive approach to social cognition.” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 6, 485-507; Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo have developed an enactive theory of social cognition through which they try to shift the focus to a view that is not exclusively defined by individual cognitive mechanisms.

²⁹⁶ Ivi, p. 497.

²⁹⁷ Ivi, p.498 (emphasis added).

²⁹⁸ Ivi, p.494.

dance” is constrained by the trust of the two individuals in each other and a more general sense of trust in the space they are moving through.

The notion of *participatory sense-making* could suggest that in a *playful practice* where we can explore the openness toward others, who play with the monster are dragged into a certain type of activity but not like a doll is dragged by those who simulate dancing with a puppet.

Beyond the physicality in this example, we see that the monster has become a trusted “form of fear.” Familiarity with one another scaffolds a form of “recreational fear”²⁹⁹ that is a fear intended “as an enjoyable activity.”³⁰⁰ We also recognize these “forms of fear” in the many blockbuster horror movies, thriller novels and interactive aggression in video games, in aggressive sports and free climbing. I am not so much interested here in the question “how is it that we derive pleasure from fear?”, towards which much of “recreational fear” research is aimed, but in describing the different “forms of trust” that enable us to play with fear and anxieties. “The monster” in this case, paradoxically, is less the scaffold of fear or anxiety, than it is a scaffold of trust and familiarity on which we will elaborate. This notion of trust is not the opposite of fear, anxiety, or stress in one’s experience of a situation, but a constitutive constraint to these experiences to be called “recreational.” Fear and trust are constituents of an unfolding movement.

Note that, even though the words “trust” and “familiarity” sound desirable, they are not regarded here as “neutral” or “objective,” a person can find oneself familiar and trusted with practices and world views that radically differ from the norms of the place or time one is situated. The way that the monstrous play develops redefines the trusted community, changes and unexpected surprises that occur in the individuals playing together, influencing each other, can lead to a renewed sense of community.

As part of a carnivalesque tradition, the monster makes much sense in an autarkic pastoral society that had to deal yearly with collective anxieties, like famine, diseases, or bad weather. Placed within a contemporary village, the future threats the monster represents, have drastically changed in the context of the globalized agricultural economy, so dependencies have changed, but the establishment of trust and familiarity in a village community can still have a place, in which the monster can play a role as a figure of the community.

3.3 The monster as a dynamic imaginative niche

As a means to build community, there have always been active members of the village that took the making and invention of the Wilder men figures to heart. On closer

²⁹⁹ As Marc Malmdorf Andersen of the Recreational Fear center at Aarhus University notes “an integrated understanding of fear as an enjoyable activity—what we call recreational fear—is still lacking” (Andersen, M. M., Schjoedt, U., Price, H., Rosas, F. E., Scrivner, C., Clasen, M., 2020. “Playing With Fear: A Field Study in Recreational Horror.” *Psychological Science*, 31(12), 1497-1510.)

³⁰⁰ Ivi, p.1.

reading, I conclude that the Schnappviecher in the video is part of the Traminer Schnappviecher group. The legacy of the contemporary Schnappviecher can be traced to Fischer Fritz. He led a group of friends from the oldest village districts in Tramin, Bethlehem, the last fifty years to revive the custom of Wudeln, meaning walking in a swarm. Slowly the snapping mechanisms have improved, the sounds and appearance of the teeth have changed, and deer antlers have changed into cow horns. Again the ‘form’ as such is less important than the group that considers the ‘creature’ as their collective creative achievement.

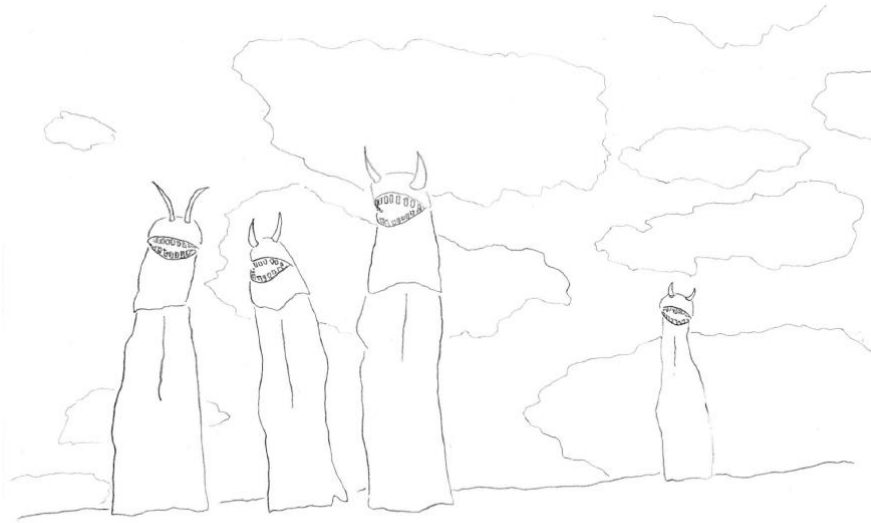
Looking at the monster as a *dynamic creative niche* to build the community, we can see how the Schnappviecher, and other Wild Mann, are not mere representations of some “ancient” and revived tradition, but are active vectors in giving form to the village community. The ‘lived monster’ doesn't give an explanation of what the monster is (a mere hypothesis) but gives us a notion of who gives form to a contemporary sense of agro-pastoral culture. The persistence of a village in a remote mountain valley depended on a community to remain flexible and changeable in the face of changes (diseases, natural disasters) that would occur. The “monsters” as community members are allowed to change and are actively remade and reinvented by community members. The slow transformation of the figure of the Schnappviecher, can be read as the transformation of the form of communal fears over time.

What is normally considered a conservative practice, a provincial form of folklore theater, can be understood as a *dynamic imaginative niche*. Over time, the making and the remaking of the costumes themselves, the inclusion of new materials, novel (often simple) technologies, the emergence of new skills, the change of the route based on the provisions and the urban change or the instances of citizens and traders, the motivations that lead the council to present the values of the event, the new graphics of the posters are all ways to give a shape to the monster.

By *dynamic imaginative niche* is meant here that niche constructed *for* and *through* playful practices with sociomaterial interventions activating an openness to unexplored affordances. Given the indeterminacy of imaginative invitations new and unexpected possibilities may emerge. For this playful practice to be enacted, it is crucial that the individuals and the group have a sense of trust in the situation as a whole. This sense of trust has to be intended as a constraint to openness to multiple affordances. Too many constraints (like the inclusion of only certain specific individuals) can lead to conservative forms of exploration, of playing, in which little new sense of the environment and the community is explored and surprises – with relative new coping skills – are minimized. Too few constraints might lead to individualistic explorations in which *correspondence* is lost and individual skills no longer lead to changes in group dynamics through playing together, or in other words educating each other's attention. No one, in this case, is in the way of the other who cannot be distracted in any way from his idiosyncratic exploration. Trust as such is a situated notion that constrains the form of playing that can be enacted by the people, the place and the things, like the Schnappviecher costume, involved.

Imagination as such can be scaffolded, and monsters are an extremely rich tool to enact collective or participative imagination, all of this is part of my exploration of *imagining for real*.

4. A monster amongst Alpine peaks



[The following description of the enactment of the Schnappviecher is taken from a video clip named Egetmann Umzug 25. February 1941, of 2:55 minutes, uploaded on the 8th of March 2014 by Unser Tiro on Youtube. The film was originally shot during the fieldwork of Prof. Dr. Richard Wolfram and edited by Dr. Lisl Waltner as part of the program of the Kulturkommission (Cultural Commission) of the Nazi regime, a sub-department of Heinrich Himmler's SS-Ahnenerbe (SS Ancestral Inheritance)].

The introductory title says "scientific film document recorded on 25.02.1941" (translated from German). The video is silent and introduces the main figures of the Egetmann Pageant one by one in short individually edited clips. Only from 01:34 till 01:44 in the background an audience appears, the cameraman is rather concerned following the slapstick-like act of the farmer's figures in the foreground. The other scenes are shot with the mountains and skies as background.

From 0:32 to 0:48 four Schnappviecher monsters appear. The camera is directed upwards and frames the monsters from below against

the clouds in a blue sky. The monsters appear to have coated heads with horns of ibex and cow. Their body is made of linen fabric which waves in a persistent wind. At first, one cannot see below the body, only at 0:41, when the four monsters march forward, the pants beneath the monster's body in the front show. At first, the monsters move slowly, but as they march forward, their jaws start snapping fiercely, showing the row of teeth and their tongues hanging from their mouth.

At 0:43 the Schnappviecher charged each other. The two on the front bang their heavily snapping headpieces into one another. Followed by the two in the back. The monsters attack each other before the image fades into black and an image of washing women on an ox car shot against a mountain ridge appears.]

The scene transcribed here is part of an archival film document kept at the University of Wien. It shows a special edition of the Egetmann Shrovetide Pageant in Tramin in 1941 for which the Italian government (under the regime of Mussolini) had to give special permission since the country was in a state of war.³⁰¹ On special request of Prof. Dr. Richard Wolfram the pageant was held with the goal of documenting the remains of an archaic Germanic culture supposedly preserved in the remote alpine villages. Cast against the eternity of the sky, the vault of the heavens where the gods of old reside, Wolfram's interpretation of the Schnappviecher attempts to represent the yearly village theater as an epic, glorifying its claims on an ancient Germanic racial lineage.

4.1 Eternal monsters

The monster here is no longer a transformative figure but a guardian of mechanical adherence to a pre-established, supposedly "ancient" ritual. It encourages the cultivation of the rigidity of "bad habits"³⁰² that stiffen the fluidity of existence. The Schnappviecher in this account becomes an exemplary heritage of conservative preservation,³⁰³ freezing a supposed timeframe as a "safeguarded" fact, such as its "ancientness." This monster becomes a guardian of the eternal, eternally guarding totalitarianism.

³⁰¹ Dow, J. R., 2018. *Heinrich Himmler's Cultural Commissions: Programmed Plunder in Italy and Yugoslavia*. The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.

³⁰² "Habits reduce themselves to routine ways of acting, or degenerate into ways of action to which we are enslaved just in the degree in which intelligence is disconnected from them. Routine habits are unthinking habits: "bad" habits are habits so severed from reason that they are opposed to the conclusions of conscious deliberation and decision" Dewey, J., 1916. *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. The Macmillan Company, New York.

³⁰³ See Rietveld E., Rietveld, R. "Hardcore Heritage."



[Imaginative visual description of the monster cast out into a landscape without human-scale, or in other words without social normativity, drawn by David Habets.]

Such “bad habits” scaffolded by Alpine Monster “put an end to plasticity, so that they possess us instead of us possessing them.”³⁰⁴ What a monster can do is let work our imagination that, as Fesmire says following Dewey “is the capacity to concretely perceive what is before us in light of what could be. Its opposite is experience narrowed by acclimation to standardize meanings.”³⁰⁵

Cultivating “bad habits” is a way to acclimate themselves to standardized meaning, losing imaginative and transformative power. The ossified image of transformation that occludes and blocks the path of transformation itself.

The process of externalization lays a claim on authenticity, instead of leaving intentions and meaning unspoken. Contrary to the first intuition mystification is a similar act in which the unspoken is claimed to belong to the realm of the unspeakable, in which its factuality remains to be claimed. Oppression can be framed here as the restriction of creative interpretation necessary for a monster to be means of communal coping. This is the monster of pre-given rules that, using the notions developed by Maiese-Hanna in *The Mind-Body Politic*, promote the *collective stupidity* which involves:

a relatively low level of social group coordination, creativity, problem-solving, and productivity, and correspondingly a relatively high level of group dysfunctionality,

³⁰⁴ Maiese, M., Hanna, R., 2019. *The Mind-Body Politic*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, p. 60.

³⁰⁵ Fesmire, S., 2003. *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics* Indiana University Press, p. 65.

aka destructive *Gemeinschaft*. Here constraint is not spread diffusely throughout the group and freely and mutually negotiated, but rather imposed top-down by those in power. [...] Such groups suffer from blind spots, limited perspective, and blind conformity, and resulting decisions do not reflect a full range of perspectives. Rather than being authentically collaborative and allowing activities to unfold dynamically, such groups force people into a particular mold and channel their activities toward some pre-specified goal.³⁰⁶

Top-down conformist activities are allowed that can bring directly to the *collective sociopathy* that is a more aggravated manifestation of *collective stupidity*:

Those who belong to, or are under the jurisdiction of, those institutions often lack the power to effectively push back, resist, or even offer their input. [...] At the same time, however, the “power elite,” consisting of those individuals who administer, control, and/or directly govern sociopathic institutions, may seem to be otherwise quite normal, sane, and socially well-adjusted individuals: they are “good, law-abiding citizens,” and they love, look after, and more generally care for their partners, their children, their extended family and friends, their dogs, and so-on, and so forth. But, in an operative sense, they are social-institutional sociopaths. The real-life, catastrophic paradigm of this, of course, was the Nazi bureaucracy’s increasingly effective, increasingly satanic “solutions” to the “Jewish question.” Eichmann, at least as portrayed by Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, was the perfect “company man” or “organization man” in the modern world’s most evil, murderous example of institutional sociopathy.³⁰⁷

4.2 The angry monsters of the *Männerbunde*

To understand better how Schnappviecher can enact “collective sociopathy” and the formation of “non-inclusive” communities, like the national socialist empire attempted to establish, I return to the question: “not *what* the monster is, but *who* the monster is”?

By establishing and preserving *what*, the monster leaves little room for the unplanned, thus stiffening behaviors and defining precise boundaries that definitely include or exclude. By directly grounding the answer in scientific fieldwork, Wolfram being part of Himmler’s program frames the monster as a symbol of an ancient and mythical Germanic empire. The monster is friend to its descendants and fiend to all others. The “what-is-the-monster” becomes fixed, there is no space for any ambiguities here, and so the ‘who’ is linked to its Germanic descendants that safeguard Germanic culture – as we shall see in

³⁰⁶ Maiese, M., Hanna, R., *The Mind-Body Politic*, p.76.

³⁰⁷ Ivi, p.78.

intervention # 3, the ambiguity of the features of a specific mask plays an important role in opening up to exploration of the situation in its totality, allowing what is not to be made present.

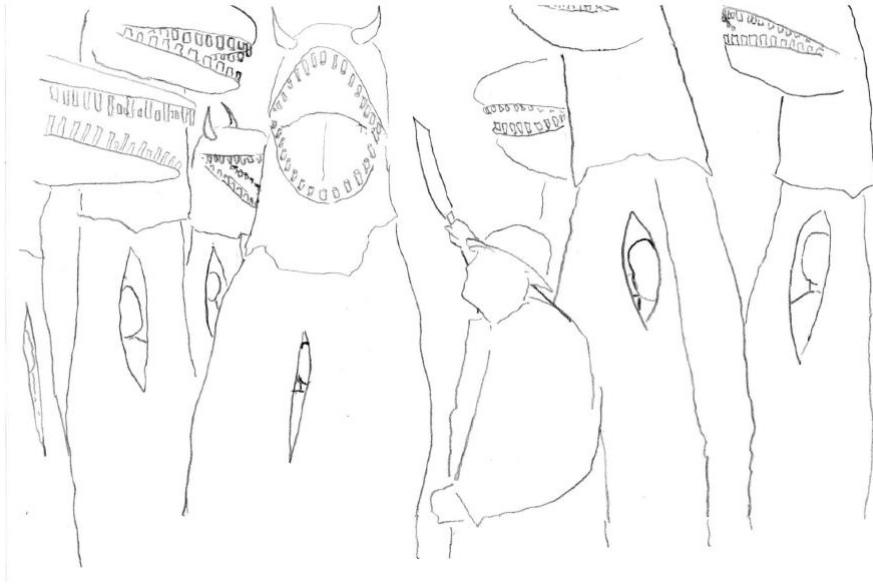
The “who-is-the-monster” is not only answered, but actively governed in this case. An active component of the establishment of the new cultural program of the Nazis was the pedagogic and educative programs, like the Hitler Jugend and the revival of a culture of Männerbunde, boys’ clubs. As Wolfram notes of the Schnappviecher and other Wild Men: “Das war Männersache”³⁰⁸ (It was a men’s thing). Further on, he admires the youthful energy and aggression of the scene describing it as an element of a lost “tribal warrior culture.” This lost tribal mentality was to be revived in the Männerbunde. Singing together, sports, and the enactment of Germanic rituals were pedagogical means to establish a conservative sense of community.

Among a select group of people, in this case, based on race, trust is established, the monster enacts the strife, the war, to ensure the preservation of its lineage. The material form of the costume of the monster did ample change, but I want to draw attention to the way of representation in Wolfram’s film. By leaving out the audience’s participation and the hunter figure that tames the swarm, the Schnappviecher are left to fight amongst each other. From 0:41 onwards the monsters snap at each other's bodies fiercely. An experience of communal anger that emerges from the ‘swarming behavior’ if left unattended by the huntsmen. The lived experience of the ‘actor’ in Wolfram’s film document is not one of encountering the village but of marching into a frame of eternity. Subtracted from a procession the monster does not invite trusted but unexpected encounters rather ossifies the “what” to the exclusion of the “who.” The uncertain and ambiguous space of the “who” is erased. The “who,” though well defined, always implies an uncertain space.

The constraints of the play can encourage extremely aggressive engagement and the monster can be one of the engineering elements of violence and exclusion.

It is important to notice that the potential for enacting aggression can also be seen in contemporary videos of the Eggetmann pageant.

³⁰⁸ Dow, J. R. *Heinrich Himmler’s Cultural Commissions*, p. 155.



[Close-up of group behavior of the swarming of the Schnappviecher, posted on Youtube under the name - Fasnacht in Tramin (Schnappviecher/Wudelen), uploaded on 23 Feb. 2017, still taken at 02:08]

The metal teeth of the moveable jaws of the monsters snap violently together. With every movement up and down of the heavy heads, the slits in the linen bodies open up, showing the exhausted faces of the carriers. Rallying together, facing each other, the intention seems to out-snap the others. The weight makes the carriers lose balance, snap into one another. The violent scene is amplified by one of the hunter's figures sticking his dagger into the mouths and bodies of the monsters. Exhaustion and violence seem to drive the enactment of the rallying monsters in the village.]

Group bodily coordination can open up a “shared bodily affective space” (Colombetti 2014, p. 201) in which perspectives are modified and new interpretive frames and habits of attention are formed.³⁰⁹

The slit in the costume acts in the “contemporary” recorded document as a frame of the face, amplifying expressions of aggression and fatigue. I think the slit on Schnappviecher's costume is a clue that if followed could lead to the exploration of a fundamental dynamic. The slit on the costume is certainly meant to allow the actor to look where to go, but at the same time, this window is fundamental to the dynamics related to the enactment of the playful activity. Watching where to go to not stumble is at

³⁰⁹ Maiese, M., Hanna, R., *The Mind-Body Politic*, p. 281.

one with the dimension of social scaffolding. Spatial orientation here emerges here as social orientation. One cannot but be intertwined with the other. In this sense, contrary to being a neutral material artifact, the monster finds itself clothed in affective musculature. The kinetic sensorimotor stimulation, faster heartbeat, increased blood pressure, and rising levels of lactic acid in the muscle are all aspects of the *bodily affective style*³¹⁰ of the performance, which in turn characterizes and increases the rhythm and intensity of actions. Play is established in rallying and fighting with others.

Aggression, fatigue, and fear are amplified in this form of play. It is a way of establishing hierarchy, which Wolfram admired in the swarming of the Schnappviecher, for initiating a revival of a Germanic tribal warrior culture. Here a “social manifestation”³¹¹ of aggression is given a form. As Colombetti-Krueger write:

members of a group may provide ongoing resources and feedback that scaffold the experience and expression of emotions unique to a certain context, irrespective of the individual’s intentions and deliberations.³¹²

By governing who is allowed to enact the monster, by the revival of Männerbunde in this case, exclusion and aggression against others are amplified by the play. Playing Schnappviecher, as many other practices under national socialist authorities, is constrained by who modulates and plays with others, things, and the environment. There is no longer an open-endedness or surprise to the play since it is set up for the conservation of the predetermined community. As I have already mentioned but as we will see in more detail in intervention #4, the surprise is a crucial element in an enactive conception of play. A “right amount” of surprise could foster exploration³¹³ and induce a sense of autonomy in the player.³¹⁴ Reducing surprise is therefore in clear opposition to a playful process linked to creativity and innovation³¹⁵ and is instead connected to the mechanics of strenuous and heteronomous work.

Transformation of the play itself, which would emerge from playing as can be seen in the slow adaptation of the costumes above, is here governed by authority. The authority of changing the form of the monster to fit its intents is underlined by a letter Gisela Schmitz-Kahlmann, the secretary to the Reich German Cultural Commission to a friend in Innsbruck Gisela Mevensky, and attached a five-page document, marked “confidential,” describing the activities taking place in South Tyrol.

³¹⁰ Maiese, M., 2016. “Affective Scaffolds, Expressive Arts, and Cognition.” *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 359, p. 1.

³¹¹ Wilson, R. A., 2004. *Boundaries of the mind: The individual in the fragile sciences*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

³¹² Colombetti, G., Krueger, K., “Scaffoldings of the affective mind.” p. 1167.

³¹³ Andersen, M. M., Kiverstein, J., Miller, M., Roepstorff, A., “Play in Predictive Minds: A Cognitive Theory of Play.”

³¹⁴ Heimann, K., S., Roepstorff, A., 2018. “How playfulness motivates – putative looping effects of autonomy and surprise revealed by micro-phenomenological investigations”, *Frontiers in Psychology*, Special Issue, 9, 1704.

³¹⁵ Bateson, P. and Martin, P., 2013. *Play, playfulness, creativity and innovation*. Cambridge University Press, New York.

Just like the house and the settlement, the [folk] costume of the people is a sign of his type. Precisely South Tyrol is exceptionally rich in beautiful and old costume styles that are still in use today. Certainly costumes that our ancestors wore do not meet the requirements of modern contemporary society. However, when the sources have been collected from which the foundations and their development can be established, then a new folk costume will come from this rootstock, and it will be a testimony to a conscious national tradition.

A nationalist tradition could be engineered, as the secretary of Himmlers' cultural program writes, to “*meet the requirements of modern contemporary society*” and as “*a testimony to a conscious national tradition.*” Transformation of the community is no longer allowed to be a form of participatory play but relies on a design of predetermined intentions. It is important to note that the monsters described here are relatives, yet scaffold radically different forms of situated trust. The Nazi monster builds “cognitive walls” in which the subjects feel “stuck in rigid and inflexible habits or established ways of thinking.”³¹⁶ To be “comfortably” stuck in crystallized practices closes off possibilities for personal and collective transformation: a monoculture of bad habits.

5. Pioneering monsters



³¹⁶ Maiese, M., Hanna, R., *The Mind-Body Politic*, p. 301.

[Drawing by David Habets based on a still from Wietz, H. (1974) Joseph Beuys: *I like America and America likes me*, VHS, Ren. Block Gallery New York, Berlin posted on Youtube on the 9th of July 2021 still taken at 28:16.

Covered in a blanket of felt, blinded by covering its eyes, the monster traveled from Europe toward the United States of America. The monster is transported in an ambulance. On arrival, it is wheeled into an elevator and moved upstairs. The monster enters a white-walled gallery space behind a wire fence to encounter a coyote. An intimate dance unfolds where the monster attempts to stay upright while the felt cloth of its body is torn away, piece by piece, by the coyote. The monster covers itself in the scraps of its body and is let blindly into the vehicle again, on its return journey towards Europe.]

Joseph Beuys, as known, did not wear a Schnappviecher costume when performing his cross-continental performance *I like America and America likes me* in 1974. From this point in the text, thanks to David's drawings, I give myself the freedom to play with my own methodology and alter the selected footage by inventing alternate stills from my imagination.

It should be made clear throughout this *intervention*, in no way is intended to equate artistic performances with folkloric ones. The aim is to explore the imaginative power of extraordinary figures – monstrous – and their role in our form of life. Similarly, I do not believe in the overlap between art and life, but through this imaginative play, it has attempted to shed light on the alienation of the extraordinary and the revolting power of its intervention in the heart of the ordinary. The distinction between life and artistic practices is crucial in order to keep the transformative power of the latter intact. Between artistic practices and what I call monstrous practices, there is a family resemblance that will be defined in the course of this thesis and that I will make clear, especially in *intervention #4*.

The meaning of Beuys's iconic performative artwork and of its constituents, like the felt and the coyote, has been the focus of careful analysis, and much has been written and said, but my specific interest here is with the allocation of this blinded transfiguration. In the white gallery space, two transformative figures intertwined with each other are present. The first is that of the Navajo shaman, to whom Beuys explicitly refers³¹⁷, who through particular spiritual forces is able to bridge the animal and human world, even modifying the cosmic order. The other figure is the coyote, which, in native American legends, is depicted as a divinity that embodies the power of creation and transformation, capable of assuming human form; a hero who rebels against social conventions. The coyote was able to talk to the fences and convince them to let him through; its power concedes in the crossing of borders by transforming itself. By European colonizers, the

³¹⁷ Schneede, Uwe M., 1994. *Joseph Beuys*. Die Aktionen, p. 336.

coyote was no longer characterized as a deity of adaptation and subversion but as a purely cunning "mean coyote" to be hunted. Beuys places himself as a shamanic figure next to the coyote of the 'pre-European coyote'. Without ever touching American soil driven from the airport to the tunnel in an ambulance, to 'heal' a festering wound. In Beuys' own words: "One could say we ought to make restitution to the coyote. Only then can this wound be healed."³¹⁸ On the video documentation, there appears not to be an audience, but in the recollection of the event it is clear that a small group of people was able to follow the performance looking through the fence.³¹⁹ Fenced off from the intimate play between the felt figure and the coyote. Looking at David Habets's illustration I see a cloaked *Wilder Mann*, traveling to another continent, a blinded European encountering a coyote in the white cube of a gallery space.

Beuys resembles a *pioneering monster*, a cosmopolitan wild man that roams freely in an attempt to reconcile newly assembled communities. As a monster has no community constraints related to fears such as anxiety about a good harvest. This monster finds itself traveling along globalized trade routes to enact a space in which anxieties of inequity caused by colonization, enslavement and the disruptive globalized economy of the 70s could be reconciled with.

In *I like America and America likes me*, contrary to, for example, Beuys's *Information Action* lectures held in the same years, the audience is separated from the coyote and artist by the wire fence. Beuys clearly presents a performance to be looked upon, not one to participate within. Even if the coyote is the figure that can cross boundaries, the *pioneering monster* is raising a barrier to separate, isolate and segregate. In opposition to fundamental features of performance art, actor-spectator exchange and the dynamization of the dichotomous subject-object and seeing-touching pairs,³²⁰ here a split is strongly sanctioned that returns the viewer to a passive role in which one looks but does not touch. The viewer, as well as the monster, is segregated.

In this sense trust for the play to unfold, is solemnly imbued in the artist's abilities, in the act of facing the wild animal. In the figure resembling somewhere between a circus tamer, a clown, and a "monstrous shepherd," this one is feeding a *personal monster* with which we will not come into contact. The audience experiences a form of "recreational fear" in the anticipation of the artist not to get injured by the allocated animal in the scene, still the coyote remains a source of constant uncertainty and surprise for Beuys. The performer is taking, by separating us from the place of action, all the risk of surprise and we are left only to watch.

Surprise and uncertainty are amplified by Beuys's skillful education of the attention of the audience but not by an active audience itself. There is no room here for *education by distraction*, where the other interrupts our usual way of coupling ourselves to the environment. Here the fear of the possible injuries that Beuys may suffer constrains us to focus on his performance to the exclusion of distraction as an unexpected encounter, scaffolding for less glaring aspects. We may also be alone in the face of this performance: alone in the face of a monster that takes risks for us.

³¹⁸ Tisdall, C., 1988. *Joseph Beuys Coyote*, Schirmel/Mosel, Munchen, p. 10.

³¹⁹ Ivi, p. 228.

³²⁰ See Fisher-Lichte, E., *The Transformative Power of Performance*.

The trust in which this form of play is based is in the artist solemnly, not in a temporal relationship between the artist and the audience. To understand this better I want to draw attention to the space, or architecture in a wide sense of the word, into which the allocation of the monster is set.

5.1 Asymptotic participation

What is elicited in the video documentation is the unseen “environ” in which the performance is situated; the airport, the airplane, the highways along which the ambulance speeds, a possible traffic jam, and the freight elevator slowly moving up and down. In these transitory spaces – emblems of the transformation that only Beuys undergoes – the visitor is characterized as a passerby, cut off from the possibilities of forming a persistent temporal community.

The video shows Beuys walking unconstrained by by-passers in the odd activity of walking and covering his eyes with his hands on arrival and similarly on departure. The lack of response of the others to Beuys shows how the play is actually confined to the trust embedded in the gallery space. All this would seem to suggest, forcing a little speculation, that on these paths, on the trajectories of “real life”, there is no room for monstrous plays. We put reality on one side and imagination on the other. Faced with harried, busy passers-by play is a childish or otherwise marginal issue. Yet, as is well known, “play is not the opposite of work but of depression.”³²¹

As a cross-continental performance, it is exemplary for the constraints of the cosmopolitan architecture in which the contemporary art scene is situated. In the transitory spaces of contemporary art, the museum, the galleries and perhaps most notably the Biennales and Art Fairs, an artist is trusted for his or her abilities to play in radical ways with the constraints of contemporary culture but as so scaffolds an asymptotic participation in the way it constraints the persistence of temporal relations formed in its performances. In this trusted space “the monster” brings together a cosmopolitan community engaged in the practices and playful activities of the arts. As the monster roams freely through the world, it scaffolds fears and anxieties that become universalized, cast into a planetary sphere and global crisis. Beyond the capabilities of the temporal collective facing these threats, its group efficacy, the monster is alienated, remaining the center of attention instead of becoming a trusted peripheral figure.

³²¹ Sutton-Smith, B., 1997. *The ambiguity of play*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p. 198.



[In memoriam of Hermann Nitsch: 29 August 1938- 18 April 2022]

Around the time I was writing this section, I learned of the death of Hermann Nitsch, a pioneer of the performing arts in Europe. Founder of Viennese Actionism, he was a very controversial figure. Since the early 1960s, Hermann Nitsch's various actions have brought performers and participants into contact with taboo objects such as blood and feces and actions such as gutting and wallowing in entrails, eating meat, and drinking wine.

Nitsch was a master of eliciting fears and gruesome obscurities of our everyday lives. His Theater of Orgies and Mysteries performed in Zac in Palermo in 2005, is exemplary of how the monster, as a trusted figure, gets ripped apart. Uncloaked and slit open, its intestines and ribcage are exposed and on display.

In this imaginary version of the play, David Habets drawing shows a Schnappviecher quartered. The figure of trust is sacrificed as a means of physical and sensual arousal. The audience is covered in the drops of his blood and intimately experiences the end of his life. Through violence and disgust, Nitsch extends the limits of what can be trusted in an exhibition space. I understand this scarification as a form of "broken" play. The room for "respected interpersonal illusions" of our trusting monster disappears here, and with it a transformative space in which the audience can inhabit together with its monsters.

Is quite impossible to become monstrous and so rather than being freed, the monsters are swallowed by the monster ripped. It is

not possible to *agglomerate* themselves - everyone is too busy reckoning with blood and intestines - let alone *revitalize* - being squeezed into this ritual leaves no room for revitalizing practices - but only to be *revolted* but without *revolt*. This monster wants all the attention and leaves us shocked but not monstrous.

Shock within the context of the art gallery or museum can in itself be a means to reorganizing life, but acts along different lines as the trusted monsters I am trying to describe.]

The alienation, removal, or outcast of monstrous figures, that have been with us in many forms for a very long time, is symptomatic of an understanding of art that looks upon its practices as segregated from everyday life. It is exemplary for an understanding of a “play as not part of ‘ordinary’ or ‘actual’ life. As a departure from the temporary atmosphere of activity with an intended purpose”³²² as Huizinga wrote. Or as Tim Ingold writes in *Imagination for Real*:

it is thanks to the opposition (of imagination and reality), so often assumed in our secular era, that reality comes to be identified with objective fact, and imagination with fiction or fantasy.³²³

The aim is to situate “monstrous play,” and with it, contemporary art practices, in a reality that is admitted to

a world that is not already precipitated out, into fixed and final object, but launched into the ever-flowing currents of formation; a more generous understanding of imagination would allow it continually to overflow the limits of conceptualization and representation, into unmapped realms of conscience and feeling.³²⁴

The words “fixed, final limits” are the constraints that allow for monstrous play to be a transformative playful practice in our everyday lives. By describing various situated monsters my aim is to show how playing depends on fixed limits of interpersonal trust, as an environmental constraint, that is preliminary for transformative play to take place. This trust extends from a ‘trusted collective imaginary’ into everyday situations.

³²² Huizinga, J., *Homo Ludens*, p. 12.

³²³ Ingold, I., *Imagination for Real*, p. 6.

³²⁴ Ivi, p. 4.



[Drawing by David Habets based on a still from the video *backstage Steve McQueen, Biennale di Venezia* posted on Youtube on the 12th of march 2009 by BNPVY, still taken at 2:58 minutes.

The scenes show the production of Steve McQueen's *Giardini* made in 2009 as commissioned by the British art council to represent the United Kingdom in the same year.

In the video, we see the dog actors arriving by boat at the Giardini della Biennale in Venice. The Giardini is void of visitors; it feels empty and desolate with incidental piles of trash and leftovers from the previous biennial. Everything is abandoned, locked away. In moody foggy weather, we see the dogs being directed to roam in the absence of the Biennial. There are few signs of human life, other than the directions and interplay between a dog trainer and dogs to stage the absence of human presence in McQueen's video.

The monsters are drawn into an absence of scenery. Cut off from everyday life the Giardini becomes a void vessel, which has provocative poetry in its own right, yet frames creativity only as a form of meaningful play at the instances of its staging.

Playtime has been defined a priori and isolated. There is a time for play, and play, with all its imaginative invitations, seems to be definitively excluded from everyday life.]

6. Disappearing monsters

The slit on the Schnappviecher's costume seems to be a promise: it's not just about *what* is the monsters; what matters is to look at ourselves and the environment differently *thanks to* a monster. As mentioned, that opening in the fabric is certainly meant to allow the actor to look where to go. At the same time, this window is fundamental to the dynamics related to collective attunement.

This promise can be broken in art fairs, and fixation on the object – or moving object – can take over. Here the *what* of the monster is crucial. In an institutional site of the appearance of monsters – often objectified and commodified –, a strategy for claiming their presence as community builders is to let them disappear. This can be done perhaps by playing with the audience's fear of missing out on something within the market offerings so busy producing novelty. In the context of an art fair, hiding is monstrous.

It seems to me that Tino Sehgal's "constructed situation" presented at the 2013 *Venice Biennale* works on the fear of missing out and at the same time on the promise of the Schnappviecher.

Entering the space at the Giardini Della Biennale is quite impossible to catch where the piece is. In the hall where the performance is supposed to be, there are sculptures, paintings hanging on the walls, and people all around. Nothing suggests where to look to meet Sehgal's work: no lighting nor a particular arrangement of space that would invite those who visit this room to a particular spectatorial posture. When you get to see the interpreters, what you see is one of the performers sitting on the ground that makes sounds, and produces a faint rhythm while the other reacts to these stimuli by moving his body through small movements on the floor. The performers are in a condition of mutual listening and they seem to transfigure each other.³²⁵

When you get there finding them performing, you get a modular piece that everyone is producing in the space to get there. You find enacting there the "instructions" that you are unknowingly following to enact the performance collectively. This is a delegated performance, and you are part of it.

What is crucial here is how you get there. The inability to distinguish the performers from the crowd requires the visitor an effort. What the Schnappviecher suggests to us is that meeting this crowd is the performance. Obviously, again, there is no link, but in the development of my reflection, I believe there are connections between these distant yet familiar fields.

To get to the performers, you look around and use the invitation offered to you by another visitor's posture or activity as a possibility to get to the performers. Once you get to the performers, you realize that you are observing what you have done to scout them out, get in touch with someone else and thus allow yourself to be transfigured. You thus consult the "instructions" for a game you were playing without knowing it: you have never been alone in meeting what you seek. You are in the midst of a *mise en abyme* of transfiguration. You can get there and let this "constructed situation" emerge if you are not overwhelmed by the commodification of the monster that invites you to run after the

³²⁵ For a different lecture of this performance see Noë, A., *Strange Tools*, pp.80-82.

novelty. Sehgal plays with this fear because if you were dominated by that, performance would not emerge. And, by playing with this fear, he interposes the presence of others between you and the achievement of a predetermined goal. Those who arrive in that room probably know that performance is in progress and might think, at a first distracted glance, that it has been moved; those who do not know might simply walk through the space without noticing it, and finally, those who do notice it might be disappointed by such low-fidelity technology and move on: there is not even any actual music, but only a performer who produces sounds with his mouth, without any special skills. All it does is transfigure the other.

[transformative intervention # 3]

Ghostly affordances

In the post-colonial era we no longer burn masks, but we ignore them, or store them safely in museums.

Davis Wiles

To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories.

Avery F. Gordon *Ghostly Matter*

For those who have stayed, their prison is their never seeing.

I am the little thing that lives in the house, Oz Perkins

1. Intro



[*The Beekeepers and the Birdnester*, c.1567-68. Pen and brown ink on paper. Pieter Bruegel the Elder. National Museum of Berlin, Cabinet of Engravings.

In the foreground are three figures wearing long hooded cloaks and basket masks. One of these has a beehive under his arm, another on the far right is trying to open one, and another in the center seems to be heading toward the first. At the top right, a boy in a tree has his back on us. To the right is a beehive under a curtain and one in the foreground is also to the right lying on the grass. A bell tower stands out to the right behind a house or barn. A watermill, indicating the proximity of a settlement, is visible just below the beehive held by the first figure on the left. The hives appear to be made of wicker with a lid at the bottom.

Face masks are made from woven basket bottoms. The masks and beehives appear to be made of the same material. In practice, it appears that beekeepers cover their faces with beehives themselves.

Their identity is inextricably intertwined with the practice in which they are engaged.

The mask obliterates the face, and dilutes the individual in the sociomaterial environment, allowing the practice and the environment to emerge and impose themselves on our attention.]

Looking around carefully is a way to pick up traces that we usually miss, invitations that remain daily underutilized and that could potentially alter our field and reshape our way of living. Some practices are meant to make present what we could not see before, what we were precluded from seeing. This is the case with the enacted mask.

I will explore here the mask as a tool that allows transfiguration in the context of reorganization practices. For “transfiguration” it is meant here the act of altering the form and other aspects of the body or the environment through which an invitation for openness towards one's field of affordances is enacted. Thus, to explore new affordances that may lead to a process of transformation, in which habitual ways and in the long-term sociomaterial practice can be altered. *Transfiguration is a means toward transformation.* A mask is an element of *monstrous practices*, that, as it came to light during this thesis, are those practices through which it is possible to transform and reorganize our form of life, foster cross-fertilization processes, and open new possibilities.

“I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper”³²⁶

The worn mask alters the situation and connects “different worlds” and “other possibilities” to this world. Its transformative power allows us to see the environment in which we live differently.

My starting point will be the analysis of the mask as enacted in the context of the Greek theater of the 5th c. BCE (2). In this way, I will be able to rely on a precisely situated model of the mask. The fine-tuning of this model will allow me to consider some particular characteristics of the enacted mask; a mask animates the environment (3) and is an opportunity for us to grasp ourselves as nested, situated in the unfolding of activities (4). Through a concrete example, I will try to suggest how these characteristics emerge (5). At this point, I will have defined terms for trying to focus on what I call *ghostly affordances* thanks to the suggestion provided to me by sociologist Avery Gorgon. This will allow me to consider the mask, that foregrounds our practices, as a powerful ally tool of the ghost understood as a social figure (6). In the last paragraph, I will present the mask created in collaboration with David Habets, *Infinity Pool*, a *real-life thinking model* that should continue with other materials the purpose of this exploration (7).

³²⁶ Shelley, M., *Frankenstein, annotated for scientists, engineers and creators of all kinds*, p.193.

2. The ambiguous Greek tragic mask

It has been shown that infants are particularly sensitive to faces. Nine minutes after birth, babies reveal an attentional preference towards them, at around 12 days of age they can already imitate expressions, and at three months they can distinguish between different faces³²⁷. This scientific evidence emphasizes that human beings depend on the facial affordance of others for normal social interaction. A face may constitute, for example, an invitation to have a chat or simply to stand silently waiting in a supermarket queue.

The ability to express or recognize emotions based on facial expression is, in addition, a significant indicator of normal cognitive development. The face has been defined as a 'motor exposure board'³²⁸ as it contains hundreds of muscles capable of generating several easily identifiable macro-expressions and a much larger number of apparently imperceptible micro-expressions.

Within a social interaction, the face is in a state of almost constant movement. It thus constitutes a fundamental tool in interpersonal coordination, so why do humans often use a mask in some contexts?

In the performative field, he who wears a mask, by transfiguring his or her own figure, eliminates for himself a powerful means of expression and for those around him a sociomaterial invitation crucial for understanding what is happening. The wearer is thus forced to use other means of expression usually unused or little used and forces the spectators to explore the context more carefully to assign meaning to the enacted mask. At the same time, the mask is also to be regarded as a *sensory deprivation* – it often eliminates peripheral vision and occludes full vocal articulation – that amplifies further sensory capacities of the actor, thus constituting an occasion for the questioning of the usual personal experience of one's own identity – the elimination of the peripheral vision of the mask in the tragic theater of the 5th century B.C. was an invitation for the *coreuta* to coordinate with the others through bodily contact, the rhythm of dance and the verses.

The starting point for this intervention is provided by the tragic mask that operated in classical Greek theater in the 5th century B.C., which constitutes the earliest theatrical form of which we possess complete works. This mask will be the model that I will use to develop this reflection.

The Athenian drama had a close relationship with the cult of Dionysus, a deity known first and foremost for his shamanic practices involving drunkenness, ecstasy, and loss of self. The cult of the god, already present in Greece from the 6th century BC, was linked to street processions, masking, extreme costumes, obscenities, singing, and dancing. In this sense, the origin of the Greek theater must therefore be thought of from processions rather than the construction of a building.

³²⁷ Simpson, E.A., Murray, L., Paukner, A., Ferrari, P.F., 2014. "The mirror neuron system as revealed through neonatal imitation: presence from birth, predictive power, and evidence of plasticity." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 369.1644, 1471-2970.

³²⁸ Skoyles, J.R., 2008. "Why our brains cherish humanity: Mirror neurons and colamus humanitatem." *Avances en Psicología Latinoamericana* 26(1), 99-111.

The original festival of Dionysus Eleutherinus dates back to at least 530 B.C. and primarily featured Dithyramps, choral songs to Dionysos sung by large male choruses. There is no evidence about when tragedy was included, but we know that tragedies were performed there at the beginning of the 5th century. Then, in the middle part of the century, comedies were added. Initially, most probably, the performance space consisted of a leveled area above the sanctuary, erected on the south-eastern slope of the Acropolis, with a wooden tribune that took advantage of the hillside to host the audience. Around 510-500 BC, both the performance area (*orchestra*) and the seating area or “place of vision” (*theatron*) were enlarged and improved. More improvements were undertaken again around 430 BCE.

The Festival opened with a large procession attended by foreign delegations from the allied states. It ended at the sanctuary of Dionysus Eleutherius, where at least a hundred animals were ritually slaughtered in front of the temple, just below the theater’s site. The program included a day of dithyrambic choral performances, then three or four days of tragedies, each ending with the performance of a satirical drama, and finally a day when five comedies were presented.

In the last years, there has been an ongoing rethinking of the *theatron* (“place of vision”) no longer intended as an architectural space but conceived in terms of its position and relationship to its surroundings and as a viewing place erected at the terminus of a great ritual procession.³²⁹ So the “place of vision” is not to be understood in relation to the modern idea of a playhouse where spectators gather to watch a play, but rather as the place open to the surrounding where a procession dedicated to the god ends, that is, that place where you get there by walking, dancing singing with others outdoors and not that building where the seats have already been assigned. According to recent findings, no stone seats were erected in a predetermined place, but movable wooden ones were used around the site.³³⁰ The Theatre of Dionysus in Athens could contain no more than 5000-6000 spectators, faced a rectilinear *orchestra* and a *skene* characterized by a wooden hut with a roof, a single door –only later will there be three – and a low wooden stage. From the south-eastern slope of the Acropolis, the Greeks of the 5th century BC, in an open-air venue, could observe not only masked actors and members of the chorus, but also the sanctuary of Dionysus Eleutherius below, the city with its ancient sanctuaries, the Attic hills, and the prominent sky.³³¹ Dionysus was the god of the altered state, liminality, wild countryside, and distant foreign lands at the edge of the known world. The theater of Dionysus expressed these aspects thanks to its location which offered a panoramic view.³³²

³²⁹ Meineck, P., 2007. *Theatrocracy, Greek Drama, Cognition, and the Imperative for Theatre*, Routledge New York, 2019; Wiles, D., 2007. *Mask and Performance in Greek Tragedy. From Ancient Festival to Modern Experimentation*. Cambridge University Press.

³³⁰ Csapo, E., 2007. *The men who built the theaters: Theatropolai, Theatronai, and Arkhitektones*. In Wilson, P. (Ed.), *The Greek theatre and festivals: Documentary studies*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 97-121.

³³¹ Rehm, R., 2002. *The play of space: Spatial transformation in Greek tragedy*. Princeton University Press, Princeton; Meineck, P. *Theatrocracy*, p.66.

³³² See Meineck, P. *Theatrocracy*.

The invitation to distant spaces, the taboo-breaking narratives, the use of music and choral dances, the presence of a cosmopolitan audience who made up a large part of the spectators, and above all, the use of the mask constituted a strong solicitation for the exploration of new and unprecedented possibilities.

While we are used to seeing actors with their “bared face,”³³³ it was unthinkable for the Greeks to act without a mask whose importance is embodied in the myth of Thespis, who, it is said, emerged from the chorus to become the first 'responder' (*hupokritēs*). In doing so, in some versions, he is said to have masked his face with white lead and colored his lips red, while in others he is said to have worn a linen mask.³³⁴ The myth of Thespis links the birth of drama with the use of the mask whose function was primarily and crucially transformative and not mimetic. The transformation, the point I am interested in, is somehow related to the subversion of community norms and their monstrous overturning. In this sense, the notion of the tragic arises when an individual belonging to a community begins to look outside it for new possibilities,³³⁵ enacting monsters. Through the practice of masking and so transfiguration of one's figure, one seeks to invite one's community to take a step outside the shared norms towards unexplored possibilities. The enacted mask thus invites change. In addition to being a tool that in the scenic representation of ancient Greece obliterates the face, the mask preserves, in its origin linked to the myth of Thespis, the gesture of removal from the community in order to renew it in the sense of saying: don't look at me but look at what I do and what we do, that is, look at the sociomaterial practice.

Greek dramatic masks, as well as the stage spaces and the cultural context, underwent variations throughout antiquity. The impressive Hellenistic stone spaces, characterized by high stages and numerous seats, were inhabited by large masks, often thought of as a model of the Greek mask, that, with their fixed expressions, mouths wide open, and elaborate headdresses, provided recognizable character types and allowed the audience to perceive the actor wearing them. The mask used in the theatre of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides was different. Usually made of stiffened linen or wood, it was a whole-face mask the size of the human head with realistic and ambiguous features that completely obliterated the actor's face.

To define the characteristics of the Greek tragic mask, it is necessary to refer to kraters and some fragments of them. This is, although the mask plays a central role in ancient Greek theatre, no specimens of it have survived, only vascular and sculptural representations. The most famous and valuable documentation is the Pronomos Vase which provides us with an abundance of details related to ancient Greek theater.³³⁶

³³³ See Wiles, D., *Mask and Performance in Greek Tragedy*.

³³⁴ Csapo, E., W. J. Slater, 1995. *The Context of Ancient Drama*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, pp. 89-102. For a detailed analysis of the sources for Thespis, see West, M., 1989, “The early chronology of Attic tragedy.” *Classical Quarterly* 39, 251-254.

³³⁵ See Wiles, D., *Mask and Performance in Greek Tragedy*; Vovolis, T., Zamboulakis, G., 2003. “The Acoustical Mask of Greek Tragedy. Form, function and appearance of the tragic mask and its relation to the actor, text, audience and theatre space.” *Didaskalia*, 7(1), 1-7.

³³⁶ For a detailed analysis look at Taplin, O., Wyles, R., 2010. *The Pronomos Vase and its Context*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Following Peter Meineck's analysis,³³⁷ I will use the mask of Heracles, depicted in the Pronomos vase, as a model of the ancient Greek mask and then compare it with that of the Noh theater of the Japanese tradition. The differences between the mask and the actor's face, as represented on the krater, provide valuable insights into how the ancient Greek tragic mask was constructed and worked.

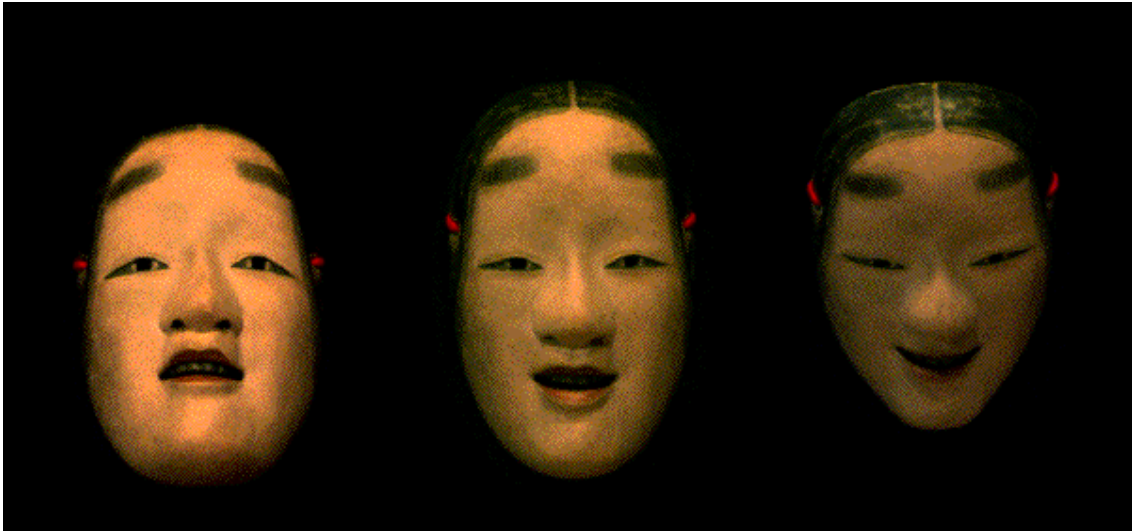


[Details of the Vase of Pronomos- made around 400 B.C. at Athene and found largely intact in 1835 in a tomb at Ruvo in Puglia. The vase is currently preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Naples. Here are presented details of the mask of Heracles and the face of the actor holding it by the laces.]

The first and most evident difference is the size of the eyes. The mask is characterized by a large and prominent white sclera with pupil holes. The painter renders the expressive quality of the mask ambiguous in the way he realizes the eyebrows and paints the corners of the mouth and the eyes, which constitute the areas of expression, as smooth surfaces. Although the mask's mouth is slightly open for the practical reason of the audibility of the actorial voice, it does not express any distinctive emotion. On the contrary, the actor's face seems to hint at a smile. The lower lip of the mask is more prominent than the actor's. It is also possible to note that the mask has a high forehead and grooves useful for catching the light and creating shadows to animate it. These features, which allow the mask to appear mobile, as Meineck notes, are common to Japanese Noh masks. The Noh is a traditional form of Japanese musical drama that originated in the 14th century but where, unlike Greek theater, masks were not used outdoors. Despite this non-marginal difference, certain characteristics common to the two masks allow us to use as insights

³³⁷ See Meineck, P. *Theatrocracy*.

the studies focused on the Japanese artifact that demonstrated how, despite having fixed characteristics, the simple tilting of the classical Noh theater mask produced changes in expression.³³⁸



[In this sequence, taken from the essay *The Noh mask effect: vertical viewpoint dependence of facial expression perception* by Lyons, Campbell, and others, the Noh mask itself, on a Noh stage under lighting conditions similar to those used during a performance, undergoes tilts in vertical orientation that causes changes in expression.

Technically, as already noted in the analysis of the Heracles mask on the Pronomos vase, this is due to certain features such as the almost complete elimination of expressive wrinkles around the eyes and mouth, the prominent lower lip, and general softening of the facial features.]

In Japanese Noh theater, the concept of *yugen*, which could be translated as “grace” and “subtlety,” was considered the most important characteristic in that tradition and could be related to the ambiguous quality of facial features observed in the representations of ancient Greek masks.³³⁹ It is precisely the ambiguity of the features, and the skillful construction of the details, that allow the Noh theatre's mask to display multiple emotions. The term used in the Noh theater, *mugen hyojo* which means “infinite facial expressions” refers to this aspect. A key role in the production of the vast and rigorously cataloged facial expressions repertoire in Theater Noh is played, crucially, by head movements,

³³⁸ Lyons, M.J., Campbell, R., Plante, A., Coleman, M., Kamachi, M. and Akamatsu, S. 2000. “The Noh mask effect: Vertical viewpoint dependence of facial expression perception.” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London B: Biological Sciences*, 267.1459, 2239-2245.

³³⁹ See Meineck, P., *Theatrocracy*, p. 97-98.

body postures, vocal expressions, light, music, and narratives³⁴⁰ which, in this sense, as I will suggest, emerge to the fore.

The ambiguous characteristics of the mask thus seem to allow for the emergence of features related to the performative context. I suggest that the ambiguous mask, and particularly the Greek mask used in the open air, has the power to foreground what is going on around us by directing our attention towards activity and environment, that is, as we shall see, towards activity in the making and towards the crystallized action embedded in the environment that offers a continuation of the previously established practice.

In the context of the open-air performance, the ambiguous mask that obliterated the actor's face forced the Greek spectator to focus on the body and the surroundings. But let us not forget that the body within the Greek theater was first and foremost a *collective body*. As the Greek scholar and mask maker Thanos Vovolis suggests, it is precisely the mask that allows the actor "to become a fractal of the common body of the chorus."³⁴¹ In the Theatre of Dionysus was staged a *collective body* whose gestures were developed in unison based on the sound of the aulos. The spectator was thus led to observe this complex musical and dancing body between landscape, sacred places, and sky. As we will observe in exploration # 4, the mask functions in part like a giant puppet carried in the procession: it leads us to observe a large body moving *with* and *through* other bodies and the environment. In both cases, the spectator's attention is not directed at psychological aspects, but at the distributed nature of human action, the way we are involved, the way we collectively enact our lives, bringing them forth within a rich landscape of possibilities.

In the context of theatrical performance, gestures – as the voice that is not considered here – are a fundamental part especially if the face, masked or too far away, does not offer those numerous communicative invitations linked to macro and micro facial movements. Unlike other theatrical cultures, our evidence on gestures in Greek drama in practice is limited to their representations, later rhetoric manuals or references in texts. To shed light on the value of gesture in ancient Greek theater, we must refer to other masked theater traditions such as the Indian Kathakali theater, the Japanese Noh, and the Balinese Topeng.

In Noh and Kabuki theater, there is a coded complex system of movement called *kata* that, as Meineck suggests, can be compared to the *schemata* of Greek dance mentioned by Plutarch when he refers to the movement being "held" for a moment during the performance.³⁴² In these kinds of tradition, the expression of emotion within a narrative sequence occurs through a complex system of movements, and the mask, in this case obliterating the interpreter's face and so a powerful expressive means, enhances precisely the importance of the gesture. The environmental aspect is not secondary, as the mask must be tilted and the performer, therefore, "joins forces" with the light and play with shadows.

³⁴⁰ See Kawai, N., Miyata, H., Nishimura, R. and Okanoya, K., 2013. "Shadows alter the facial expressions of Noh masks." *PloS One*, 8(8), e71389.

³⁴¹ Vovolis, T., Zamboulakis, G., "The Acoustical Mask of Greek Tragedy." p.108.

³⁴² Plutarch as quoted by Meineck, P., *Theatocracy*, p.138.

In the open-air setting, the Theatre of Dionysus was built to allow the natural light to activate the mask, whose expression changed in the course of time due to the activity developed by the actor in the unfolding of the drama and because of the sun, which, as it progressed in its course, considerably changed the figure of the actor.

The most outstanding feature of the theatre of Dionysus, which, let us remember, in its original form was first and foremost a place and not a building, was, as already repeated, the position that allowed the spectator to look out onto a large space delegated to drama adjacent to a religious sanctuary. The prominent element that stood out to the viewer was the view of the Attic hills and a panoramic view of the southern city and the sky. The mask, in my opinion, had the power to allow the sociomaterial environment to emerge further.

3. The world is animated

As considered so far, the ancient Greek mask, from my point of view, had the function of directing attention primarily to the activities of the actors and their surroundings. Such a specific mask will be used as a model during this exploration. From now on when I talk about masks I will refer to this particular one with ambiguous features enacted in an open-air setting in which relevant aspects of the sociomaterial environment are preeminent. Whenever I speak of a mask I refer not to the object itself – which is not the focus of my interest – but to the masked performance.

This *intervention* aims to focus on one more tool of the rich equipment of the various monstrous practices that are part of reorganizational practices that afford the opportunity to question and reorganize our form of life. Through the practices I have characterized as monstrous, we can enter “different worlds” and explore further possibilities.

I suggest here that all performed masks are in a sense monstrous because they foreground ways in which the world is animate. They do that by making present previously absent figures such as monsters, gods, animals, hybrid beings, fictitious characters, dead people, ancestors, ghosts; they do that in a less evident way, but in my opinion more revealing for the understanding of their functioning, even when the features they offer are ambiguous, as they oblige us to observe the situation, the surrounding environment that precisely, in this way, “comes to life,” in order to decipher them. The idea proposed here is that the ambiguous mask presents a characteristic common to every mask and that the monsters or gods made present by these tools are to be found precisely where the ambiguous mask tells us to look. In practice, by presenting faces with more or less ambiguous features, the mask paradoxically invites us to *look around*. The invitation to explore the environment depends on the type of material in which the mask is made – wood, bones, plastics – and the type of expression or traits that are more or less monstrous, but, in any case, such masks do not present a univocal meaning regardless of the actions and environment they precisely invite to explore. Meaning is enacted in the process of exploring the activity that unfolds over time on a dramatic level and, at the same time, exploring the material aspects of the environment.

The way in which this tool operates is first and foremost through the obliteration of the actor's face. In this way, the mask subtracts a rich expressive repertoire from our attention, allowing the landscape of affordances in flux, activities, and practices to come to the fore.

By letting aspects of the environment emerge, a mask does not represent “different worlds” but animates them.

The performed mask animating “different worlds” *connects us* to them because, since the aspects of the “animated” environment that emerge on the occasion of its presence are in any case defined by the sociomaterial practices in which we are engaged, by foregrounding the practices themselves it shows us the way in for the construction of alternative realities. The mask, therefore, highlights the possibility of questioning practices. The point I want to make is that the environment turns out to be animated by figures who present themselves through their masks. However, the purpose of these masks is, I suggest, to act as vectors that, in a sense, contour the figure of the masked character and dilute it in the situation to allow us to capture the character outlines in the situation itself, in the activities and invitations, in the practices. Although one may be fascinated by the contemplation of musealized object, the situated mask – situated in their practice that is worn in a performance – do not, in my opinion, capitalize our attention entirely, but constitute a propelling agent to investigate the situation, to explore the environment: *look around*. This is to elicit again that the mask should not be described outside of its practice of use if one tries to understand it in the context of its performativity on stage.

The enacted mask affords an opportunity to connect with a “different world.” As a tool used in monstrous practices, it accompanies us in the transition from “not seeing to seeing or from seeing to seeing differently.”³⁴³ The mask then seems to accord with the short introductory narrative used by Alva Noë in the Preface to his essay *Strange Tools*:

Some years ago I was talking with an artist. He asked me about the science of visual perception. I explained that vision scientists seek to understand how it is we see so much—the colorful and detailed world of objects spread out around us in space—when what we are given are tiny distorted upside-down images in the eyes. How do we see so much on the basis of so little? I was startled by the artist’s reply. Nonsense! he scoffed. That’s not the question we should ask. The important question is this: Why are we so blind, why do we see so little, when there is so much around us to see?³⁴⁴

I suggest the mask could help us to not be blind toward “different words,” toward all that much around us to see. A further, non-marginal aspect that, as Noë points out, can be gleaned from this brief introductory dialogue is that:

³⁴³ Noë, A, *Strange Tools*, p. xi.

³⁴⁴ Ivi, p. xii.

The artist was right. Science and philosophy, to the extent that they concern themselves with art, tend to do so from on high. They seek to explain art, to treat art as a phenomenon to be analyzed. Maybe we've been overlooking the possibility that art can be our teacher, or at least our collaborator.³⁴⁵

Collaboration, which I try to experience through these interventions, develops through the common exploration of the same sociomaterial environment with different but similar practices. The explorations themselves are transformative in that by allowing new aspects of the sociomaterial environment to emerge, they invite additional skills and thus different types of practices into play. The mask has the same transformative power.

4. We are nested

In each situation, multiple affordances are interwoven and unfold on different time scales through activities belonging to broader sociomaterial practices.

The mask I speak of is situated in performance and stage representation which can be considered, following Noë, as reorganizational practices of which the arts and philosophy are a part, practices “aiming at illuminating the ways we find ourselves organized and so, also, the ways we might reorganize ourselves.”³⁴⁶ I propose *monstrous practices*, of which the masked performance is part, to be reorganizational in the sense in which Noë means it. We engage in them in order to investigate ourselves. The enacted mask has a specific role in this: to emphasize how the environment is animated and how we are nested.

The reorganizational practices are normative in themselves. People anticipate a possible unfolding of a performance that can also be disregarded. Performers, engaged in an activity that gives life to a larger practice, follow a norm and thus keep it alive. But this norm can be subverted by allowing the activity we see unfolding by performers to take a new course. The enacted mask is a tool that augments those possibilities.

In everyday life, we show responsiveness to the normative demands of specific situations as they unfold.³⁴⁷ Our actions may be more or less appropriate based on our sensitivity to the situation and the type of training. Engagement with sociomaterial invitations occurs on both short and long-time scales. To account for the ability to engage with affordances on long-time scales Van Dijk and Rietveld³⁴⁸ developed a process-based notion of affordance I have already referred to in the introduction and intervention #1 and that I will recall here to present my proposal. Through a process-based affordance account, Van Dijk and Rietveld provide a scalable notion in which affordances are determined within activities and intertwined across time scales. Scalable means that this notion can account for both immediate and time-distributed engagement with a given

³⁴⁵ Noë, A, *Strange Tools*, p. xii.

³⁴⁶ Ivi, p.17.

³⁴⁷ Rietveld, E. “Situated Normativity.”

³⁴⁸ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E. “Situated Anticipation.”

sociomaterial invitation. Affordances “although they are available in the current environment, they pertain to that which the environment offers a skilled individual to do in the *future*.”³⁴⁹ The core of their argument is that “once affordances are seen as forming in process, they can unfold on the same temporal scale as the activities necessary to enact them.”³⁵⁰ They introduce thus a notion of affordance “in which an individual engaging with an affordance can be understood as continuing the practical engagements of communities of people that preceded him or her.”³⁵¹ Drawing on this process-based notion of affordances, Van Dijk and Rietveld can then consider how not only activities and practices but also affordances are nested. This means, for example, that the invitation offered by the sofa to read a book may also contain an invitation to take a nap: innumerable affordances are nested in the activity of reading on a sofa.

Van Dijk and Rietveld understand a concrete situation as “continuations of real-life ongoing practices in terms of unfolding activities of individuals rather than as realizations of possibilities pre-existing *in abstracto*.”³⁵² An activity comprises a skill and unfolds over time, it unfolds into an action in the sense that the action is to be understood as the conclusion of the activity, i.e. the way in which all possible ways of continuation an activity actually end, how the action has unfolded and the materials have been organized. Activity and action belong to a single process considered from its starting point or as it concludes.

Action is defined, for example, by the way in which the activity that takes place within the practice of writing results in a written text, while activity is defined by the writing process itself. As the authors point out: “the unfolding of activity stresses that it is ongoing and thus open to continuation.”³⁵³ That is, the materials available in a practice organized by a specific activity can be subject to reorganization. This does not mean that activities are free of constraints. They take place within broader activities and by different individuals on longer time scales, i.e., within the practices that constitute the form of life. One of the central points is that the practice, the previously established regular ways of doing things, “pave the ways in which activities on the smaller timescales are able to continue—that is, they are the (relevant) history in terms of which the current situation continues.”³⁵⁴

The affordances have the same temporal relationship that the action/activity:

the ‘backward-looking’ character of actions is allied by the role of ‘materials’ in the affordance concept. The notion of material aspects (of the environment) foregrounds which practices (i.e. which history of actions) have been established as the terms in which the situation is now available to continue [...]. The ‘forward-looking’ character of activities is captured by the ‘invitational’ character of affordances that are

³⁴⁹ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E. “Situated Anticipation.” p. 351.

³⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

³⁵¹ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E. “Situated Anticipation.” p. 352.

³⁵² Ivi, p. 354.

³⁵³ Ivi, p. 355.

³⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 357.

unfolding and foregrounds the open-endedness in ways to continue the current situation.³⁵⁵

This means that materials constrain behavior, that is, they invite an ability to continue within a practice that has organized them, but they do not pre-exist our practices: affordances are open to new activities.

The point is that in the affordances the previously deployed and established actions in a practice form the terms in which the materials currently constrain further activities to continue that practice in a particular way. Those who have been educated in a practice will be invited to continue the activity. Activities, as well as affordances, are nested, i.e. they lead to further ways of continuing within the overall situation in which the process sets the conditions for its own continuation.

What I propose is that the performed mask, by highlighting how we are nested, could afford us the opportunity to question the way in which we are involved and invited to engage in activities. The enacted mask in this sense could invite us to question the practices, showing the two sides of the same unfolding process.

5. The Mask in Practice

5.1 Inviting and backward-looking

The mask can afford us to question real-life practices insofar as performance art enacts “continuations of real-life ongoing practices in terms of unfolding activities of individuals”³⁵⁶ that is, the practices themselves and the way they are carried out by the activities, in other words, the way we are organized. The enacted mask, within the broader performative practice, could make a specific kind of questioning by bringing the sociomaterial situation to the fore.

The performed mask foregrounds the actions of real-life practices in two related ways:

1. by obliterating the performer’s face and thus allowing us to observe the activities that form a practice – what the performer does, with whom is related, and which activity is unfolding. This highlights the 'inviting' aspect of the situation. Affordances are unfolding and the indeterminacy of ways to continue the current situation;
2. by directing attention to certain material aspects of the surroundings this brings to the foreground what practices have been established as the terms in which the situation is now available to continue – the ‘backward-looking’ character of

³⁵⁵ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E. “Situating Anticipation.” p. 358.

³⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 354.

affordance. In this way, it transforms what we see and allows us to question the practices in which we are engaged.

We participate in the masked situation that highlights the activity that unfolds a practice and at the same time we are called upon to explore our surroundings thus placing our attention on, for example, the courthouse, the church, or the highway present in our immediate environment as invitations from which to develop our daily practices, while precisely on the stage activities of a legal, religious or simply related to the way we move, speak and relate are staged.

Drawing on the famous Wittgensteinian example, we could say that the mask is a tool that allows us to grasp the flowing water and the riverbed at the same time.

To try to emphasize how the mask allows the surroundings to emerge, I will use a concrete example taken from classical tragedies, which constitute an extremely useful element in trying to understand the value of the mask within the theatrical representation in the classic Greek theater. Although very useful, this example does not exhaust the argument I have tried to develop. The concrete example of *Infinity pool* (7) will introduce even more elements so as to account for this dual aspect of the mask.

It should be foregrounded, however, that very often in Greek tragedy in particular, but in open-air performance in general, what performers “construct” and carry out through their activities – a system of power, behavior constrained by rules, customs, and institutions, way of living together – finds in the immediate surroundings the material part that constitutes the term and starting point of their– and our– actions and future activities. Very often, in contemporary performances, the shared public place is itself a space of live action. This preliminary clarification is intended to further enrich the possible resonances of the example I analyze below.

5.2 Moving away from the old thoughts

In this very famous passage from Euripides' *Bacchae*³⁵⁷ it is possible to observe how the surrounding environment is highlighted during the performance and how the mask plays a central role in the process of transformation from 'seeing to seeing differently'.

The *Bacchae* tells of Dionysus arriving in Thebes to prove his divine nature. To this end, he transforms the Theban women into Bacchae, i.e., worshipers of the rites of Bacchus – another Dionysian name – who then flee to Mount Cyton. Pentheus, king of Thebes, not recognizing Dionysus as a god, has him captured, but this causes an earthquake and manages to free himself. Meanwhile, on Mount Cyton the Bacchae make wine, milk, and honey gush from the rocks, slaughter cows alive, invade villages and kidnap children. Dionysus then manages to convince Pentheus to disguise himself as a woman in order to secretly break the Bacchae. Once on Mount Cytheroene Dionysus incites the women,

³⁵⁷ For a different reading of this passage, see Meineck, P., *Theatrocracy*, p. 67.

among whom is Pentheus' mother Agavê, who tear the king to pieces. Agavê then returns to Thebes with a thyrsus on top of which is Pentheus' head, which she, under Dionysian influences, has mistaken for the head of a lion. Cadmus, Pentheus' grandfather, manages, in the end, to bring Agavê to her senses. Then Dionysus reappears to exile the two to distant lands.

The moment I report is when Agavê discovers that the head impaled on the stick she clutches in her hands is not that of a mountain lion, as she believed, but that of her son Pentheus.

First of all, it should be remembered that actors always appeared on stage wearing masks; as we have already said, for the Greeks a theater without masks was unthinkable.

The exchange that I report in full will be interspersed with some of my notes. What I present below is a brief theatrical description:

Agavê enters carrying the severed head of his son on the top of his staff. The audience can immediately recognize Phenteus' face because it is very likely that the actor playing Agave is showing the mask of Phenteus himself who had appeared on stage earlier.

Cadmus turning to Agave:

CADMUS: When you know what you've done, you'll feel the most terrible agony of pain. But if you stay in the state you're in forever, you'll be unlucky to the end, and never have the faintest idea.

AGAVÊ: What do you mean? It's not beautiful? It's painful?

CADMUS: First let your eyes look at the sky. Up here.

Cadmus invites Agave to observe the sky, to explore a very rich aspect of the Greek sociomaterial environment available to each spectator, and that it is available at any time in everyday life. The actor playing Agavê looking up defines the position of his entire body in such a way as to indicate that his eyes are turned towards the sky. The actor holds the position according to the concept of *schemata* mentioned by Plutarch. Turning one's gaze or tilting one's face would not suffice in an open-air theater with 5000 to 6000 spectators, it is necessary for the entire body to hold the pose and be active in order to enact a gaze towards the sky, which although prominent at this moment emerges even more prominently.

AGAVÊ: I'm looking. Why did you suggest I look at this?

CADMUS: Is it the same? Or do you think it changes?

The ambiguous mask, obliterating the face, and having the function of sensory deprivator invites the actor to fully use other expressive means and, at the same time, afford the audience the

possibility to look somewhere else instead of at the actor's face to understand what is going on.

AGAVÊ: It's brighter than before, a new glow comes through it.

CADMUS: And that fluttering sensation, still have that in your soul?

AGAVÊ: I don't know what you mean. But I am somehow coming back into my mind, I'm moving away from the old thoughts.

Through Agave's engagement with an invitation as indeterminate as that of the sky, her mind cleared, and serenity returned to her. Looking at the sky is a way to open up to indeterminate possibilities and so to allow activities to widen.

Is staged here the transformative power of the imaginative process that develops through indeterminate sociomaterial invitations³⁵⁸. Each invitation is to some extent indeterminate and thus involves an imaginative process. The sky is a powerful example of this at hand in the context of ancient Greek theater.

The Agavê's transformation does not appear on the face but is enacted within a dense network of affordances where the mask plays a role, but a relational one.

CADMUS: Can you listen now and answer clearly?

AGAVÊ: I've forgotten what we were saying, Father.

CADMUS: When you married, what house did you go to?"

AGAVÊ: You gave me to Echion—a Sown Man. So they say.

CADMUS: And who was the son born at home to your husband?

AGAVÊ: Pentheus, from my marriage to his father.

CADMUS: Tell me, now. Whose face do you have in your arms?

AGAVÊ: A lion's. At least that's what they said, the hunters.

CADMUS: Look straight this time. It won't take long to see it.

Agave inspects the head, which is actually a mask. The spectators are watching a masked actor staring at a mask and recognizing in it no longer the head of a lion but that of a lost son.

It seems to be a dialogue between masks that is articulated through indeterminate possibilities.

The mask is a tool that, enacted within an open-air performance, allows the environment to emerge. In this case, it is an aspect of the environment, explored in its indeterminacy, that allows Agavê to recognize a face, which although familiar she no longer recognized as she was in the grip of Dionysian delusions.

³⁵⁸ "Imagination, I suggest, is an aspect of coordination with indeterminate processes that an individual participates in" (Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E., "Situated Imagination." p.17).

AGAVÊ: Oh! What am I looking at? What am I carrying in my arms?

CADMUS: Look carefully, and you will learn the answer clearly.

AGAVÊ: I see horrible pain. I am so miserable.

CADMUS: You don't think it looks like a lion anymore?

*AGAVÊ: No. It's Pentheus. I have his head.*³⁵⁹

Agavê observing the sky, i.e., engaging with an indeterminate invitation of the surrounding environment available to each, transfixes his state and this occurs precisely in the transition between the mask and the environment.

As already mentioned, the sky represents a particularly powerful indeterminate invitation. This scene, as well as emphasizing the transformative function of the mask, its dual feature of letting the situation and its surroundings emerge, thus reminds us of the power of imagination. All aspects of our surroundings that are present to each in this open-air performance are potentially subject to imaginative power. Every aspect of our surroundings, to some extent, can have the same transformative power as the sky. Everything around us can be seen differently, that is, can afford new actions.

Perhaps we are blind and the mask inviting us to explore our surroundings allows us to see what we could not see before, that is, act differently.

The mask in a performative context draws attention at the same time to activities and to those material constraints that characterize “the unfolding of the process in as far as it is finished and forms the given context for people”³⁶⁰.

This tool seems to show how a sociomaterial invite works: “together with an established past of constraining materiality, affordances also come with an openness to possibilities for future activity”³⁶¹. The masked performance foregrounding the activity taking place on stage and the surrounding environment shows that “both materiality and activity take shape together within the same ongoing process.”³⁶²

The mask affords us to grasp that place of openness and possibility that allows us to open up 'different worlds', that space between the outcome of previous actions and the future of activities that preserve or revolutionize practices. The mask does this by inviting us, I believe, to catch how we are nested that is situated in the unfolding of activities.

During a performance, in conclusion, we can observe the unfolding of affordances as the masked actor, in performing an activity, allows us to grasp its development over time, and at the same time, invites us to explore in the environment those material aspects that are the terms from which the activity begins according to shared practices.

³⁵⁹ Euripides, 1999. *Bacchae*. Tr. Woodruff, P., Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. Indianapolis/Cambridge.

³⁶⁰ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E. “Situating Anticipation”, p.358.

³⁶¹ Ivi, p. 359.

³⁶² *Ibidem*.

In a nutshell, what is being suggested here is that, in the context of reorganizational practices that allow aspects of our form of life that we can then question to emerge, the masked performance has the specific characteristic of bringing the whole situation to the fore thus allowing us to catch ourselves in our nested activities, in our nests.

Infinity pool has a red sun hole.

Infinity pool is an incomprehensible mixture.

Infinity pool shows us a polluted face.

6. Ghostly affordances

How does what is invisible, that has been forgotten, believed extinct, could appear in a performance?

If the ghost is the presence of something elusive then the mask is a ghostly tool hint at this elusiveness. But the mask, following the line of reasoning made so far, lets ghosts appear not only by presenting someone or something apparently absent or extinct – in this sense, every masked performance is to some extent ghostly – but at the same time, and crucially, by foregrounding material constraints of unfolding actions that blinds us and make invisible others, namely letting emerge *ghostly affordances*, that is *affordances unfold in ghostly ways* that hunt us.

This makes the mask an ally of the ghost understood as a social figure, the ideal tool to evoke him. In a masked performance, we can grasp the possibility of “being hunted” by ghosts – being stuck in activities that perpetuate the same practices over and over again – and we can thus enact the possibility of a “reconciling” intervention, that is, the possibility of reshapes activities or practices, or perhaps reinvents new ones. Or in more ghostly words, to give a spirit peace in life after one lived.

In this section, I will zoom in and out moving from the unfolding constraints enacted “on stage” and the unfolding – blinding – constraints in the sociomaterial surroundings. This way of approaching the masked performance brings together Van Dijk’s and Rietveld’s process-based understanding of affordances (as discussed above) with Avery Gordon’s understanding of ‘ghostly matter’ (as follows below). I will first widen the understanding of the ghostly before returning to a renewed understanding of the masked performance.

One of the classic sites of ghost narration is the appearance of the deceased invoking justice. Something lost appears to invite us to “put the world to rights”. The ghost can return to rest in peace only if what it has lost is recovered through our intervention, our ability to “heal the wound” that is trying to do him justice in the world today.

The heterogeneous performance contexts are by their very nature the places where who is not present appears, the vanished can show themselves, where the dead can speak and the ghosts invoke action. The cue to start this exploration is provided to me by the American sociologist Avery Gordon and in particular, her essay *Ghostly Matter* in which the ghost is defined as a social figure.

Dealing with ghosts is not only a way of allowing lost stories to emerge but also an attempt to emphasize how what is lost is present in faint traces, which can become pathways toward new possibilities.

6.1 The elusive concreteness of ghostly matter

To try to understand what people do, why, and how they might act otherwise, according to what Avery Gordon writes in her essay *Ghostly Matter*, we cannot limit ourselves to describing how abstract structures determine social action but must try to analyze how past conditions have erased certain individuals, activities or practices and how circumstances have made them marginalized, or invisible. Her attention is directed toward what has been lost and is only seemingly absent: which has disappeared casts a shadow over the existing.

Gordon is interested in comprehending the “elusive concreteness of ghostly matter” and tries to focus on those “singular yet repetitive instances” when the world is “out of joint”, that is when “home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when things are animated, when the over and done with comes alive, when the blind field comes into view, when your own or another’s shadow shines brightly.”³⁶³ It’s all about the “sociality of haunting, that we are haunted by worldly contacts.”³⁶⁴ Gordon develops a practice that allows her to catch those traces, shadows and murmurs, that she calls “ghostly matters,” that constantly haunt us. To be haunted, as Gordon puts it “is to be tied to historical and social effects.”³⁶⁵

As Gordon writes:

The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure [...] The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition³⁶⁶.

³⁶³ Gordon, A. *Ghostly Matters*, p. 197.

³⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁶⁵ Gordon, A. *Ghostly Matters*, p. 190.

³⁶⁶ Ivi, p.8.

Gordon's aim is to "follow ghosts, neither to memorialize nor to slay, but to follow where they lead, in the present"³⁶⁷ and to do this she invites us to follow their traces neither in the claustrophobic spaces of the unconscious –although, as she notes, Freud has long chased spectral power but renounced its social dimension – nor exclusively in the material aspects of the environment. As Gordon reiterates, haunting is the ghost's way of claiming the healing of a wound and it is not a private matter to be traced to personal trauma but is rather something that draws us, "sometimes against our will" into what that she calls, using the notion by the sociologist Raymond Williams, a "structure of feeling" of reality. "Structure of feeling" is used by Gordon to try to explain "the haunting way systematic compulsions work on and through people in everyday life."³⁶⁸ The concept coined by Williams attempts to hold together the elusive element of feeling and the systematic and enduring element of structure. In this way Williams wanted, in a nutshell, to avoid reducing the social to fixed forms of the past, to overcome the separation of the subjective from what he calls the "fixed explicit forms,"³⁶⁹ and to avoid falling back into asocial abstractions that do not take into account the entanglement of social and personal that is the living present. Gordon uses this notion because it allows her to focus "not only the structure of an affective social experience and consciousness but also the spellbinding material relations of exchange between the defined and the inarticulate, the seen and the invisible, the known and the unknown."³⁷⁰

Following Gordon:

The ghost makes itself known to us through haunting and pulls us affectively into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience as a recognition. Haunting recognition is a special way of knowing what has happened or is happening.³⁷¹

The 'social ghost' has the power to *pull us* into a "structure of feeling", that we find ourselves inhabiting in spite of ourselves that is transported beyond our individual troubles and our limited worlds. This means to be caught up in a transformation that not only involves an intellectual gaining of new concepts but rather:

involves being taken beyond a dull curiosity or a detached know-it-all criticism into the passion of what is at stake. It is not individualistic, but it does acknowledge, indeed it demands, that change cannot occur without the encounter, without the something you have to try for yourself. There are no guaranteed outcomes for an encounter; much is uncertain and the results may be very limited. But if you think

³⁶⁷ Gordon, A. *Ghostly Matters*, p. 57.

³⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 197.

³⁶⁹ Raymond Williams as quoted by Gordon, A. *Ghostly Matters*, p. 198.

³⁷⁰ Gordon, A. *Ghostly Matters*, p. 200.

³⁷¹ Ivi, p. 63.

you can fight and eliminate the systems' complicated "nastiness" without it, you will not get very far because it will return to haunt you.³⁷²

Such obsession that governs us has a transformative force as we become able to be with ghosts and thus let reality disrupt.

To stay on the trail of ghosts, Gordon's practice:

require attention to what is not seen, but is nonetheless powerfully real; requires attention to what appears dead, but is nonetheless powerfully alive; requires attention to what appears to be in the past, but is nonetheless powerfully present; requires attention to just who the subject of analysis is.³⁷³

6.2 To be bound by constraints of unfolding actions

Assuming that my focus is on how a ghostly "social figure" operates as a performative masked figure, Gordon's cue is useful to me first of all to define the ghost that appears in real life not as a private matter nor even as a material presence but as something that is enacted, as an emergent property of the sociomaterial world in flux. In this sense, the ghost could be understood as a repertoire of unnoticed affordances – and in this very sense, the mask is an ideal tool for conjuring ghosts.

What I am interested in is how a ghostly performance can foreground what is invisible and allows us to grasp ourselves as *haunted* and thus invite us *to heal the wounds*.

To be haunted, is, following Gordon, as already reported, "to be tied to historical and social effects"³⁷⁴. What is distinctive about haunting is that it is "an animated state" in which something repressed or socially unresolved «is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely."³⁷⁵ I understand *to be haunted*, as to be bound by constraints of unfolding actions which "pose strong limits on the possibilities available – but they do not pre-exist our practices."³⁷⁶ They are "the previously established actions that have given shape to the possibilities currently encountered"³⁷⁷ that is the material terms through which a practice is continued in an activity.

Such ghosts *haunt us* since once they appeared, as lost and invisible affordances now present, they create a disturbance within the activities or practices that marginalized them. Since we are constantly engaged in these practices, we keep excluding them, making them invisible, if we do not change, if we don't allow new possibilities to emerge. *Being hunted* is related to the incapacity to transform practices, to being forced into some that blind us,

³⁷² Gordon, A. *Ghostly Matters*, p. 203.

³⁷³ Ivi, p.42.

³⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 90.

³⁷⁵ Ivi, p. xvi.

³⁷⁶ Van Dijk, L., Rietveld, E. "Situated Anticipation." p. 358.

³⁷⁷ Ivi, p.359.

that exclude thus reducing our own ability to welcome multiple invitations letting us forget that “life is complicated.”³⁷⁸

The appearance of a ghost in real life is related to the request from that which is extinguished to *heal a wound*, to repair an injustice suffered, which implies the invitation to respond to “something that must be done.”³⁷⁹

Heal a wound, I understand it as the possibility of reorganizing practices in accordance with the ghost, that is, with that which is made invisible in the perpetuation of a practice. Changing practices *to heal* and enable us to see, or rather to move from “seeing to seeing differently.”

To be haunted then is to remain bridled to the constraints of action development, unable to modify practices taken for granted, that is, unable to *heal a wound*.

A masked performance invites us to follow the ghostly traces, showing us how we are bound by historical and social effects and thus how we could reorganize our form of life, that is, *to heal a wound*. The monstrous tool, that makes the actor an “otherworldly figure,” can let those traces reappear that are covered up by the trampling of daily life. The enacted mask invites us to trace what is lost in the way we bring forth practices, it does it specifically by foregrounding the constraints of an unfolding situation, that is by enacting it, and by inviting us to explore the immediate environment where those constraints invite us –in everyday life– to continue to unfold shared practices. In this sense, it “shows” the inviting and backward-looking aspect of practices that blind us and make invisible.

I suggest that the mask can invite us to grasp the *ghostly affordances*, unfolding actions that haunt us. If you let it, the mask as the ghost “can lead you toward what has been missing, which is sometimes everything.”³⁸⁰

So, again, returning to the question posed at the beginning of this paragraph, how does what is invisible, that has been forgotten, believed extinct, appear in a performance? How could a *monstrous practice* present something that haunts us and tell us that *something has to be done*?

A feeling of being haunted that is brought about in an experience – it could be a performance, or being in the house of a deceased love – is that that situation presents nests, in the ability to zoom in and out between activity and action, which in the “structure of feeling” make that reality seem to be “out of joint,” or “haunted.”

Before attempting to answer the initial question, I’ll try to unpack this first thought, which, besides leading us toward an attempt to understand a ghostly performance, also condenses everything that has been said so far about the function of the enacted mask in an unfolding situation. As we have already seen, all actions take place in nests, in unfolding activities and practices. All affordances are perceived as actions and activities, zooming in and out, as nests. Sometimes an unfolding activity, so a nest, creates the feeling of being haunted. These are situations in which a nest feels, “not right” or even “unreal.” There is something in the “structure of feeling” in that situation that is “out of joint.” The suggestion is that the 'nest', the unfolding activity, is in this sense ghostly.

³⁷⁸ Gordon, A. *Ghostly Matters*, p. 3.

³⁷⁹ De Certeau as quoted by Gordon, A. in *Ghostly Matters*, p.168.

³⁸⁰ Gordon, A. *Ghostly Matters*, p.58.

The unfolding and relating affordances together, are “out of place.” To clarify, so not the affordances themselves are ghostly – they are relevant and thus perceived or irrelevant and thus not perceived – but the temporal relation in which they are situated feels “out of joint”: in this precise sense, they are *ghostly affordances*. This is a specific experience that can be evoked, *by* and *in* a situation. Crucially, one feels ghosts at this temporal relational level.

In the context of performance art, *ghostly affordances* can be enacted intentionally – although, as I will point out in a moment, it is always an attempt to present what is seemingly extremely elusive that could emerge “sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely.” The use of a mask is a tool to do so, to make the enacted situation feel “out of joint” and thus haunting situations: (1) by presenting someone lost, unfolding ghostly affordances, and at the same time (2) by affording us to explore the surroundings where he could have been disappeared or where it was suppressed. The enacted mask is then the specific tool that presents who is absent and so, for making ghosts, understood as social figures, appear.

The enacted mask then is the specific tool for invoking ghosts.

In a nutshell, through a *monstrous practice*, a nest develops that trustfully³⁸¹ haunts us. Within a ghostly performance, thus, someone makes the nest “off the joints”, allowing us to catch ourselves tied to social and historical bonds thanks also to the enacted mask that allows us to look around, that is how we are nested. This is a way to see how practices that make someone invisible and blind us organize us, and a way to reorganize ourselves.

Enacted ghostly mask could invite us to put into question those values, rules, conventions, and assumptions that we take for granted but, specifically, have the characteristic to show how we are blind, how this blindness is linked to the way we bring forth practices through activities and where to explore in order to see what we don’t see. In practice, the appearance of what is elusive shows us our inability to see: the unfolding ghostly affordance, in the context of masked performance, tells us that we are blind and that there is a way to go from “not seeing to seeing differently” and, –thanks to the monstrous tool that lets the entire sociomaterial situation come to the foreground – it tells us that this can only happen by changing the practices in which we engage.

The monstrous practices that unfold ghostly affordances show us how we are blind. Moving from not seeing to seeing is possible through the practices we engage in.

6.3 Modifying nests

So, how to stage something that haunts us? I am attempting, step by step, to answer this question, and I will also try to do so in the last paragraph by different means. The masked performer modifies nests, unfolding situations, making them haunted. He especially gives existing nests the feeling of being haunted, inhabiting and transforming them. The ghostly performed situation does not drag us into fantastic worlds but unfolds

³⁸¹ See Ianniello, A., Habets, D., “Partecipating Monsters.”

in this one. This means that it is the situations in which we usually find ourselves that take – through a reorganizational practice – a ghostly turn that frightens us. As we will see in intervention #4, the performer operates like the child that “create” a Twin Earth³⁸² just by modifying a few parameters of the sociomaterial environment. Based on the possibilities of actions available to each the masked performer unfolds a situation by altering certain aspects in such a way as to make the nest haunted.

By wearing a mask, by this “otherworldly transfiguration,” the actor takes ghosts or “the haunted” as his ally to foreground what has been made invisible. By putting the mask on, the actor not only foregrounds the environment letting us catch it as nested but can make it feel “otherworldly” or “ghostly” or “haunted.”

Cooperating with a ghost is difficult because it does not appear on command. The ghost has his own “desires” and getting him involved could be a failure. In a performance, ghosts are not simply staged but invoked, hoping that in the unfolding situation, the spectators could catch themselves haunted. Masked performance does not represent ghosts, or does not just do that. Still, it can provide an opportunity to put us on the trail of ghosts, recognizing what is “out of joint” in the context of an activity that is usually carried out according to shared norms. This, as already anticipated, may not only involve the questioning of practice but may allow us to forge an alliance with the ghost, which is understood here as a transformative agent operating within reorganizational practices.

In conclusion, on the occasion of a ghostly masked performance, thanks to the invitation to explore the unfolding of activities and at the same time the surroundings, a ghost may appear that allows us to catch how we are bound to practices and thus allows us to reorganize our form of life i.e., “to heal a wound.”

To “heal a wound,” means to re-enact a practice on the occasion of the appeal of what should be lost. It means to take a walk in a “different world” by rescuing this one.

The enacted mask thus has the function of allowing the situation to emerge and for us to be caught as nested. Furthermore, the mask has the power to remind us that we are constantly haunted by possible *ghostly affordances*, unfolding actions that haunt us, as we often engage in practices that blind us and make others invisible.

We are blind and there is much to see but it is not just a matter of moving around things to grasp different aspects of them but of being drawn into haunted vortexes that radically transform us.

Ghosts tell us that we are blind, the performed ghosts help us chase them.

³⁸²Lillard, A., 2001. “Pretend play as twin earth: A social-cognitive analysis.” *Developmental Review*, 21(4), pp.495-531.

7. Infinity pool

Living in a time of planetary catastrophe thus begins with a practice at once humble and difficult: noticing the worlds around us.

Swanson-Tsing-Bubandt-Gan, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*





[*Infinity pool, study for a masked landscape* made in collaboration with David Habets, is a twofold real-life thinking model that is articulated in a series of three performance walks and a video installation.

Infinity pool revolves around a project for a mask that will be made from glass and chrome plated so that it will be reflective. As big as the actor's face, it will be worn as part of three performance walks.

In this first study, we developed the hypothesis of performing *Infinity pool* in three different places: 1) on the top of Mount Fumaiolo where the Tiber has its source, 2) on lungotevere - at the height of the ruins of the Neronian Bridge- where the Tiber goes through Rome, and 3) on Ostia beach where the Tiber flows into the sea.

With a video camera, we imagined recording the reflections of each enacted mask. These reflections, moving selfies of a landscape - like the 19th century Claude mirror, or a Claude Glass - will be projected in a cinema/theater/museum space.

The three projected enacted masks will be cloaked by voices describing the materials of specific locations.

During each walk, every participant will collect samples of water and what he or she encounters on the route - feathers, pebbles, plastic bottles -, and give them to the enacted mask. These objects

will be part of the sand castle built on Ostia beach that will be part of the last walk.

What each person collects will become part of what the masks will utter in the projected selfie.

The projections are ghostly maps that do not guide us anywhere but could orient us.

The mask brings the environment to the front by making someone face it.

Infinity pool is about changing the environment by altering the mask's angle. Like if the mask reflects the river: by tilting the head slightly down, the river levels would rise, moving further away, the river level would drop.

When wearing in a performance, it is difficult to predict the actual reflection:

- when the performer gets very close, people see themselves, distorted;
- when the performer tilts his head upwards the sky is seen, when he tilts it downwards the colors of the ground appear;
- when a participant offers to the enacted mask what he or she has picked up, a reflection of the object and face become blurred;
- the mask plays mostly with distorted colors.

Infinity pool, given the small surface area of the mask, will reflect details and places that no one would ever frame. The waste of our usual practices. Framing what is lost, fallen, and never to be picked up again, is one of its abilities.

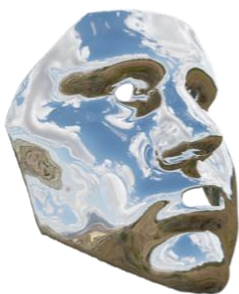
Infinity pool shows the changing, mobile, and constantly in flux nature of our landscape that is configured and then disfigured through the interplay of relationships between a face, body, practice, environment, and participants.

Infinity pool being created according to ambiguous features based on the model of the ancient Greek mask and that of the Noh theater, it changes expression when tilted but, crucially here the mask in changing expression changes, at the same time, what it reflects that is presented in a dynamic flux. Environmental characters determine its expression.

Infinity pool helps us to zoom in and out with respect to the different dimensions of ghostly processes. The mirroring actually brings different scales and timescales together allowing us to

confront ourselves with activities, practices, and the ways in which these have taken place -strangely- in our environment.]

Below, from left to right, is possible to read a hypothesis of the dialogue between the three different projected enacted masks that starts with the Source of Tiber (1) in silence, then the words from The Tiber in Rome (2) and the Tiber in the Sea (3). The dialogue can be read as such, horizontally from left to right or from right to left going up from the sea to the source, vertically following what each mask has to say, or also as a monologue; after all, it is still the same river. The three masks have blurred reflections, what gives them a face are the details of their surroundings presented by the words that are traces of the objects picked up by participants in the walking performances. What the masks pronounce refers to collected objects, analyzed water samples, and names of the presence blurred on their faces. The most eloquent mask seems to be that of the sea where everything is collected.



Barbus Tiberius

feather

Polyurethane bushes

Gonyaulax fragilis

sanpietrino

dead Barbus Tiberius

Snake-shaped inner tube

feather

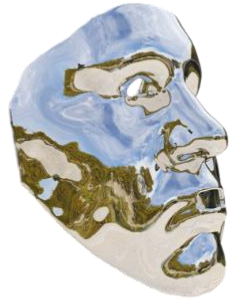
Polyurethane

Gonyaulax fragilis

sanpietrino

Snake-shaped inner tube

feather



Clothianidin

stone

sun

Sorbus aria

fog

stone

Cypermethrin

floating dragonfly

Boletus edulis

stone

pebbles

Escherichia coli

little stone

Gonyaulax fragilis

Clothianidin

stone

fog

Platanus

fog

stone

Cypermethrin

Coke

cocaine

stone

grit

Escherichia coli

Gonyaulax fragilis

Clothianidin

stone

sun

Juniperus oxycedrus

fog

stone

Cypermethrin

cocaine

stone

sand

dead *Silurus glanis*

A ghostly masked performance may open a place where it is possible to follow traces that lead to a “haunted” present. What has been made invisible *in* and *through* our practices can be recovered: we could be able *to heal wounds*.
A masked performance can remind us of what Gordon says:

[...] the ghost is nothing without you. In this sense, the ghost figures what systematically continues to work on the here and now. When a ship, a bridge, a face, an inert object, an ordinary building, a familiar workplace, a patch of grass, a photograph, a house becomes animated, becomes haunted, it is the complexities of its social relations that the ghostly figures. This sociality, the wavering present, forces something that must be done that structures the domain of the present and the prerogatives of the future.³⁸³

Ghostly affordances, unfolding actions that haunt us, can emerge in a performance through *putting on display* activity and through uncontrolled reverberations and combinations of the environment: a shadow, a twinkle, a strangely deformed figure, an out-of-the-ordinary graft – in practice the unwanted offspring of an exploratory mind, monstrosities emerging unseen from our practices, shadows of change that swarm around ordinary lives waiting to change them.

Certainly, the ghost appears according to its own “desire” and its appearance in a performance cannot be guided fully, but ‘the haunted’ can certainly be enacted in a *monstrous situation*.

Infinity pool presents us as “out of joint” time and place.

Infinity pool presents us with everything perfectly as we left it.

Infinity pool attempts to transform the figure of the environment which is out of proportion, out of scale.

Infinity pool presents us a face laden with rain.

Infinity pool shows us that atmospheric agents are as mobile as facial expressions.

Infinity pool whispers to us that if someone is our friend, we know how to take in an arched eyebrow.

Infinity pool has a red sun hole.

Infinity pool is an incomprehensible mixture.

³⁸³ Gordon, A. *Ghostly Matters*, p.179.

Infinity pool is the pockmarked face of the environment.

Infinity pool is a smooth, reflective surface.

Infinity pool shows us how our contours are deformed.

Infinity pool purposely deforms the course of the lines that reassure us.

Infinity pool shows us a burnt face.

Infinity pool shows us a polluted face.

Infinity pool disfigures the face of our landscape.

Infinity pool says that what falls remains on the ground.

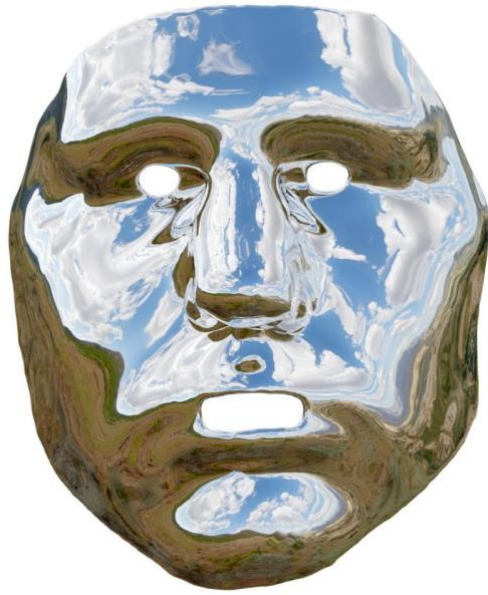
Infinity pool says that what falls can stick to your face.

Infinity pool shows us a face dulled with smog.

Infinity pool warns us that when a ghost appears, it is not always good to run away.

Infinity pool asks you to patiently look around for traces of those who might be worth talking to.

Infinity pool warns us that when a ghost appears, it is not always good to run away.



[Transformative intervention #4]

In the monster's belly

"It is alive"

Frankenstein, James Whale

1. Intro



[*Dancing skin*, a project for a kombucha SCOBY puppet created in collaboration with David Habets to be developed in Villa Mirafiori, home of the Faculty of Philosophy at *La Sapienza* University of Rome.

In subsection 7, I will describe *Dancing skin* as a *participatory puppet* that aims to highlight the emergence of playful *we-intentionality*.

Dancing skin, which resembles a long sheet of human skin, could welcome us into the belly of a monster and allow unusual encounters, coordination, and contacts.

Images courtesy of artist Boram Soh and photographs by David Habets.]

How could a puppet enable us to change our form of life? As all art practices allow us to reorganize ourselves in the sense that they are transformative, how does the puppet's art form do this specifically?

It should be made clear immediately that the way I use the term "puppet" here is extremely broad and includes marionettes, glove puppets, rod puppets, or giants carried in procession and thus refers to what we animate more generally, that with which we engage to "bring it to life" and so extends beyond notions of puppetry as merely figurative or anthropomorphic.

With its strings, rods, knobs, and grips, the puppet is part of the monstrous equipment considered in these interventions. It can remake our life in the sense that, as I will try to highlight in this transformative intervention, employed in imaginative explorations it

augments our abilities

and

puts on display how we augment our abilities.

A puppet could show the way we animate it:

look how we animate.

This also encapsulates the fact that the puppet foregrounds how we – in some specific cases considered here – collaborate to animate it:

look how we collaborate.

Some kinds of puppets display the way we *collaborate to animate* them and in addition afford us the opportunity to

play with what meaningful collaboration and animation can be.

This means that the enacted puppet by putting *on display* the way we animate it through collaboration and at the same time the possibility of playing with all this, allows us, as I will try to explain, to potentially animate and thus collaborate in new and unconventional ways.

When confronted with an enacted puppet, the question is: "How do they do it?" What strikes us is the skill of those puppeteers. Our attention is directed, yes, towards the object that mysteriously "comes to life"—making it monstrous – but, above all, towards those who skillfully pull the strings or the rods. We are impressed by *our shared ability to animate the world* that comes through active engagement. We ask ourselves this question, especially when faced with giant puppets that involve many people and different abilities to make them animate: "How do they do it?"

The mask, as we have seen in *intervention #3*, invites us to be open to the entire situation; it foregrounds "undesired" activities and practices that we take for granted. It helps us see the "ghosts that haunt us." Similarly, the puppet does not require all the attention, it highlights ways in which we couple with each other and materials to animate it, the way we manipulate, and pull strings or rods. I am interested in how we cooperate to animate, and the puppet enacts just that, particularly the giant puppet, which I call *participatory puppet*. Certainly, this particular case can constitute a staging of power, but I will not deal with the specifics of how large-scale collaborative projects can be regarded as structures of power, hierarchy, or dominance here.

The puppets can be considered from time to time as great possibilities for thought and action or subversive agents who, as the puppeteer Peter Schumann states, not being obliged to respond to the general sense of everything, engage instead the opposite sense, "which is the sense of donkeys confronting the existing transportation system."³⁸⁴ They are objects of play, used in performances, rituals, or shamanic gestures, or as the American scholar Kenneth Gross writes, referring to the hand puppets built by Klee for his son Felix "they are children who have survived their childhood, grown old, but retained something of that early state."³⁸⁵

Puppets constitute an extremely rich reservoir of out-of-ordinary exploratory possibilities: disturbing doppelgangers, modulations of scale, and miniaturizations. I will focus in particular on the possibility that puppetry offers to play with a radical variation in scale. In this sense, puppets extend the possibilities to enact a wide range of stories: the puppeteer can manipulate, like a giant surgeon, minuscule bits of the existing or maneuver gigantic creatures that redefine the scale of our individual possibilities. This can allow for the development of tales in which giant beings can crush us, wipe out an entire city, and pose a threat that cannot be dealt with by a single but only by resorting to the heterogeneity of individuals with their specific abilities. But the giant can also be an ally for battles that we would not win without its help; it can lend itself as a bridge to cross deep ravines or allow us to look far into the distance if it allows us to climb on its shoulders. At the same time, we can animate tiny creatures inhabiting completely unexplored yet familiar places, silent companions, perhaps secretly allied or hostile. In the development of our narratives, these giant or tiny beings can catch fire and light up the night or melt before our eyes, be crushed, change in form, multiply and express

³⁸⁴ Schumann, P., 2001. "What, At the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets and Performing Objects?" in Bell, J. (Ed.), *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p.49.

³⁸⁵ Gross, K., 2011. *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p.148.

different characters, be even more mobile, flexible, and soft or extremely rigid copies of ourselves, give birth to beings of other species, mingle with other living and non-living forms can take several beatings in the head without ever dying, being pierced or crushed, torn to pieces and yet still animated.

These enacted objects look like visitors from another world that bring with them new, completely different ways of living: new landscapes open up upon their entrance. They could be light and extremely mobile, but at the same time, heavy and rigid, tiny or gigantic, fragile or so resilient that they could survive for centuries, saggily soft or stubbornly solid. Puppets are seeds of unknown practices and material agglomerations that contain other kinds of gestures, postures, voices, and ways of living within them.

In the course of this thesis, masks, puppets, and costumes have been considered because they help us to explore imaginative dimensions that our own bodies cannot “afford” – this is the core of the *transformative chain* developed in exploration #1. These monstrous practices are “outside of practical and/or rational possibilities” that could help us explore and transform our ways of living. The puppet is transformative in the sense that through active engagement with it, a transfiguration is produced that can trigger a transformation, that is, reorganize our form of life.

When understood as a transformative tool, etymology could provide a reference. It is from the Latin word *pupa* that “puppet” is derived. *Pupa* in Latin means little girl or doll. In entomology, this term refers to the intermediate quiescent phase between the larval and adult state characteristic of the metamorphosis of holometabolous insects. In this phase, the insect is in a state of absolute immobility and at the same time undergoes profound transformations of tissues and organs in the function of future adult structures. In puppetry, something inert could unfound changes in view of possible future life forms, radically different lives.

In order to understand from the start what I mean when I talk about puppets as a transformative tool, I will briefly use some practical examples of *participatory puppets* that will be the focus of this intervention. It should be immediately made clear that *participatory puppets* are potentially transformative, but this does not mean they cannot be used to preserve and re-present a predetermined order.³⁸⁶ As highlighted in intervention #2, the opportunity to play and adopt flexible behavior or simply perform a task can be offered based on how the dynamic imaginative niche is structured. My emphasis, beyond the example brought, is on the playful dimension that allows cross-fertilization of one's abilities. What I want to highlight is that the participative puppet, at different levels, can foster a pooling of skills and thus the opportunity to create new possibilities. Said in a way that will only become clear at the end, the *participatory puppet* is potentially transformative, as it allows us to collectively inhabit its belly, which here is the belly of a monster.

The practice of animating giant figures and carrying them in procession through public space for entertainment or celebration, involving numerous puppeteers, is ancient and crisscross multiple cultures. A giant puppet, the *participatory puppet*, is a puppet whose size allows it to be visible in the street by a crowd and is usually used in pageants

³⁸⁶ See Ianniello, A., Habets, D., “Partecipating Monsters.”

or street theater. Giant puppets are manipulated by puppeteers with strings, rods, stilts, or different kinds of mechanisms or a combination of these. The most prominent example of traditional rod giant puppets is the Chinese New Year dragon puppet, a giant dragon-shaped animated by up to fifty puppeteers. I am not referring to the display of organizing a society that this traditional object enacts but using it precisely as an ancestor and prototype of the *participatory puppet*. What interests me in this intervention is not, in this case, the dragon itself – a monster of which all Chinese feel they are the children – rather it is how different people coordinate to animate a giant figure. The dragon choreographies, enacted by puppeteers, have very suggestive names such as, for example, "Cave of Clouds" or "Dragon Chasing the Pearl." To develop the typical movement of the sea creature, coordination in a succession of each cylindrical section is necessary. The dragon's motions develop into spirals that allow the body to weave about itself. Puppeteers, at times, through acrobatic movements jump over sections of the body or mount on top of each other to allow the dragon to extend in height. The giant body moves only through well-coordinated personal skills.

The individual by coupling with others and materials is transfigured into a collective body that enacts the mythological figure of the sinuous, mobile, and wise dragon that wanders into "caves of clouds."

In one of its contemporary forms, which in this following example takes on anthropomorphic features, *Shipwrecked Giant* – together with other giant puppets part of the performance *Liverpool's Dream* – has been carried through the streets by the French *Royal De Luxe* company since 1993. Standing 10 meters high and weighing 2 1/2 tons is made of steel, lime and poplar wood. With the participation of numerous puppeteers engaged with ropes and rods and various types of machinery including cranes, the French company animates giant puppets to unfold an imaginative practice that extends beyond the performer's bodies and across a long-time span. This particular performance is part of *Liverpool Giant Saga's* third creation, the final act of the *Giant Spectacular* trilogy. This intricate series of chapters that make up larger trilogies expresses how the giant's opening possibilities unfold on multiple temporal scales. "Larger than life" is not only the giant body, but also the long-term temporal scope that these creatures allow us to explore. Even in this sense, they are monstrous. The *Shipwrecked Giant* is thus transformative in that, as well as extending our exploratory possibilities, it shows how we extend our abilities and collaborate to animate it – the heterogeneous skills of puppeteers are brought to the forefront here. In addition, this giant opens the surroundings for our playful activity through pretend play.

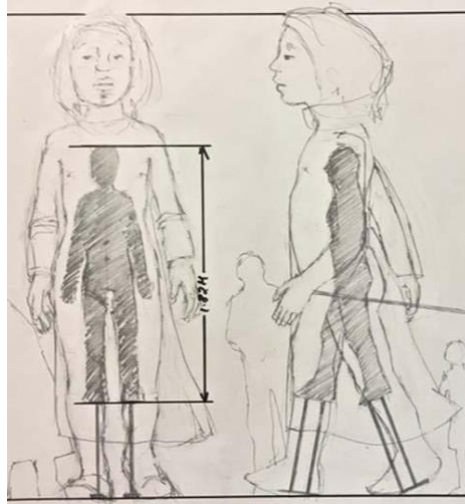


[The Royal de Luxe's *Shipwrecked Giant* walks along the promenade at New Brighton as he takes part in *Liverpool's Dream* in Liverpool, England, on October 5, 2018.]

The transformative process of the puppet is well exemplified by another contemporary giant, *Little Amal*, a three meters puppet depicting a Syrian refugee girl created by the South African *Handspring Puppet Company*. This puppet is the main character of *The Walk*, a performance that travels through Turkey, Greece, Italy, France, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and the United States to draw attention to young refugees and their needs. During its journey, it has been greeted in different ways: in Larissa, Greece, for example, in late August 2021, Amal was welcomed with spitting and stone-throwing. Here is clear as puppetry, questioning some of our practices, constitutes an occasion to change them. Again, it does so by foregrounding the participatory nature of its animation and, in no small way, through an exploratory tool related to play.

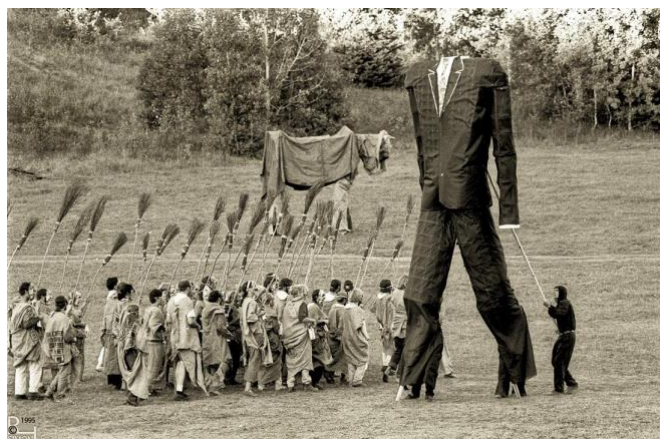


[*Little Amal* by Handspring Puppet Company. A puppeteer on stilts is embedded in the structure, while two others with rods animate the arms.]



[In this sketch by the Handspring Puppet Company, the puppeteer inhabiting the belly of *Little Amal* transfigures himself “extending” his or her own abilities to let a giant walk in the public space. The transformation could happen in the long term at the collective behavior level, for example, by changing the way the condition of refugees is viewed and then intervening in the policy that relates to their status.]

In speaking of giant puppets, one cannot but refer to the pioneering American company *Bread and Puppet*, founded in New York by Peter Schumann in 1963, concerned above all with developing performances that put urgent political issues at the forefront. Through their pageants with large puppets, they aimed to change how certain questions, such as the Vietnam War, were perceived.



[*The Headless Man, with Sweepers and Beast. Our Domestic Resurrection Circus*, Glover Vermont, 1995. Bread and Puppet. Photograph by Ronald Simon.]

What we see is a pageant with an elegantly dressed suited, six-meter-tall man walking headless.

Two puppeteers are embedded in the two legs and animate the giant in cooperation with one who sustains the torso.]

The puppets offer multiple possibilities for exploring affordances beyond our reach and augmenting our abilities. As mentioned, the aspect that I will highlight in this *transformative intervention* is precisely the way in which puppetry, as a reorganizational practice, brings to the forefront *how we collaborate to animate it* or said otherwise *how to animate it, we collaborate*. To do this, I will try to sketch a brief history of the puppet to the point of tracing his presence in the future (2). I will identify the value of scale variation in child's play and adult's reorganizational practices (3), analyze how a puppet can show the way we "extend" our body and how we animate the surroundings (4), try to clarify how, engaging with a *participatory puppet*, we could pool, cross-fertilize our practices and playfully explore our environment as a Twin Earth (5). I will, thus, examine two contemporary puppets that question how we animate the environment (6). At the end of this transformative intervention, I will present a *real-life thinking model* already anticipated at the beginning of this intervention (7).

2. An outcast in the future

In presenting a brief and partial historical account of the puppet for the purpose of situating this intervention in the context of an ancient exploratory practice, I will highlight one key element of it, namely, the marginal position that this practice has held within the arts in general.

In this way, I attempt to trace an extremely incomplete trajectory in which this monstrous tool from being a marginalized figure reappears as an exploratory tool in future narratives within the film industry. To do this, in the brief space I devote to it in this chapter, I will examine two attitudes of animation, solitary and intimate (Robert Anton) and collective and monstrous (Jabba the Hutt). Zooming in and out highlights the different planes in which the puppet operates. In doing so, I will take the liberty to play with historical cues and personal insights.

In order to briefly sketch out a possible history of puppetry, I can only start with a statement by Peter Schumann which immediately sheds light on what it means to attempt to reorganize the vicissitudes of such an elusive performative object that is so reluctant to be classified:

Puppet theatre, the employment and dance of dolls, effigies, and puppets, is not only historically obscure and unable to shake off its ties to shamanistic healing and other

inherently strange and hard-to-prove social services. It is also, by definition of its most persuasive characteristics, an anarchic art, subversive and untameable by nature, an art which is easier researched in police records than in theatre chronicles, an art which by fate and spirit does not aspire to represent governments or civilizations, but prefers its own secret and demeaning stature in society, representing, more or less, the demons of that society and definitely not its institutions.³⁸⁷

Since puppetry is present in popular theater contexts where the role of the written text is usually downplayed, documents testifying to its historical development are very scarce. Puppets, as already mentioned, have always been used within societies of every kind across the globe for purposes of entertainment or ritual. The first written reflections on the art of puppetry are to be found in the 1738 memoir *Naniwa Miyage* by the Japanese playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon. In Europe, the fascination with puppetry arose in the Romantic era, especially thanks to Kleist's text *On the Marionette Theater* of 1810, while the theater avant-gardes of the 20th century placed it at the center of their research as a revealing means of a new form of theater and intending to question a naturalistic approach centered mainly on the psychological developments of the character.

Apart from a revived interest in recent decades, and its use within the film industry before but also after the intervention of CGI (Computer-generated imagery), puppet theater has certainly always been an outcast form of theatrical art aimed mainly at children. Perhaps it is precisely this marginalization that has been its good fortune, an art form that prefers "its own secret and demeaning stature"³⁸⁸ rather than the spotlight of fame.

Such a defiladed position allowed, for example, puppets in Tudor England to stage medieval Passion plays at a time when they were banned, just as in the 1960s and 1970s the American company Bread and Puppet could stage politically inconvenient issues for official theaters.

In practice, puppetry is a secondary and clandestine art that has always cultivated a concern for material things and their capacity to act. The intimacy with the material and its residual position allows for free yet uncanny explorations.

As with *intervention #3* where I used the cue provided by the Greek tragic mask as a starting point, here too, the cue is provided by something that has somehow disappeared. In this particular case, we are not searching in the past centuries but in the 1970s in New York, and unlike the case related to the Greek mask here the performance objects, the puppets, are preserved and available for close inspection. The problem, in this case, is that there is no documentation of any kind of performance except for a couple of photos. This is because Robert Anton, the puppeteer from which this brief overview begins, forbade the visual documentation of his works. We can, however, rely on the accounts of Diana Vreeland, Robert Wilson, Susan Sontag, John Lennon, and Yoko Ono

³⁸⁷ Schumann, P.,1990. "The Radicality of the Puppet Theater." *TDR, The Drama Review*, 35,4 (T 132) 75-83, p.75.

³⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

who described hypnotic and highly intimate performances in Anton's apartment attended by a maximum of 18 people.

In his darkened New York flat in front of a small theater, Anton wore, like his puppets, a black velvet turtleneck, and the ritualistic and silent staging of rebirth and transformation took place on a small stage, also made of black velvet. In this way, only his face and that of his miniaturized colleagues emerged from the penumbra. Anton's face was impassive while that of his puppet's faces are mostly old and 'used up'. During his performances, Anton fed his 'actors' – as he called them –, operated on them, and extracted organs or colored stones from their bodies. His movements, like those of a “puppeteer-surgeon,”³⁸⁹ probed and manipulated in such a way as to bring about unexpected transfigurations. The “actors” are characterized by heads sculpted to the smallest detail, measuring about 10 centimeters. Their faces are mostly old and worn out and, as Anke Kempkes points out in the press release for the exhibition held in New York in December 2016 in the Broadway 1602 Gallery, they embody what Rainer Maria Rilke formulated as “the non-face that remains when a person has consumed all his faces.”³⁹⁰

His 'actors' are inspired by the people Anton observed in Verdi Square Park, near his flat at 44 West 70th Street in New York, or by characters from Federico Fellini's and Bob Fosse's movies. Of the 39 monstrous' figures who survived after his death in 1984 at the age of only 35, they include clowns, cardinals, rabbis, skeletal dancers, assorted wise men with a blindfold that hides their third eye, beasts, a bird woman, an egghead from whose crack a monstrosity emerges. One puppet bears the name Alter Ego. Such a name gives a good idea of the exorcist character of these miniatures.

The almost clandestine nature of his performance well embodies puppetry's subversive and outcast nature. But as Schumann argues, it is precisely being in a state of the minority that is the great fortune of the puppeteer.



³⁸⁹ Gross, K., *Puppet*, p.44.

³⁹⁰ Rainer Maria Rilke 1910, as quoted by Anke Kempkes in the press release for the exhibition *The Theatre of Robert Anton*, held in New York in December 2016 at Broadway 1602 Gallery.

[One of the rare photographs documenting Robert Anton's performances.]

The face and hands of Anton, as well as the puppets, emerge from the darkness. His style is in some ways a reinterpretation of the traditional Japanese bunraku where the puppets are animated on sight by three puppeteers. In this image, Robert Anton appears to be intent on feeding one of his 'actors' with a liquid so he is literally giving it life by taking care of its sustenance, keeping it alive, and animating him.

Photograph by Ana Mundo, Bette Stoler Archive.]



[A Robert Anton "actor."]

To borrow an expression used by Gross: “puppets offer a refuge for fantasies otherwise exiled.”³⁹¹ I would argue that, in exile here, there are sociomaterial invitations completely out of the ordinary, unexplored corners of our environment that can only be reached by “extending” our abilities through tools that are in this case *monstrous*.

You could almost say that in Anton’s picture, an adult appears to be playing with dolls. And this is the aspect that interests me, the exposure of practices of exploration that are common to the child and adult condition indistinctly. Gross uses the romantic category of innocence to define this type of exploration:

³⁹¹ Gross, K., *Puppet*, p.60.

Puppet theater draws us closely to something like innocence. This theater feeds on intensities of imaginative love that are native to children at play, so ready to transform ordinary objects into something else, to give these objects a surprising life, to allow them to crystallize thoughts otherwise invisible. [...] The innocence of the puppet keeps the imagination open to the power of unknown things, even death; Children are often asked to be content with puppets that are merely soft and yielding, content with wheedling cuteness and moralism, rather than being given a wildness they might crave or a danger that might spark bravery and love. Such a contrived innocence can be itself more creepy than even the most violent and grotesque of puppet shows. It comes more to reflect the fears of adults than the wishes of children. It distrusts children's ability both to commit their belief to fantastic worlds and to face the real one. As William Blake knew, the category of innocence is itself a thing always in need of repair and of testing. It is something that needs continually to be reimagined.³⁹²

As Gross still remarks:

It is as if innocence were an endless mine of substance, a fissionable material hidden in a huge diversity of works and stories, a talisman or password by which to enter into hidden, dangerous realms, both of literature and of performance.³⁹³

In its long semi-clandestine history, the puppet can be found in such diverse places as squares, cemeteries, temples, children's bedrooms, and even, surprisingly, among the instruments used by filmmakers or video game creators in forms that we would be hard-pressed to recognize as puppets.

It could be argued that in this partial history I trace, Anton's work shows the marginalization of puppets which is just a child's game; then the puppets retreat into the backstage of the cinema world.

I will dwell briefly on considering the use of the puppet within a famous sci-fi cinematographic saga in which, in an emblematic way, the future is imaginatively explored. In this sense, it turns out to be even more unusual to use this ancient, rudimentary, and marginal tool in narrative settings that reckon with unheard-of scientific scenarios. Thus, it seems ironic the fate of subversive art resurfaces with a central role in speculations about the future: to understand the future in which we will live we play with puppets. I will focus here on one case in particular that, by its nature, constitutes a particularly interesting example to further develop what I mean by a *participatory puppet* that as a monstrous tool allows us to come to terms with future threats: Jubba the Hutt, the iconic puppet featured in *Return of the Jedi* from George Lucas' *Star Wars* saga.³⁹⁴

³⁹² Gross, K., *Puppet*, pp. 141-142.

³⁹³ Ivi, p. 153.

³⁹⁴ Although the opening sequence recites the famous: "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away....", George Lucas deliberately left the time location ambiguous so that he could free himself from hard science fiction principles typical of narratives such as *Star Trek*.

The limelight has often been trodden in recent decades by this rudimentary form of exploration in the context of TV or film shows (*Muppets*) or in major Broadway theater productions (*The Lion King*, *Avenue Q*, *War Horse*) but less striking is its operation – invisible – in the context of the collective construction of the imaginary of the future since it is concealed. A marginal and semi-clandestine tool, at work in an outcast sphere of the arts, it operates underground to anticipate the future.



[Jabba the Hutt is a fictional character representing a gangster of about 600 years, who leads criminals, bounty hunters, smugglers, assassins, and guards through which he can run his criminal empire. He first appears in *Return of the Jedi* (1983), although he is mentioned in both *Star Wars* (1977) and *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980).]



[Jabba the Hutt is a large snail-like extraterrestrial with anthropomorphic arms, no lower limbs, and a long tail. In *Return of the Jedi*, he was realized through a large latex puppet controlled by a troupe of puppeteers, while in later films and new sequences introduced in the original trilogy, computer graphics were used.]



[A drawing of Jabba's interior taken from the documentary aired on PBS television in 1983, *Star Wars to Jedi: The Making of a Saga*.

In this sketch, the giant puppet is animated almost entirely from the inside. One puppeteer, Mike Edmonds, controlled the tail; another, Dave Barclay, the right arm, jaw, and lip movement; and the third, Toby Philpott, controlled the left arm and tongue.

In the belly of the monster, as in the cabin of a spaceship, the exploration of future space is taking place, through quite unusual coordination between disparate skills and practices. In addition, another operator animates the mouth and nostrils, another blows smoke when Jabba smokes the pipe and another remote operator animates the eyes. Each operator inside the monstrous body had a headset and monitor inside the creature, so he could control how his movements appeared on the camera.]



Dave Barclay animates Jabba's right arm and the jaw and lips.



Toby Philpott, controls the left arm and tongue.



An operator animates mouths and nostrils...



and Jabba's lungs.



An operator smokes a cigar and injects smoke into a tube when Jabba smokes a pipe.



Mike Edmonds, controlling the tail.

[In these images, taken from the documentary *From Star Wars to Jedi: The Making of a Saga*, it is possible to see how the puppeteers are embedded into the creature's body fully coupled with their tools. Each according to his or her ability develops a certain aspect of puppetry practice.

The most striking aspect of these images is that they appear to depict the interior of a spacecraft. More than the animation of a puppet seems to be at play here, a real exploration of unknown

spaces: a group of puppeteers locked in the monster's belly is launched into distant galaxies.

Fantastic worlds, those far into the future and space, are an opportunity to explore new ways to be monstrous, that is, to pool, hybridize and contaminate.

The spaces explored here are those of collaboration and coordination completely out of the ordinary.]

This suggestion that closes the brief and unbiased historical account opens up the exploration of the puppet as a *monstrous tool* that can allow us to investigate possibilities beyond our reach.

The example paradigmatic of Jabba the Hutt highlights collective play as a way to explore unconventional affordances. This is expressed by the tangle of activities that Jabba puts in place because a pooling process can allow new opportunities to open up.

3. Playing with scale variation

Why, as children or adults, do we animate an object, small or giant, through our environment? Exploring our surroundings through miniaturization or enlargement is a practice that children and adults share, for different purposes. As adults, for example, it is a technique by which we zoom in and out in order to better focus on significant aspects or situations in general in architectural or military settings, construction, or medicine but also simply to indicate the location of a store thanks to the glass and salt shaker when we are having lunch with a friend. My interest here is in the practice of miniaturization or enlargement in the animation of a figure as part of the explorative practices which are those ludic in which the children are involved (3.1) and those play for “adults” that are reorganizational practices (3.3). I will try to focus on these two – overlapped – areas in the next two subsections and I will introduce a study that, as well as linking these two dimensions, will allow me to frame the play as an opening to materials and others (3.2).

3.1 Child's Play³⁹⁵

The child, when playing, using elements out-of-scale, could produce surprises in his or her exploration of the environment to which he or she tries to respond. I propose that variations in scale are potentially unconventional accelerators, and a puppet is a tool

³⁹⁵ *Child's Play* is the title of a 1988 horror film directed by Tom Holland where Chucky, a doll – a paradigmatic object of childhood explorations related to pretend play – comes alive and begins to claim victims. The story tells about a serial killer, who, shortly before his death, through a voodoo ritual, poured his soul into a doll for the purpose of later reentering a human body, precisely the body of the first person to whom he revealed his true identity. He will have to do this in a short time, otherwise, he will be trapped forever in the doll. For such a goal he chooses Andy, a child who receives the doll as a birthday present. The title of this section is meant to allude to the exploratory potential of the animated object that turning around its precoded nature offers unheard of scenarios to investigate.

that could allow us to intercept unusual and out-of-scale “slopes.” In this sense, the puppet is an ally of the little “slope chaser” as for the adult. More specifically, pretense play is what the puppet helps to enact. Before dwelling briefly on this, I will give a quick rundown of some addresses about the play’s nature I will discard that will help me to better introduce the Andersen et al. account already considered in exploration #2.

Play is complex to define; it involves a great expenditure of energy but has no obvious function. It is generally understood as a spontaneous behavior produced by individuals free from disease, stress, and starvation³⁹⁶ and is associated with positive feelings.³⁹⁷ Animal species that engage more in playful behavior tend to mature more slowly, and have larger brains, higher intelligence, and good learning abilities.³⁹⁸ In addition, it is generally recognized that young individuals tend to play more than older individuals. With respect to why animals play, according to evolutionary theories, ludic activities would increase the individual's chances of survival and reproduction. Since play is an energy-intensive and risky behavior, it must be able to improve fitness in other ways. Following this hypothesis, young animals would play to acquire the skills needed to become more efficient adults.³⁹⁹ Non-adaptive hypotheses refer to play as a by-product of a surplus of resources.⁴⁰⁰ Cognitive accounts hypothesize that pretended play is a manifestation of the ability to *think counterfactually*,⁴⁰¹ the ability to meta-represent,⁴⁰² or that pretended play could develop a range of cognitive functions⁴⁰³. According to *theory-theory*, which has been very influential in recent years, play is a form of informal experimentation⁴⁰⁴ that enables children to optimize information acquisition.⁴⁰⁵ Following most of these accounts, children play because playing is fun and rewarding, intrinsically motivating. Precisely this aspect would seem, according to Andersen and at., unclear. That is: why should play be fun? In an attempt to account for what is fun about information acquisition and uncertainty reduction in play, Andersen and at. develop an enactive address to play. Information acquisition cannot be the only explanation for why

³⁹⁶ Burghardt, G.M., 2005. *The genesis of animal play: Testing the limits*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

³⁹⁷ Bateson, P., Martin, P., *Play, playfulness, creativity and innovation*.

³⁹⁸ Gopnik, A., 2016. *The gardener and the carpenter: What the new science of child development tells us about the relationship between parents and children*. Macmillan, New York.

³⁹⁹ Groos, K., 1898. *The play of animals*, D. Appleton, New York; Fagan, R., 1981. *Animal play behavior* Oxford University Press, New York; Baldwin, J. D., Baldwin, J. I., 1977. *The role of learning phenomena in the ontogeny of exploration and play*. In Chevalier-Skolnikoff, S., Poirier, F.E., (Eds.), *Primate bio-social development*. Garland, New York, pp. 343-406; Bateson, P., 2017. *Behavior, development and evolution*. Open Book Publishers, Cambridge, UK.

⁴⁰⁰ Burghardt, G.M., 2005. *The genesis of animal play*.

⁴⁰¹ Lillard, A., 2001. “Pretend play as twin earth”; Gopnik, A., 2009. *The philosophical baby: What children's minds tell us about truth, love & the meaning of life*. Random House, New York.

⁴⁰² Leslie, A. M., 1987. “Pretense and representation: The origins of” theory of mind.” *Psychological review*, 94(4), 412.

⁴⁰³ Singer, D. G., Singer, J. L., 1990. *The house of make-believe: Children's play and the developing imagination*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

⁴⁰⁴ Gopnik, A. and Wellman, H.M., 2012. “Reconstructing constructivism: Causal models, Bayesian learning mechanisms, and the theory theory.” *Psychological bulletin*, 138(6), p.1085.

⁴⁰⁵ Bonawitz, E.B., van Schijndel, T.J., Friel, D. and Schulz, L., 2012. “Children balance theories and evidence in exploration, explanation, and learning.” *Cognitive psychology*, 64(4), pp.215-234; Cook, C., Goodman, N. D., Schulz, L. E., 2011. “Where science starts: Spontaneous experiments in preschoolers’ exploratory play.” *Cognition*, 120(3), 341-349.

children play.⁴⁰⁶ Very often, children in play create problems they do not necessarily need to solve and, in doing so, expend a good amount of energy for no apparent benefit. Children create surprises that are exploratory challenges. As understood here, according to Andersen and at., play is a behavior in which the agent, “in contexts of freedom from the demands of certain competing cognitive systems,”⁴⁰⁷ deliberately seeks or creates surprising situations that are neither too much nor too little unpredictable with the goal of resolving them. Play is associated with a quality of well-being because “the agent is reducing surprise faster than expected.”⁴⁰⁸ As mentioned in *exploration #2*, play could be understood as a variety of niche construction in which “the organism modulates its physical and social environment to maximize the productive potential of surprise.”⁴⁰⁹ That means that the playful agents are not just “slope chasers,” but also “slope-builders” who modulate environmental constraints that can generate a “trusted” amount of surprise and uncertainty. If the surroundings do not provide surprises or aspects that generate uncertainty, children and adults combat boredom by creating an environment that fosters these experiences. Play, in this sense, consists of the deliberate creation of error that allows for “the further exploration of productive surprises.”⁴¹⁰

As Andersen and at. point out, if some children were placed in a room in which there would be no surprise – or uncertainty– inducing aspects, then after a while, children would surely feel the urge to combat boredom by reshaping the environment for the purpose of being surprised by the unpredictable. This active construction of “slopes” is extremely varied.

The puppet is a trusted ally of the child, through which to activate too familiar and boring environments or to cope with highly unpredictable ones. The play that the child enacts is seemingly pointless but fun, because the child creates problems that he or she can often solve at a better rate than expected. Playing with “trusted surprises” let us say “I’m doing well” that is “one does better than expected at transforming an unpredictable reality into a predictable one.”⁴¹¹

In order to be neither too surprised nor too bored, thus the child could use a trusted tool: a puppet that has a specific pretending purpose which is the attempt to “animate what is dead.” At the age of one year, children begin to pretend that objects, persons, or places are different from what they actually are. Pretend play usually peaks when children are between three and five years of age.⁴¹² In this paragraph, I am interested in how they pretend that what is inanimate is animate and how this can lead them to explore the world from an out-of-the-ordinary position. According to the American philosopher and developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik, children prioritize pretend play because it enables them to test a range of hypotheses about how the world works. Pretend play

⁴⁰⁶ Chu, J., Schulz, L., 2020. “Not Playing by the Rules: Exploratory Play, Rational Action, and Efficient Search.” *PsyArXiv*, June 3.

⁴⁰⁷ Andersen, M. M., Kiverstein, J., Miller, M., Roepstorff, A., “Play in Predictive Minds”, p.1.

⁴⁰⁸ Ivi, p. 23.

⁴⁰⁹ Ivi, p. 7.

⁴¹⁰ Ivi, p. 27.

⁴¹¹ Ivi, p.24.

⁴¹² Piaget, J., 1962. *Play, imitation and dreams in childhood*, Norton, New York and London; Lillard, A.S., 2017. “Why do the children (pretend) play?” *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 21(11), pp.826-834.

implies “applying non-literal meanings to actions and objects,”⁴¹³ it involves “imitative actions in a non-functional context, such as pressing a toy stethoscope against the chest of a doll,”⁴¹⁴ in sum pretend play is about the “voluntary transformation of the here and now, the you and me, and the this or that, along with any potential action that these components of a situation might have.”⁴¹⁵ In their paper, Andersen and al. refer to the professor of psychology at the University of Virginia Angeline Stoll Lillard who in 2001 proposed the “Twin Earth model”⁴¹⁶ of pretense, according to which pretend play is like the imaginary world Twin Earth, a concept that philosophers use in their thought experiments.⁴¹⁷ Following Lillard, the Twin Earth, apart from a few parameters, it’s like the Earth. Children, as well as philosophers, explore an imaginary world but, crucially, by changing only a few parameters in such a way as to meet “the right amount” of surprise. In this way, following Singer and Singer, the child “creates a new field of stimuli” that can sometimes be seen “as a characteristic response to an environment in which there is considerable redundancy.”⁴¹⁸ According to Andersen and al., pretending play may be seen as “a way that children modify their environment to yield more surprises”⁴¹⁹ and thus “enjoying just the right doses of relative complexity.”⁴²⁰ Children

by creating an imaginary world, which contains only few deviations from the real world, [...] shape their environment to set themselves up for small surprises where none were to be found before. In other words, children readily introduce uncertainty into environments that are lacking it in an effort to combat boredom.⁴²¹

Playing with a miniaturized or gigantic aspect of the sociomaterial environment could be a booster in creating surprises and uncertainty, a useful tool for out-of-scale slopes. Dead things come to life and create “a novel stimulus field.” We do this by transfiguring sociomaterial constraints that allow our exploration to the extent that we can still trust ourselves and our surroundings⁴²². What was dead, completely still, through our engagement and testing the norms learned so far, is “now alive” and guides us into a “different world.” In this sense, “play generates novel ways of dealing with the environment”⁴²³ imaginatively transformed into a Twin Earth and crossed by an animated out-of-scale figure. What needs to be emphasized is that playful intervention causes the environment to be altered with respect to a few parameters; this is enough to bring us into a “new world.”

⁴¹³ Bateson, P., Martin, P., 2013. *Play, playfulness, creativity and innovation*, p.14.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹⁵ Garvey, C., 1990. *Play*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.p.82.

⁴¹⁶ Lillard, A., 2001. “Pretend play as twin earth: A social-cognitive analysis.”

⁴¹⁷ Pessin, A., Goldberg, S., (Eds.),1996. *The twin earth chronicles*, M. E. Sharpe, London.

⁴¹⁸ Singer, D. G., Singer, J. L.,1990. *The house of make-believe: Children's play and the developing imagination*, p. 145.

⁴¹⁹ Andersen, M. M., Kiverstein, J., Miller, M., Roepstorff, A., “Play in Predictive Minds.” p.41.

⁴²⁰ Ivi, p.25.

⁴²¹ Ivi, p.33.

⁴²² Ianniello, A., Habets, D., “Partecipating Monsters.”

⁴²³ Bateson, P. and Martin, P., 2013. *Play, playfulness, creativity and innovation*, p.4.

Playing with the enlarged or miniaturized figure falls thus within the sphere of pretense play in which, crucially in this specific case, it is introduced an out-of-scale element into the situation that could “maximize the productive potential of surprise.”⁴²⁴ This means that the child explores his environment through pretend play using, for example, a tiny figure that prompts him to reconfigure the surroundings according to the scale he or she has introduced, in addition, of course, to the possibility of manipulating and controlling fictional characters and the imaginary situation in general – an aspect I will not focus on here.

Similarly, in my opinion, the adult – even if the range and openness of affordances an adult is open towards and practice an adult engages is much wider–, through the introduction, in particular, of giants in the streets, opens up the environment to our exploration as a Twin Earth, but this also, as we will see, emblematically could entail the possibility of observing the way we animate it collaborating and in a condition of pooling and so potentially cross-fertilizing our practices. In other words, a *participatory puppet*, carried in a procession through the streets, provides an opportunity to observe how it is animated in a collaborative way, and at the same time the crossing could open up the surroundings to our playful and creative exploration. Animation takes place on two levels, that of the object used in the play and that of the imaginatively reconfigured environment. Concerning adult play, compared to child play, one can speak of an extension of complexity but of similarity in the "means to explore". In the case of adults, exploration and opening the field of possibilities should be emphasized. Both child and adult modify the environment to attempt to enter a Twin Earth; each will then explore it according to their skills and practices.

In the adult play thus, through the introduction of the unconventional, the field of affordances can be opened up. These are the monstrosities that I deal with and are enacted through active engagement with *monstrous tools*. The monster is a way to play; the enactment of the transformative chain is an adult form of playful exploration.

3.2 Multiply ducks, open up to materials and others

I introduce here a study conducted in 2017 by Katrin Heimann and Andreas Roepstorff working at the *Interacting Minds Centre at Aarhus University*⁴²⁵ that allows me to distinguish play from playfulness and move on to the adult, more complex area of play.

To better clarify the terms at stake here: play is to be understood as that behavior in which one engages without any definite and obvious purpose; playfulness is a state. Play is not always playful, and to be playful it must have certain characteristics. If the surprise is

⁴²⁴ Andersen, M. M., Kiverstein, J., Miller, M., Roepstorff, A., “Play in Predictive Minds”; As Andersen refers in a private conversation, It should be reiterated that the deliberate introduction of an element of uncertainty into the surrounding environment does not necessarily cause a surprise.

⁴²⁵ Heimann, K., S., Roepstorff, A., “How playfulness motivates – putative looping effects of autonomy and surprise revealed by micro-phenomenological investigations.”

“trusted” then playfulness is favored, or better, the surprise is one of the “stepping stones” into playfulness. So, the authors point out through an empirical study the experiential nature of becoming playful in adults that are tied to the seeking or creation of unconventional. Heimann and Roepstorff define playfulness as “an attitude, mode or mental position, which can be modulated independently of the activity performed and the general character of the person.”⁴²⁶ As children teach us, everything around us can trigger play. According to the authors, playfulness is a specific experiential state related to creativity. In this sense, every aspect of our environment could be creatively reconfigured through a playful process. So, I propose that by introducing an unconventional affordance deliberately, our surroundings could be transfigured if we use a new working definition according to which: “playfulness may be conceptualized as an attitude of throwing off constraints, which facilitates an explorative interaction with materials and others”⁴²⁷. In other words, what surrounds us could be reconfigured if we introduce the right amount of unconventional, which puts us in a playful state, i.e., free of constraints and free to explore. The unexpected element we then introduce into the environment, if it is neither too predictable nor overwhelming, loops back allowing us to freely explore.

Heimann and Roepstorff’s research was based on an experiment involving 22 participants who were each given six equal sets of six LEGO bricks, each set allowing them to build a small duck. Four bricks were yellow and two were red, and one of the yellow bricks had an eye on opposite sides. The six LEGO bricks can be combined in more than 13 million different ways, giving participants the opportunity to build many more duck models. The experimenter presents a prototype duck and participants are asked to build five ducks in two rounds, for a total of ten ducks. In one round, participants were asked to build the ducks in a way that looked playful to them; in another round, in a way that did not look playful. The researchers found that participants in the “playful” round built different types of ducks, while many simply built the same duck over and over again in the round in which they were “serious.” In describing the playful round, participants defined “autonomy” and “surprise” as key elements of their play experience. Also, they reported that in the playful round, their building process led them to be surprised by their final duck models. The surprise of being able to build original duck models prompted them to build even more unusual models. In commenting on this experiment Andersen in his book on play says that “if play entails a steady flow of small surprises, that might explain why play and creativity seem to be so closely linked.”⁴²⁸ Heimann and Roepstorff summarize the micro-phenomenology⁴²⁹ of people engaged in

⁴²⁶ Heimann, K., S., Roepstorff, A., “How playfulness motivates – putative looping effects of autonomy and surprise revealed by micro-phenomenological investigations.” p.1.

⁴²⁷ Ivi, p. 13

⁴²⁸ Andersen, M. M., 2022. *Play*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore MD, p.59.

⁴²⁹ Micro-phenomenology interview is a methodology for eliciting past experiences in a well-controlled manner proposed recently by Petitmengin (Petitmengin, C. 2006. “Describing one’s subjective experience in the second person: an interview method for a science of consciousness.” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*. 5, 229–269); It’s worth mentioning here *Experiencing Life*, a micro-phenomenological intervention by Katrin Heimann. In 2021, the cognitive scientist of Aarhus University in Denmark, was invited by Studio Olafur Eliasson to collaborate with the Fondation Beyeler museum team to conduct a series of interviews with a group of visitors of *Life*, a site-specific artwork by artist Olafur Eliasson, installed at Fondation Beyeler near Basel, Switzerland, in 2021. As you can read on the

the test:

The majority of participants in the playful condition built five different constructions, some of which did not even represent ducks. Rather than the outcome of a conscious strategy, this appeared at least partly to be the result of a distinct openness to the process induced by the autonomous stance taken. Participants' reports furthermore suggested that such openness might have been facilitated by a conscious care to keep up a good mood and a low stress level. This mood management appears in turn to have allowed for a higher sensibility toward the building material [...]. In the non-playful condition on the other hand, the majority of participants produced several copies of one and the same construction. Furthermore 10 out of 22 participants reported negative feelings, such as stress and boredom, arising from such building. Interviews also indicated that such feelings might have reduced the sensibility for the material, by this further narrowing the action space available.⁴³⁰

The point I would like to foreground is that playfulness allows an experience of opening toward the process and the material, non-playfulness fosters a narrowing of the action space.

This experiment can, of course, be extended to plays in which others participate. So, coming back to our *participatory puppet* – as will become clearer throughout this chapter –, in the playful state of mind, we are *open to the process that includes others crucially*. This means that the participatory puppet could foreground that we, in the playful state, can go “from not seeing to seeing” thanks to the openness to the world and its multiple possibilities. Furthermore, being free from a pre-established task enables us to explore new patterns instead of “copying the duck” that is, enacting the attitude to stressful work on a specific assignment that narrows our imagination and keeps us too stuck with the prototypical example.

As already reported, in the Heimann and Roepstorff experiment the majority of participants in the playful condition built five different constructions, while in the non-playful condition, the majority produced several copies of one and the same construction. What should be emphasized is that “four participants in the playful condition in fact reported not building ‘ducks’ at all, that is, their drive for freedom and creativity made them even ignore a critical part of the (very minimal) task instruction.”⁴³¹ This means, as it will be more clear in subsection 5, that, enabling a playful engagement with the surroundings affords different configurations to unfold that allow a flexible way to cooperate and be open to multiple affordances in the unfolding of the situation:

project website, Eliasson states “*Life* lives and breathes through the experiences of its visitors, both human and non-human. I welcome everything visitors bring with them to the artwork – their expectations and memories, thoughts and emotions. Katrin Heimann’s micro-phenomenological interviews offer unique access to these experiences and create an expanded understanding of what the artwork does and is”. Some interviews are collected on the web site: <https://experiencing-life.net>.

⁴³⁰ Heimann, K., S., Roepstorff, A., “How playfulness motivates – putative looping effects of autonomy and surprise revealed by micro-phenomenological investigations.” p. 11.

⁴³¹ *Ibidem*.

freed from specific constraints and goals, participants seem to enter a curiosity driven interaction with the material, which allows for an unknown outcome to occur. [...] Interestingly, this process may result in unexpected products, and the realization of this appears to enhance participants' feeling of competence.⁴³²

Surprise at an unexpected result, loops back and in turn encourages a playful openness to the material, the process, and thus, in this case, to others.

Surprising oneself – as we will see – through a *participatory puppet* opens up to others and enables a new way of animating.

3.3 Reorganizational practices

A miniaturized or gigantic object, deliberately introduced into our environment without any specific purpose, could produce surprises by the countless combinations it provides that are out of the ordinary and require an ability to respond to sociomaterial invitations creatively. These strategies of surprising ourselves could help us to explore and thus reconfigure the surrounding space. We do this by operating on some aspects of our environment that might allow us to land on a Twin Earth. This is a way to open our field of affordances, and so to broaden the class of possibilities of action we can see provided by the material environment.

Introducing an unconventional element in our surroundings helps us explore our ecological niche that “is much richer than we might have supposed.”⁴³³ As repeatedly mentioned, this potential is related to the variety of its physical structures and at the same time to the varied repertoire of human ability.

For thousands of years, we have worn masks or costumes and animated objects, and as Rietveld and Kiverstein remind us:

Every concrete situation offers an enormous amount of valuable possibilities for action that may motivate human beings (some affordances already did so for millennia, for instance, possibilities for action related to social activities around hearths, campfires and pigments). It is because they might be worth doing for us as well that our continuous openness and exploration of affordances make sense.⁴³⁴

All the imaginative re-figurations are not already given but must be produced from time to time on the basis of exploration. The child plays to surprise himself and does so in order to better be able to explore the environment, the puppet is an ally that could multiply surprises by placing them at an unusual imaginative level when considered “on a human

⁴³² Heimann, K., S., Roepstorff, A., “How playfulness motivates – putative looping effects of autonomy and surprise revealed by micro-phenomenological investigations.”

⁴³³ Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., “A Rich Landscape of Affordances.” p. 349.

⁴³⁴ *Ibidem*.

scale.” Playing is a way of going “from seeing to seeing differently” and that is exactly what a reorganizational practice does in “grown-up playing.”

By animating miniatures, we explore as giants while by animating giants we are like miniatures. We are small in the face of the environment that to some extent we have contributed to building; we are giants when playing with fragile miniatures. We are tiny elements caught up in collaborative practices that overwhelm us or giants that must care and cooperate to keep the matter “alive.”

Miniaturization, in general, is a way of controlling and anticipating actions. It is a playful and at the same time strategic activity. The drastic alteration of scale enacted through manipulating miniaturized objects in a reorganizational practice provides an opportunity to engage with downsized perspectives. The extremely small constitutes an invitation to engage with affordances that usually are underutilized in our form of life. This leads us to pay attention to those rather small things that we usually “leave behind,” for the waste and the superfluous, what we usually forget at the bottom of our life form. There is a deep connection between puppetry and waste; as Schumann states, through the puppet, the object rebels in the form of garbage.⁴³⁵

As a monstrous tool, the puppet is the completely useless one that allows us to “extend” our abilities in an unforeseen way by allowing us to explore imaginative places otherwise unreachable. Consider the example of Anton who, like a doll surgeon, extracts small stones thus enacting metamorphosis and hybridization. Through this tool, from the “caves of cloud,” we can find ourselves exploring “abdominal tunnels.” A *monstrous tool* is like garbage because it is removed from any “rational” function but here in this case, as a puppet, it is an ally for out-of-ordinary explorations. Garbage is what is not needed, and puppet is the outcast par excellence. The “object’s revenge” is thus that of a tool that serves no precise aim, and is monstrous because it is useless and unconventional.

The miniature offers the opportunity to “ally” oneself with what is small and affords one to educate attention to what is fragile and can easily be lost; lost because it is residual to current practices, it is too little and insignificant, whose grain slips through the mesh of routine. As giants, we are responsible for what needs our activity to survive, to keep going, and to still work. The miniature invites us to examine how we engage to animate what would die out without our intervention. As giants, the puppet puts us on the side of what is minuscule and whose life depends on us.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, on a practical level, miniatures allow for exploring “on a small scale.” With relatively few resources and means, alternative ways of life and imaginative explorations can be “brought to life.” This is closely related to the dollhouse and the architectural model. It is a way of exploring some future project on a scale that is not exhaustive and so allows for mutilation and transformation before engaging in real-life. In puppetry, the miniature form allows for highly controversial

⁴³⁵ Schumann, P., “What, At the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets and Performing Objects?” p. 49.

“plays” to appear and disappear from the public domain because of the ‘modest’ scale of its operations. Solitary “radicals” could and can be subversive as such.

Giant animated objects, on the other hand, invert the relationship and make our existences appear minuscule in the presence of what towers above us: we are tiny beings engaged in necessarily collective activities to cope with weights and heights that overwhelm individual strengths. We animate something that overlooks us and this directs our attention to that which is too big to be framed individually from our stature. After all, in this case, it is we who are fragile. It is we in the presence of a giant figure crossing the streets who appear as Lilliputians, small individuals engaged in several practices. A giant figure crossing a city shows how individual idiosyncrasies can be of little account in the face of practices that are articulated on, now highlighted, sociomaterial constraints that determine the starting point of our individual activities. We are small and insignificant not only in the face of the giant that is the fruit of our deliberate creation, but in the face of the sociomaterial environment that we strive to determine with our practices. The giant allows us to look at what we have done so far with our collective lives.

In the practice of puppetry, a giant figure can be seen by many people even not located near the performance, it involves collaboration and a long and time-consuming preparation time.

In addition, and this is what particularly interests me and which I will elaborate on in section 5, the giant animated figures highlight the strings, the rods with which we collectively work to move them: the way we engage with matter to animate it and thus the way we might otherwise animate it.

The giant figure that emphasizes coordination processes can also be traced in children's plays, such as the “centipede” example, where all the feet of the children are tight together, and one has to move as a group. In this case, emblematically the giant is first and foremost a cooperative figure within which skills are attuned in order to animate something “larger than life.”

In conclusion, as adults, we attempt to introduce a paradoxical “controlled surprise” into our surroundings in order to play with altered scales, respond to invitations out of the ordinary, and, “landing” on a Twin Earth, observe our behavior from unusual perspectives. This surprise could also highlight the way we animate things and also gives us the possibility of considering the surrounding environment as susceptible to our creative intervention.

A puppet is a tool through which we attempt to introduce the unconventional in our surroundings but it is also a *monstrous tool* for “extending” our abilities in a way that is apparently devoid of any particular function.

4. Augmenting our abilities, “the world of the puppet coming alive”

Rather than fixing our gaze on the object magically “coming to life,” what we can talk about is how the animation of a puppet can shed light on the way we augment our abilities.

At the center of my exploration, there is, as usual, a practice that –itself in my view, and not the isolated tool – can “extend” ourselves.

A tool, in this case a puppet, gets meaning in its embeddedness in a sociomaterial practice, which immediately involves a ‘group of people’, an interpersonal dynamic with the environment – of which tools are aspects.⁴³⁶

The practice itself is augmenting because it is a social and material dynamic of more than one person. The tool, thus, doesn’t become ‘strange’ or ‘monstrous’ without the explorative practice of ‘other-than-me’ or, maybe better, ‘other-than-us’ possibilities for seemingly overwhelming or unsolvable socio-material situations like, for example, the Monsters I’ve introduced in exploration #1.

In this section, I’ll try to introduce the way I understand the puppet as a *monstrous tool* that, embedded within a sociomaterial practice, implements our skills. From this perspective, I will begin to address the issue of ‘animation’, which turns out to be related to the ability to ‘involve’ objects in our “common fate.”⁴³⁷

I suggest that a person could “extend” himself in the sense that he can augment the capacity to open up to the rich landscape of affordances through skillful engagement with a tool. A tool, as it is understood here, enhances our openness to our surroundings. Only in this sense can we “extend” ourselves through it. We tried to focus on this earlier, when we explored the possibilities that in play or reorganization practices large or small animated objects offer. In the context of the relational perspective on affordances adopted here, augmented ability opens up the possibility for the individual to be responsive to a wider range of affordances. Thus, for example, when I am riding my motorcycle – thus participating in a practice – I can be open and responsive to the multiple route possibilities offered by the streets of Rome that would be precluded to me as a mere pedestrian in relation to paths, travel times, or norms – taking the belt road for example –, and thus to the possibility of arranging multiple meetings and appointments around the city within a few hours – so many affordances are nested in the activity of riding a motorcycle. Some tools require work (experience in use) to increase one’s capacity and openness to possibilities.

⁴³⁶ See Mol, A., *The body multiple*.

⁴³⁷ Noë, A., 2009. *Out of Our Heads. Why You Are Not Your Brain and Other Lessons from the biology of Consciousness*, Hill and Wang, New York, p. 74.



[Tangenziale Est Roma. This non-puppet example shows how, through the skillful use of specific tools – cars, motorcycles – we can augment some of our abilities, such as moving from one place to another in a shorter time than if we were on foot. This example highlights how “extension” through a tool at the same time opens ourselves – on a personal level – and configures – if the extension is related to collective behavior – the sociomaterial environment in a particular way. This means that by “animating” my car I also “animate” my surroundings in a specific way.⁴³⁸]

We are continually engaged in many practices that involve the use of tools with which we do our activities – a tool is a hub of practices. I am augmenting, right now, my ability to write through skillful and sustained engagement with my MacBook, thanks to the writing practice that is sustained by the activity of pressing keys on the keyboard.

I propose here that a motorbike or a computer are similar to but different from the puppet.

Finally, it is the case of pointing out the family resemblance of tools, *monstrous tools*, and *strange tools*. Following Noë, a tool is at the center of our organized activities while a *strange tool* is part of reorganizational practices – philosophical and artistic – and as such emerges from the background in which the pieces of our equipment – tools – are placed and thus interrupting the ordinary unfolding of activities thus questions what we take for granted. A *monstrous tool*, I propose, is a tool whose purpose is to extend the agent's abilities that otherwise “naked” would not be able to develop and in doing so opens up the environment in an unconventional way. Here, crucially, the practice is foregrounded. Then the alliance with pigeons (#1), Schnappvicher costume (#2), mirror

⁴³⁸ I am aware that this example may appear to contradict the general thrust of this thesis in that moving by motorcycle could be replaced by more sustainable commuting by bicycle or public transportation. However, I do not want to give up on it because it gives me an opportunity to imagine a way to travel, move, fly, expand our exchanges and exploratory possibilities in a different way compared to what we have done so far. I am referring to the work done by researchers at Deft University of Technology (Aerospace/CleanEra) already mentioned in the Introduction. In addition, I am aware that this kind of infrastructure has quite a few critical issues, but once again I do not want to give up imagining a future in which such structures built with an acquired sensibility can still allow us to cross our large and hopefully increasingly livable and inclusive cities.

mask (#3), or SCOPY puppet (#4), through practice, augment the abilities of the performer and open up new imaginative possibilities. The mask, thus, for example, is not a *strange tool* – it might as well be – but it is a *monstrous tool*.

The *strange tool* is an ‘unconventional object’ that could change an existing organization. The practice of art is to come up with *strange tools* that potentially reorganize. The *monstrous tool* is the embodied of the “unknown” in an object that is embedded in cultural practice. The monster, as understood here, is the form of that which is “unknown” to us, completely out-of-ordinary that feels unpredictable. Its sociomateriality gives us the means, the affordances, to give form and meaning to this unknown in the now.

In the *interventions* unfolded here, I aimed to broaden the scope of cultural practices, to give back “transformative recognition” to what is thought of as “conventional practice” like masks, puppets, all monsters. Broadening the scope of transformative practice – or, as Noë calls them, reorganizational practices – brings the transformative ability of art closer to everyday life, than the segregated position it has in the museums of ‘avant-garde’ and contemporary art.

A *monstrous tool*, like a mask, a costume or a puppet, thus, is no longer monstrous unless it is placed in the context of practice that copes with the “unknown.” In this sense, it can “recede” to a *strange* or a simple tool with some determined purpose, as a sample to be catalogued in a museum, an object to decorate a wall, or even something to be used to rob a bank.

Engaging with a puppet augments our possibilities but in a way that is “not very rational,” that is outside the ordinary practices that are usually carried out in our form of life. A *monstrous tool* is thus that tool through which we expand our abilities in directions seemingly without any practical function. This means that a *monstrous tool* puts us in a position to expand in unconventional ways the repertoire of possibilities to which we are invited to open up.

Crucially, a *monstrous tool* can also be used in less than “artistic situations.” This places at the center of activities that are not necessarily extraordinary – such as masquerading or dressing up and playing with puppets – an instrument that is potentially reorganizing. There is thus a family resemblance between Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc*, a Venom mask used at a Halloween party, and a Godzilla puppet a child plays in the living room. In practice, the reorganizational potential is inherent in practices in which everyone can engage.

The *monstrous tool* emphasizes the practice and claims the presence of imagination in reality coping with the unknown.

Through animation, i.e., skilled engagement with a monstrous tool – in this case, a puppet – we augment our ability to develop imaginative explorations, allowing us to open up to a wider range of opportunities. The animation of a puppet is thus a monstrous type of “extension.”

A *participatory puppet* – as will be more clear in the following section – “puts on display” how we animate, that is, how we augment our abilities through things. In this sense, it is an opportunity to potentially redefine how we open ourselves to the environment and thus perceive the world around us. It allows us to explore unconventional possibilities and to reflect on how, by extending with tools, we explore the environment in a particular way.

The way we extend enables and constrains the way we perceive, and the way we perceive is enabled and constrained by the way we animate – both the tool and the environment.

Participatory puppet could afford us the possibility to reflect on what aspects of the surroundings we are allowed to explore thanks to the tool that augments our ability, or says differently, how the world opens up to our exploration based on the object we involve in our “common fate.”

In animating a giant puppet, different aspects of the environment will open up than if I manipulate a small glove puppet. This is true for every tool I use, but the *participatory puppet* precisely puts this on display i.e., again, *the way the world opens up to our exploration based on the tool we use within a practice.*

The animation of the giant puppet thus has to do with the possibility of watching how the environment opens up to our exploration thanks to the tool that augments our ability, to see ourselves extend through engaging with an object, *to see ourselves extend through animation* which thus turns out to be the animation of an object but also the animation of the environment or what surrounds us that is animated as it opens itself to our exploration – several new paths open to my perception when I get on a motorcycle, that is when, thanks to my skills, I augment my ability to move around the city through the motorcycle tool.

The giant puppet opens and enhances openness to the rich landscape of affordances through the skill of puppeteering doing so could allow us to reflect on the way we open to the environment thanks to our animation practices.

5. Participatory puppet: playful shared relevance and cross-fertilization on a Twin Earth

One of this chapter's central themes is how certain kinds of puppets foreground how we animate them by collaborating. I call them *participatory puppets*, which by showing how we engage with them, enable us to reflect on the possibility of pooling and thus potentially cross-fertilizing our practices and, at the same time, allow us to collectively open ourselves up to the sociomaterial environment as a Twin Earth. As we have seen, animating a tool is one way to animate the environment. As a *monstrous tool*, the giant puppet has the specific characteristic of animating the surrounding environment through pretense play. Thanks to this *monstrous tool*, the world opens up to collective and playful exploration that brings with it the possibility of creatively reconfiguring things as we have found them already organized by the practices in which we are constantly engaged.

5.1 Playful shared relevance

The *participatory puppet* puts *on display* the ability to cooperate on the basis of individual skills in the animation of an aspect of the sociomaterial environment that involves multiple practices; for example, a big giant puppet being made for walking through the streets of a city will need someone to drive the crane that supports its entire structure from the top, a series of puppeteers using ropes to make its arms, legs, and feet move, who with levers directs his gaze and many others skilled in additional practices. I propose, more specifically, that the *participatory puppet* foregrounds our tendency *towards an optimal grip* on the occasion of *affordance of shared relevance*.⁴³⁹ Crucially, such coordination occurs here during a playful activity. This then leads to investigating the “shared relevance” of playful behavior.

Moving a piano, an example we will consider in a moment used to highlight how we coordinate on the occasion of a determined practice, is something different than moving a giant hand to wave, and yet there are important similarities. I will first introduce the notion of “shared relevance” and then try to understand how it can be intended in relation to playing practice.

As Kiverstein and Rietveld argue in their proposal on we-intentionality, people coordinate to act together in response to *affordances of shared relevance* and not on the basis of supposed goals and intentions. When an affordance is of shared relevance to two or more individuals, these agents will be ready to cooperate and pool their individual skills in order to improve their grip on the situation. The pooling of their individual abilities enables actions that were not possible for each of the participants acting as individuals.

It should be noted at the outset that invitations are potentially always shared as they are available within a form of life, but by “shared” here is meant those affordances on the occasion of which the individuals “pool their sensitivities to situated normativity,”⁴⁴⁰ their abilities to tend towards an improved grip on affordances of shared relevance as members of a group. Kiverstein and Rietveld provide an account of we-intentionality – standardly taken to be a property of the mental states that account for how individuals can think –, in terms of a skilled agent’s selective responsiveness to relevant affordances, that they call “skilled we-intentionality:”

When people engage in activities together [...] it is the shared relevant affordances of the living environment that explain how they manage to coordinate with each other. In acting together, agents dynamically couple to each other in ways that are constrained and scaffolded by the affordances of shared relevance to them.⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁹ Kiverstein, J., Rietveld, E., 2021. “Skilled-We-intentionality: Situating joint action in the living environment.” *Open Research Europe*, 1,54.

⁴⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 12.

⁴⁴¹ Ivi, p. 4.

To explain what happens when more agents engage with a *shared relevant affordance*, Kiverstein and Rietveld compare it to how affordances “stand out” as inviting to an individual when they improve grip: “one is ready to act on those relevant affordances that allow one to tend towards a better grip.”⁴⁴² The same is true in reference to *affordances of shared relevance*: “affordances stand out as of shared relevance when it is only by acting in ways that are mutually adapted that each of the individuals is able to improve grip.”⁴⁴³ An affordance is relevant, that is, it becomes a *solicitation*, as the result of a process of self-organization through which an animal, from a position of disequilibrium – or dynamic equilibrium –, tends *towards an optimal grip* in order to re-establish relative equilibrium. Starting from a situation of disequilibrium, a skilled individual can be “moved to improve” its situation by being responsive to solicitations. In that regard, Rietveld speaks of *situated normativity*. Taking the example of the Wittgensteinian architect: a door is appreciated as too low in its situated context by a skilled architect. The dissatisfied architect skillfully combines one of the affordances offered by this aspect of the material environment, which for him constitutes a *solicitation* to increase the height of the door.

The agent, when participating in a group activity, must be sensitive to the situation and adapt and modify what he does to the constraints of the particular circumstances in which he acts. When more individuals are responding to relevant affordances, “they will have similar or complementary bodily states of action readiness that are coordinated with each other.”⁴⁴⁴

I propose that a *participatory puppet* displays precisely how “in acting together, agents dynamically couple to each other in ways that are constrained and scaffolded by the affordances of shared relevance to them.”⁴⁴⁵

In this sense, it is meant here that the puppet, by foregrounding the way we animate, it says: *look how we can collaborate*. A giant puppet constraining the way agents couple to each other in animating it, at the same time, puts all this *on display*, that is, it *foregrounds those constraints that allow us to couple to each other* when we act on an *affordance of shared relevance*.

Very effective is the example used by Kiverstein and Rietveld of moving a heavy piano down some stairs. In order not to drop the piano, i.e., not to lose grip, each person's movements must be complementary, yet each must move differently, some holding others leaning. The affordances of the piano and those of the stairs play a crucial role because the agents continuously adapt to each other in relation to the effect their movements have on the moving of the piano in that specific context:

when several people are moving a piano, it is the constraints that derive from people being coupled to the piano that reduce the degrees of freedom of their individual movements allowing them to function together as a single coordinated whole. The

⁴⁴² Kiverstein, J., Rietveld, E., “Skilled-We-intentionality.” p. 10.

⁴⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴⁵ Kiverstein, J., Rietveld, E., “Skilled-We-intentionality.” p. 4.

mutual adaptation makes the behaviour of the individuals interdependent in a way that makes it possible for them to pool their skills, so as to coordinate their responsiveness to multiple affordances of shared relevance. It is the affordances of the heavy piano in the situation of descending the steep stairs that invites the individuals carrying the piano together to coordinate their actions in a particular way.⁴⁴⁶

Thus, “interpersonal synergies”⁴⁴⁷ form through a skillful engagement with *affordances of shared relevance* that constrain the degrees of freedom in which the agents' behavior unfolds. Following Kiverstein and Rietveld, coordination is then to be understood as the behavior of a single system jointly modeled by agents as they respond to *affordances of shared relevance* on the basis of the skill they have developed by participating in sociomaterial practices.

So, why do we “collectively” engage in “playful behavior” such as puppetry? I propose that we engage in playful activity to freely undergo pooling and cross-fertilization, that is, to open ourselves to others and materials. More specifically, we engage with a giant puppet to unfold imaginative explorations that we could not develop on our own, to extend our possibilities – and here the similarities with the piano are relevant – but in doing so, we *open ourselves to others and materials*, so we also do so to share our skills and allow ourselves to be contaminated as if in a *gray zone*. My proposal is, therefore, that on the occasion of playful shared relevance, our openness is amplified compared to collaborative situations in which we have a determined purpose, such as carrying a piano down the stairs.

Picking up on the example of the centipede child's play sketched above, on the occasion of playful practice a child opens himself to others and to things. This means the possibility of encountering other ways of doing and more generally of living. The openness to others and materials allows the child, for example, to multiple possibilities to point the hands differently to better let the collective centipede run enacted by looking at the child in the row in front of him and the one still ahead and so on and, crucially, they *explore coordination*.

Thinking of the Chinese New Year dragon puppet, we engage with it to expand imaginative possibilities, to stage a fifty-meter-long legendary animal that we could never individually animate, to open up our surroundings through pretense play, and to explore, this is the point I want to emphasize here in its connection with the child's play, through this playful practice, coordination processes that we usually enact in different practices in everyday life, with the possibility here of

opening up to others and materials.

⁴⁴⁶ Kiverstein, J., Rietveld, E., “Skilled-We-intentionality.” p. 10.

⁴⁴⁷ Dale, R., Fusaroli, R., Duran, N., Richardson, D. C., 2014. “The Self-Organization of human interaction.” *Psychology of Learning and Motivation - Advances in Research and Theory*, 59, 43-95 as quoted by Kiverstein and Rietveld in “Skilled-We-intentionality.”

So, one of the answers to why we engage with a giant puppet is that, basically, in doing so we subject ourselves to the possibility of pooling and cross-fertilization.

5.2 Cross-fertilization

As I will try to propose, pooling skills is an entry toward cross-fertilization, and the *participatory puppet* displays precisely this.

The several puppeteers cooperate to animate a *participatory puppet* on the basis of different skills, unfolding multiple nested affordances, pulling ropes at the same time, maneuvering rods, in short, developing their own activities that inevitably become intertwined and pooled, put *on display* the possibility of cross-fertilization which allows material aspects of our sociomaterial environment to unite with practices in unexpected ways.

Through a process of cross-fertilization, by accepting those new affordances – “pulling a string from a different position” or by moving the foot using the crane – we can change our practices and thus *animate differently*. I think this is precisely what the *participatory puppet* “puts on display”, letting us observe how puppeteers cooperate to animate it. Figuratively speaking, the belly of the monster – Jabba the Hutt – is where we can potentially mix our skills.

But in what specific way on the occasion of engagement with an aspect of the sociomaterial environment is it possible for new affordances to emerge and thus initiate a process of cross-fertilization? During my explorations, I am resorting to the relational notion of affordance as proposed by Rietveld and Kiverstein. As I have already mentioned in the Introduction, to account for the possibility of the emergence of new affordances, Rietveld and Kiverstein, propose a distinction between two levels of description:

- 1) the form of life in which individuals have the potential to engage skillfully with affordances;
- 2) the actual ability of a particular individual to use affordances.

The existence of an affordance thus, does not depend on an individual's actual engagement but is relative to a broader form of life. In this way, not only is the objective reality of environmental invitations guaranteed, but at the same time, it is possible to account for innovative behavior and, thus, the creation of new types of affordances. Cross-fertilization processes, therefore, are always possible, even if there are dimensions, such as play, that favor their emergence.

What I am interested in emphasizing here in relation to the *participatory puppet* is that this *monstrous tool*, in a peculiar way offers the opportunity of observing the possibility to create or harvest new affordances on the basis of capacities and possibilities already available in various practices, exploiting the rich potential that the environment already

offers, for example by creating “new combinations.”⁴⁴⁸ The paradigmatic example, already mentioned in the Introduction, is the practice of oil painting made possible by the invention of a new technique. The innovative technique emerged because of the unusual combination of substances already available. The possibility of mixing such substances was already available in painting practice but had not yet been grasped. The discovery, therefore, or gathering of new or unconventional possibilities can be fostered by stimulating the application of existing capabilities to different aspects of the environment. This, as seen, is possible because affordances exceed those available to an individual both on the side of skills available in a life form and on the side of the sociomaterial environment:

The variety that manifests itself in both *relata* of the definition of affordances, i.e. both in the sociomaterial environment and in the abilities available in a life form, allows us to see the human ecological niche as a rich and resourceful landscape of affordances.⁴⁴⁹

As we have already mentioned, there are essentially two ways to change behavior, namely to create new affordances or another way to enrich the landscape of affordances by introducing new abilities in the form of life:

An example could be a transfer of skills from the practice of sky diving to that of office working. One way to realize this is by looking in an entirely different form of life for unorthodox abilities that could be used to enrich the landscape of affordances.⁴⁵⁰

In the case of a giant puppet involving extremely heterogeneous skills and materials, we can see how such very productive mixtures can emerge. Again, this could ferment in the monster's belly.

5.3 Landing on a Twin Earth

As we have seen so far, then, the puppeteers who carry a giant puppet in procession through the streets of the city not only animate a figure of more or less human likeness but, this is the aspect I have explored, they carry along the dense intertwining of affordances that are unfolded by practices used to animate the figure. It is precisely this interweaving that, in giant form, is carried through space, which is then transformed through a pretense play into a Twin Earth. Basically, we insert a potentially

⁴⁴⁸ Rietveld, E., Kiverstein, J., “A rich Landscape of affordances”, p.338.

⁴⁴⁹ Rietveld, E., Denys, D., van Westen, M., *Ecological- Enactive Cognition as engaging with a field of relevant affordances. The Skilled Intentionality Framework (SIF)*, p. 46.

⁴⁵⁰ Rietveld, E., “Situating the Embodied Mind in a Landscape of Standing Affordances for Living Without Chairs: Materializing a Philosophical Worldview.” p. 929.

unconventional element that could transform the space of everyday life through pretend play thus allowing us to see things differently, subtracting, in this sense, affordances from their predetermined use, that is from the practices in which they are usually unfolded. At the same time, this *monstrous tool* allows us to consider how we “extend” ourselves through an instrument and by doing so animate it and our surroundings.

When we see a giant puppet being transported around the city, we ask ourselves, first of all: “How do they do it?” this question walks us through the streets we now cross. So the way of animating that is foregrounded by the puppet is carried in procession to those places that we collectively animate in everyday life that can be playfully reconfigured, that is re-animated.

Thus, to collectively animate a *participatory puppet*, to carry it in procession through the streets of a city, is to drag into the public space a *monstrous tool* that allows us to grasp ourselves as animators and collaborators who are in the condition of intersecting their practices. At the same time, nested in this process of cooperation and animation we transform the space through pretense play.

Engaging with a participatory puppet, through the practice of animation, we display our cooperation and re-animate the shared space that is transformed into a Twin Earth.

How can our environment be transformed through pretend play into a Twin Earth? It could happen because we, like children, introduce “a right amount of surprise” into our surroundings that is an unconventional affordance, and just as the kitchen becomes a large playground for the child using a miniature figure, the same could happen to the city crossed by a giant puppet.

In this way, the agents “create and establish an environment tailored to the generation and further investigation of surprise and uncertainty.”⁴⁵¹ We surprise ourselves in order to explore our environment more effectively and let new possibilities for action emerge. This experience is fun because we deal successfully with the unexpected. The giant puppet, I propose, is a specific kind of ally thanks to which we try to surprise us that opens up new possible ways to animate and cooperate.

We deliberately bring a giant in the streets showing constraints, ropes, and levers, that is showing the way we “animate,” but by introducing surprises and thus opening the environment as a Twin Earth, we could foster the “throwing off constraints”⁴⁵² attitude and so the possibility to re-animate.

Participative puppet is then about showing “constraints” and letting go of “constraints.”

Showing constraints and letting go of constraints.

⁴⁵¹ Andersen, M. M., Kiverstein, J., Miller, M., Roepstorff, A., “Play in Predictive Minds.” p.1.

⁴⁵² Heimann, K. S., Roepstorff, A., “How playfulness motivates – putative looping effects of autonomy and surprise revealed by micro-phenomenological investigations”, p.13.

So, what specifically does this playing with puppets afford us? As I have tried to focus on so far, the *participatory puppet* offers us the opportunity to observe how we augment our abilities, the way we re-animate our environment, and to do so, how we cooperate and, thus, how cross-fertilization can be foregrounded. Not marginally, the *participatory puppet*, under certain conditions, could introduce us to a Twin Earth in which we can creatively reconfigure things as we found them. The *participative puppet* displays our way of animating and does afford the possibility to actually re-animate our environment.

6. *Look how we animate: contemporary ways of animating*

In this section, I consider two contemporary practices where the puppet is used in order to question animation itself: they are what could be defined *strange tools* although the boundaries here are extremely blurred and mobile. Here it will be possible to observe how a *strange tool* and a *monstrous tool* could overlap. Although these are very powerful examples of reorganization they are at any rate “confined” in a white cube. Once again, we find a type of practice that “invokes” a *gray zone*.

I think that – even in a not direct way– through these two examples could emerge how playing together with a puppet creates a sense of we-intentionality, and how playing together can lead to learning from the skills others perform. This latter which is the core element of this chapter will be further explored through the participatory puppet developed in collaboration with David Habets.



[*Colored Sculpture*, Jordan Wolfson, 2016.]

The ancient Greek word for marionette is *neurospaston*, “pulled by strings,” formed from *neuron* —used for sinew, tendon, nerve, the string of a bow or lyre —and *spasma* —a pulling, drawing, or convulsing, the root of “spasm.” The American artist Jordan Wolfson, through *Colored Sculpture*, investigates the meaning of this term.

Even if it is not apparent – and this is precisely the game the artist plays with us – here is staged our playing together with a puppet that creates a sense of we-intentionality.

We are, as spectators, engaged with a playful shared relevant affordance, the puppet, and we are the ones who animate it – partially – as its uncanny gaze shifts – thanks to software – based on our presence in the room.

The way I participate is the skill that is required for me to animate his eyes, and the participation, the way of looking at the animated object is emblematically pooled; each one is the object of attention in this ring where, from side to side, I can intercept other visitors intent on engaging with the common object of our experience.

In *Colored Sculpture*, Wolfson chains a puppet with the features of a child and tortures it, drops it, and violently lifts it up again.

An iron structure surmounts a white carpet marked by the rubbing of chains. Connected to this is a chain system through which the puppet is maneuvered. A long chain is attached to the puppet's head, another to an arm, and a third to a leg.

The puppet's movements are controlled by a computer program that makes it rotate in the air, move its limbs in a disjointed manner and turn its torso upside down. It is pulled up and then plummets to the ground.

The 1950s-style animatronic puppet reproduces a slightly larger-than-life boy. It is equipped with facial recognition software. Sensors inside the puppet's head scan nearby human faces and, once detected, the puppet's gaze turns in their direction.

We are presented with a computer-animated puppet, bound by chains and tortured, staring at us.

The movements are programmed, the choreography of the torture is fixed, and what varies is the shifting of the puppet's eyes, which depends on who is standing there watching it. Everything is predetermined, the variable – even if it is a well-determined variable – is our presence, us observing him being abused: we are the puppeteers of his eyes.

Our participation, in the face of torture, determines at most the software-governed gaze shift. In this sense, the puppet which displays the chains that govern it, the way in which it is collectively animated – the chains and the software – calls into question our way of participating, of collectively animating.

This is a *participatory puppet* in an emblematic sense as it is our presence that animates the gaze through threads that escape observation. We are the puppeteers of its eyes and it is we who animate part of this violence.

Literally, a boy is getting beaten up and we are part of it. However, the puppet, chained in a museum room, seems to dance for us.

What is most striking about *Colored Sculpture* and which claims not only a visual but also a sonic presence, are the chains, their mechanical parade, the trail they draw on the white carpet, the trajectories they trace in the cubic volume, the fact that when the puppet is thrown to the ground, they pour in a slow regular and unstoppable manner over

him, covering him, enveloping him in a grip that seems deadly were it not for the fact that the puppet shortly afterward comes back to life and begins his dance of torture, staring at us.

This *participatory puppet* shows the more or less visible chains through which we animate things.

Despite our feeling of pity with our mere presence that does not translate into action, we are participating in violence.

Or perhaps it is we who are animated and invited to pity by facial recognition software.

A raped puppet is thus emblematically the display of our participation and the way we animate and are animated.



[*Herbarium*, Barbara Visser 2013, video, 7'
<https://barbaravisser.net/herbarium>]

Through the medium of film, the Dutch artist Barbara Visser questions what remains when the plant is separated from its physical characteristics and relegated to an aseptic space, isolated from the natural surroundings.

Herbarium takes place during a full moon night inside an abandoned tropical greenhouse, formerly used by the biology faculty of Wageningen University. The now-dried plants are brought to life through a system of ropes maneuvered by performers.

The puppeteers move through the abandoned space, among completely dead plants whose branches rest on the ground and large leaves of crumpled tropical plants, preparing their 'actors'.

During the video, we witness the animation of plants whose broken branches, as they rise, produce unusual movement, an uncanny and desolate choreography.

In the last scene, the branches of a plant are all standing up again, animated by puppeteers pulling ropes. Before the video closes, they fall back to the ground, dead again.

Extinct life forms, ghosts, are animated in an aseptic and spectral context.
The fruit of a withering process is brought back to life through a system of threads.

What is dead – eradicated and isolated– is animated, and plants are dancing and acting as they couldn't do in the real life. We know, because we have been shown, that puppeteers are the creators of this choreography.

In this tropical greenhouse, plants are animated and you can see the threads they are held by human beings, intent on giving life to a now lifeless nature. Here we can catch the puppeteers in the act of reanimating what is dead in a play in which life is given and taken away in a deliberate manner, isolating, assigning characteristics, defining aspects and pulling threads, letting broken and amputated arms articulate.

7. Dancing skin



[*Dancing skin*, a project for a kombucha SCOBY puppet created in collaboration with David Habets to be developed in Villa Mirafiori, home of the Faculty of Philosophy at *La Sapienza* University of Rome.]

SCOBY stands for Symbiotic Culture of Bacteria and Yeast - a culture of bacteria and yeast living in symbiosis with each other.

SCOBY, usually used for kombucha fermentation, looks like a pinkish-brown disc of jelly that might resemble human skin, a few inches thick, shiny, and somewhat slimy, with an intense odor tending toward acetic.

The film is created by certain bacteria inside kombucha: *acetobacter aceti* responsible for converting ethanol found in yeast into acetic acid and gluconic acid through aerobic respiration and thus in the presence of oxygen.

These bacteria also transform sugar into cellulose, which - in simple terms - is nothing more than a long chain of sugars joined together. This cellulose is what we call SCOBY.]



Dancing skin is a project for a *participatory puppet* that aims to let the coordination processes typical of playful we-intentionality come to the fore. In this way it could “put on display” how we usually go through public places and interact based on the setting of sociomaterial constraints.

We imagine installing a giant SCOBY that covers the entire hallway ceiling on the ground floor adjacent to Classroom V and the Cappelletta of Villa Mirafiori. *Dancing skin* is fixed to remain suspended and can be maneuvered with rods by participants/puppeteers. This *participatory puppet* will remain available to anyone who happens to be passing

through the hallway and wants to engage with at least one other in the playful experience of animating, for no apparent reason, what looks like a piece of human skin.

Although the purpose of *Dancing skin* is to foreground how we usually cross public spaces, the "generative" component of the real-life thinking model is particularly emphasized here.

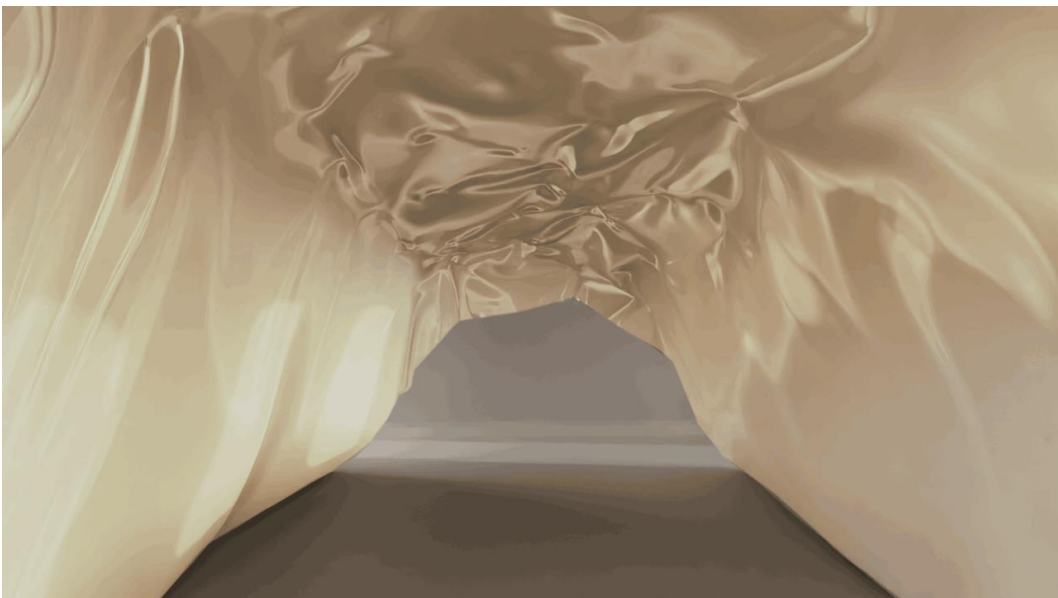
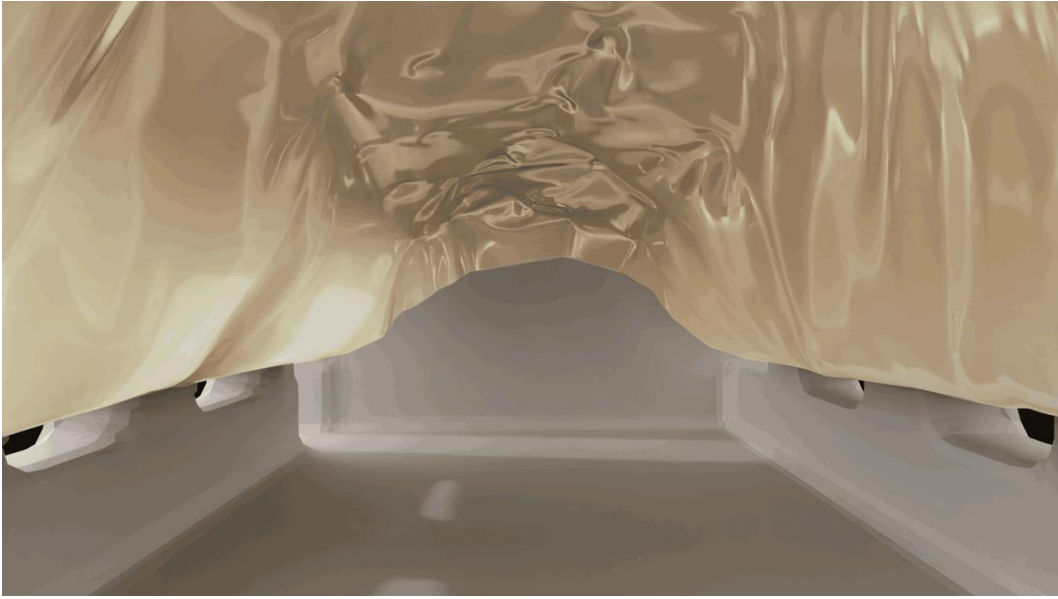
Dancing skin can be analyzed on different scales. Zooming in, from a local scale, is possible to focus on materials and the structure itself. Zooming out, we can focus on the situated context, the surroundings, and the relation that this real-life thinking model is nested. Zooming out further is the societal scale which is the dimension of the sociomaterial practice that is questioned here— living in a public space.

Zoom in: *Dancing skin* is constructed with SCOBY, which results from a collaboration between colonies of bacteria and yeast. It has a texture and coloration very similar to human skin. When maneuvered by several people, the huge SCOBY's surface used for this project causes folds and shapes that human skin or body could never achieve. The dance of this giant puppet creates rosy highlights and it lets faint reddish veins. The play of colors is further enhanced by light that comes from the large stained-glass windows overlooking the outdoor garden.

Zoom out: *Dancing Skin* was designed to be set in a corridor of Villa Mirafiori in Rome. Villa Mirafiori, erected between 1874 and 1878 in the Neo-Renaissance style, was acquired by La Sapienza University of Rome in 1975.

The specific hallway in which *Dancing Skin* is installed leads to the large library and faces to the right, through large windows that reach the ceiling, onto a garden where, when the weather is fine, students eat lunch or simply rest.

Zoom out: *Dancing skin* is embedded in the broader practice of attending the university, teaching courses, developing research, questioning.



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