The analysis is focused on the work and actions of drag artists from Belgrade gathered in collectives, in which the practice of commoning becomes an alternative mode of social relations. Their joint actions provide an opportunity to examine the paths of radical imagination on two levels: firstly, by following the principles of collective creativity, which operate through different forms of artistic and socio-cultural production, systematically targeting the development of social imaginaries; secondly, by creating a collective, aimed at the production of sociability itself which are evolved and tested through practices. In this transposition from the level of artistic production to the level of social production, the tools of (self-)reflection can be crucial. (Self-)reflection is equally a guardian of equality and emergence. Provided that the imagination is not reduced to reactive mental representations, this becomes the drive of practice: the material manifestation of certain relations, their testing, in reality, their growing and simultaneous performing, on the path towards new forms of collectivity, and perhaps collective autonomy.

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Collectives and Commoning in Small Arts[1]

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The building of a society, its self-creation and self-determination, is an ongoing process grounded in a form of social creativity, which Castoriadis calls radical imagination (319–337). This creativity is uncaused, emerges *ex nihilo*, and precedes distinctions of the "real" and the "fictive". However, it is conditioned by relations and originates in the dynamic field of imaginary meanings that guarantee the self-articulation of society. Radical imagination is a major driving force behind social flows. It is inherent in humans, and it is analogous to the social imaginary, as Castoriadis says: "The individual is a social creation. […] There is no confrontation between the individual and society", as we already make an institution and create meaning (332).

What might be our perspective? It might be the project of individual and collective autonomy, which underlies a free society in which all citizens have equal opportunities to participate in its creation. The goal is "to remove the gap between states – an independent mechanism – and society by creating a real political community, a social group that can govern itself" (Kastoriadis 27). However, the range of imaginary meanings in our liberal oligarchies seems to be highly narrowed. The effects of radical imagination are recognised only in hints, as types of revolt and voices of dissent originating from the microstructures. They partly come from the contemporary performers gathered within small arts collectives. They are systematically marginalised, although they persist in questioning the imposed paradigm – they survive as a space of manifestation and production of sociability, as an open plateau of self-determination. At the same time, the commoning becomes a motor of superstruction and a stronghold of radical imagination that enables change.

As we know, the performers from small arts collectives are frequently and intentionally involved in imaginative work. Their joint actions provide an opportunity to examine the paths of radical imagination on two levels: firstly, by following the principles of collective creativity, which operate through different forms of artistic and socio-cultural production, systematically targeting the development of social imaginaries;

secondly, by creating a collective, aimed at the production of sociability itself which are evolved and tested through practices. Indeed, these paths are entangled, and it could be essential to explore prerequisites of collective creativity as the basis for understanding more extensive processes of creating a collective and consequently building a community. [2]

In this analysis, I will focus on drag collectives, in which the practice of commoning becomes an alternative mode of social relations. An overview of empirical studies about collective creativity will be juxtaposed with the fragments of interviews with drag performers from distinctive small arts collectives, such as Weird Sisters and Ephemeral Confessions from Belgrade. Interviews were realised and transcribed in August 2021, purposely for the lecture at the Small Arts Symposium in Ljubljana.

In many ways, collective creativity differs from individual creativity, primarily because it is based on the phenomenon of emergence (McLaughlin 49–93). Creative synthesis within the collective act can be defined as the process of the emergence of something novel and valuable towards the needs of the society where it takes place (Sawyer, *Emergence in Creativity* 33). It sounds quite smooth and easy. Actually, it is not easy at all. "Mainly nothing works, everyone sticks to their guns", said one of the Weird Sisters, describing her experience in small arts collectives. This kind of statement is neither rare nor surprising. No collective is fully functional. As Stina Nyberg well noticed, it is not a matter of dynamics but of the starting point itself, "assuming that a group is functional from its outsets (and only later falls into dysfunction)" is completely wrong, like every little myth about commoning which needs to be left behind: "Every group is dysfunctional in its very formation" (78). The risk is grounded in ambition. Commoning bears a problem that should not be diminished. Equality does not delete our differences. And, despite all difficulties, they are the asset, not the ballast. To have and preserve them is the first prerequisite of collective creativity. It is empirically confirmed: heterogeneous collectives are far more creative than homogenous ones (Milliken, Bartel, & Kurtzberg 32–62). True, in the latter case, people recognise one another more quickly, understand more easily, and connect more strongly, so joint work can bring a particular pleasure but with modest reach and mostly minor creative performance. This is because total homogeneity within a collective reduces the scope of imaginative work directed towards finding new ideas. The explorative process is modest – it ends before it truly begins. Critical thinking is reduced, and initial ideas are quickly accepted before unusual and original ideas emerge. The absence of emergence gives way to a phenomenon called group thinking (more in Janis, *Groupthink*), resulting in premature consensus and a completely negligible

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2 The keynote about principles of collective creativity was performed for the first time on the occasion of the conference opening *Another Artworld: Manifestations and Conditions of Equity in Visual Arts* (3–4 December 2020), and then the lecture was specified for the *Small Arts Symposium* (9–11 September 2021) in the Slovenian Theatre Institute, Ljubljana.

product of joint work (Moorhead & Montanari 399–410).

Fortunately, homogeneity is not to be expected in *small arts* collectives. "We are all totally different", performers agree when describing their collectives' structural features. Of course, diversity is, first and foremost, an issue of quality. When referring to clear and explicit features like age, appearance, skin colour or language, the effects of diversity can be strong but only during the formative phase, which is seldom relevant for collective creativity. Differences in implicit features, like education, values, aesthetic preferences or specific personality traits, are far more important. Cognitive diversity is also significant for joint work (Milliken, Bartel, & Kurtzberg 32–62). The entanglement of cognitive styles brings very intensive explorative and generative processes, followed by deeper elaboration and evaluation. Somebody proposes an idea, which has never occurred before, and plenty of associations and concepts bursts out from different cognitive "pockets", arising from the combinatory function that is active already at the individual level. As cognitive style leads the person along the beaten tracks in the perception and processing of information, the scope of ideation at an individual level can be limited.

In the collective process, the borders become porous. The ideas of others lead us to activation of previously acquired knowledge in a slightly different way than usual. Then it leads to the flow of thought within the semantic domain and the generation of new ideas, which would never have emerged without a specific cognitive stimulation from a collective process. This way, the ideas of others can wake us up in a creative sense and "shake" the cognitive patterns. There are obstacles as well. "I choose associates by sensibilities, by the level of openness", says drag queen Dajana Ho, but "sometimes people are self-absorbed and stick to their ideas without even listening to the others, and that could be a real problem". One of the reasons, according to cognitive psychologists, is that the ideas of others can be a kind of noise. Cognitive interference appears when others' ideas disturb ideation at the individual level. For the emergent process to happen and, therefore, for the collective to achieve something more complex and creative than the sum of all individual contributions might be, cognitive stimulation must be stronger than the noise (Nijstad, Diehl, & Stroebe 137–159). Yet, before considering how these forces compete during the process, they must first appear. Cognitive diversity needs to be expressed!

The second prerequisite of collective creativity is active participation. Participants in the process should openly express their ideas and viewpoints. Key differences in the collective should be seen and heard. As another performer states: "Everyone has something of their own. Everyone contributes in their own way. Somehow we came together like that. We complement each other in these differences. And when someone is a bit withdrawn, they are still an equally important part of the story."

However, active participation makes dynamics quite complex. When people freely express their ideas, differences become apparent, so it is not always easy to understand one another or connect: you could expect more collisions, a lower level of cohesion and less identification. Different voices are confronting, not always agreeing, which is ideal for dissonance!

Here comes another myth about commoning: seemingly, it is aimed at consensus, and such a manner of decision-making is almost fetishised. That longing is partly justified and equally sentimental. In fact, joint work has no room for consensus. Only the dissensus counts – it occurs upon activation of differences in implicit features of those involved, so diversity is clearly expressed. Dissensus is important because it brings far richer creative flows to the collective. It enables the exploration and construction of new realities with extensive generative processes, deeper elaboration and fewer errors. Collective decisions are stronger and braver (more in Van Gundy, *Managing Group Creativity: A Modular Approach to Problem Solving*). They require more time. Certainly, the procedure is not closed quickly, and it does not aspire towards a "happy" ending but towards an open system of dynamic meanings as the basis of social imaginaries. At the same time, dissensus guarantees a clarification of ideological positions. It sharpens the politicality of the collective due to animosity rather than closeness. Inner battles find their way of externalisation in creative production, making dissensus the key feature of the artistic act.

Only when the potential of diversity is expressed all prerogatives of plurality can be noticed. However, plurality also brings a lot of conflicts (Jehn, Chadwick & Thatcher 287–305): they are threats to trust and the feeling of psychological safety. It is wrong, however, to think about all conflicts in the light of destructive outcomes. For example, task-focused conflicts encourage creative production (James 285–290) and lead to more original (Van Dyne & Saavedra 151–167) and complex outcomes (Gruenfeld 5–20). Still, it is questionable whether these constructive conflicts, which are the immediate expression of dissensus, can be completely isolated from all others, which could be destructive. Particularly delicate are those related to personal frustration, roles and responsibilities, or relations which arose beyond the creative frame (Jehn 87–100; Sheldon 299–306). There is no simple answer here. Conflicts are dynamic situations which escape control and require specific methods. It seems that performers are aware of that: "We are ready to face it by dialogue. Sit and talk. Let's talk. Once, we organised a plenum, and it was not easy. Some old dissents emerged, but we started something and shared some frustrations accumulated during that time. Sometimes we fail when individual vanity is stronger than the goodwill of all, which does happen but not often."

On dissensus, here we speak in the context of the action itself, without putting the very concept of diversity on a pedestal, particularly not when it is used as a means of ideological defocusing in neoliberal agendas, as was the case with cultural diversity. Besides, not every diversity is in service of collective creativity. Differences in status in hierarchical structures express disparity and not variety, bringing nothing good to collective creativity (Curseu et al. 187–206). Some performers' statements clearly indicate this point: "It bothers me when the collective gathers many strong individuals, needing one of them to be above all. For me, these are not inviting collectives in which people complement each other. In this case, I felt that I was disposable, but not that I was a part of something. I didn't feel welcome to say anything. And when I see there is no room, I start to fade out". And really, certain studies show how joint work can bring a lack of motivation due to the feeling that the individual contribution will not be useful or gratified. This leads to passivity and withdrawal and even to the diffusion of responsibilities with the phenomenon of social loafing, colloquially known as "free riding" (Karau & Williams 681–706). Creativity decreases because the processes are reduced to a smaller number of intersections, proportional to the lack of active participation and readiness of people to get involved in joint work. And just as active participation is a condition for mobilising cognitive diversity, a specific climate is crucial for active participation to be developed.

Climate is the third and perhaps the key prerequisite for collective creativity. It refers to the general atmosphere that evolved from interpersonal relations. If competition dominates and fear of errors frames the entire process, outcomes are quite modest. Generative processes are inhibited due to anxiety, leading to a lack of spontaneity, which is necessary as a catalyst of ideation. One ephemeral confessor points out: "As soon as I see other people grabbing or competing, I cool down completely". On the contrary, if relations are transparent, communication open and information is available to everyone without latent forms of practising power, if a climate of trust and mutual support prevails and spontaneous creative expression is encouraged, then we can expect collaboration grounded in psychological safety and resulting in a high level of collective creativity (Ekvall, "Organizational Climate" 105–123; "Creative Climate" 403–412).

The paradox is obvious: how to preserve trust in the dynamic dissensus-based production of meanings in situations of actual danger of conflict and even aggression? Of course, it is not easy, but a high level of trust and support is indeed the condition sine qua non, which must be recreated over and over again. Only a climate, which brings the feeling of safety to everyone, enables dissensus to appear and then to be directed towards the creative synthesis. "It's ok for me when everyone goes crazy, we all get into some creative mode, and everything is intensified – then I can put up with anything. But it is still important to preserve some kindness and attentiveness, for people to ask me how I am and whether my needs are met", said Dajana Ho.

Climate also affects the development of two main dimensions of collective creativity – novelty and coherence. Novelty refers to the expression of ideas, which anybody in the process can offer as a response to the heuristic task, and coherence expresses the readiness of participants to take their cues from the ideas of others or from emerging constructs. Both dimensions must be highly expressed for the collective process to progress. For ideas to be generated and then stimulate the creation of new and common ones, a certain level of spontaneity is required, directly depending on climate (Ristić, *Početak* 98–118). At the same time, new elements must be integrated into a coherent joint creation. Building on the ideas of others and mutuality are necessary presumptions for cognitive stimulation in the process to prevail over noises and achieve a creative synthesis (Ristić, Škorc, & Mandić 213–229). Or how a drag queen simply points out: "As long as there is love and respect, differences are not a problem. Something good emerges from them". Although this could sound like a corny stereotype, it is a pure fact. Experimental studies have confirmed that collective performance depends on interpersonal reactivity, specifically on empathy, which is far more significant than the individual creative capacities of each participant (Ristić & Milošević, 2019).

It is easy to conclude: only when the feeling of trust and support dominates and people in the collective feel safe the live gathering is possible to be achieved through creative synthesis, in which every idea, no matter how novel it is, builds on the previous ones, relying on mutuality and searching for the path of integration. Climate has a moderator role as it enables diversity through the expression of active participation. It is precisely the one that provides the appearance of dissensus and, simultaneously, the "victory" of cognitive stimulation over any kind of noise. Whether dissensus shall result in a creative leap or inhibition and motivation loss depends precisely on the climate. And reversely, the arousal brought by the leap develops the sense of community, and even some kind of conspiracy, on which performers gladly testify, recognising in it the surrogate of the family (Ristić, *Mala vrata* 159–192).

Finally, it remains indisputable that the quality of relations defines the emergence of the collective outcome, non-reducible to the set of singular contributions. Thus we arrive at the third myth of commoning: collective does not delete singularity, insist the performers. It does not. Indeed, we are actualising ourselves through otherness, but that is not a given and undeniable premise. It is only the potential; first and foremost, it is the space of inner battles. Therefore, the actualisation of singularity in collective practices during imaginative work might be the major issue of commoning. Three prerequisites play a vital role in this process: cognitive diversity, active participation and climate. These prerequisites are not only the foundation of collective creativity in each particular production, but they also shape how the collective is created and recreated over and over. They shape a sphere of commoning as well. This

sphere is undoubtedly even more complex, and we need to observe it as a field of dialectic tensions with solid implications for building a wider community structure. Specifically, this refers to the tensions between equality and hierarchy, emergence and stagnation, plurality and consistency, parallel with the sharpening of ideological positions of all people involved. These tensions reveal the potentiality (and also risks) in the sphere of commoning. According to the interviews, perhaps the most critical is the hierarchisation process that quietly, almost invisibly creeps within the collectives. The drag queen known as Dekadenca describes such a situation: "There was no open communication. Everything was very implicit, although they expected complete obedience from us. And they profited from our performance every time, even when we worked without compensation. Malicious teasing and constant criticism followed all these. I left the collective after a year. I realised that I didn't need it at all".

The tendency of silent construction of hierarchy brings a loss of motivation and stops the production of meanings and the process of self-articulation. Sociability is obstructed; the relations of subordination are reproduced, while the performers lose their autonomy, and the collective starts to perpetuate the system obstructions. At the same time, the commoning becomes a kind of nominal aspiration without real impacts or deeds, while the collective begins to close and conform to its own taste (as Dishan would say). It might even remain self-sufficient if the performances satisfy the need for narcissistic gratification at the individual level. And this tendency within the collective has a direct impact on its actions in public. The collective loses its ideological sharpness and political potential. Some performers sound even resentful when they analyse the local drag scene: "At this point", says one, "the potential for political actions is zero. Drag is commodified and occupied. We need a new word for what we are doing". Further, he says: "People don't even distinguish between a fan club and community, between audience development and political impact".

Conclusion

All difficulties, mapped in the interviews, reveal a ratio between short-term creative production (processes of collective creativity) and long-term processes of creating the collective. At the level of a single production, one can follow the development of collective creativity that arises from pluralistic collisions, from the dissensus that seeks ways of joint articulation in the new imaginative construct. It is the proximal outcome of the creative process, intentionally targeting the production of imaginary meanings. At the same time, during the creative process and performing, a space opens for the re-creation of sociability, and the practice becomes a polygon for (self-)reflection and (self-)articulation in the live gathering. Thus, the imaginative work during each production results in new constructs and relations that arise and

can be further changed. And all dialectic tensions of creating a collective take place during one (every!) creative act – against silent construction of hierarchy, against stagnation and closing, against pseudo-political speculations versus real production of meanings (Ristić, *Mala vrata* 119–158). And then the tensions may continue from one act to another, from another to a third, and remain without an epilogue because the production of the socially imaginary is of a wider range. All these tensions are potent to the extent that people stay together without giving up. Despite all ideological stumbling, they change the patterns of relations on the internal level, thus creating an alternative to the external reality. This alternative can face the dictates of the capitalistic imaginary and open the space for radical change in the community that is emerging over and over again. This spreading, the emergence of community, is a response to the obstruction of sociability, which derogates the paths of radical imagination. Only in this way, the practices of commoning remain vital and dynamic as a distal outcome in the processes of creating a collective and, consequently, a collective autonomy. And then, in return, the vitality of the practices pushes the next moves in the service of change, which become more precise and effective. The conditionality of internal dynamics and external actions is apparent, as well as the entanglement of mutual influences that emerges from public acts. Thus, the necessity of actions and new manoeuvres becomes clear in the very practices in which dialectical tensions are always present, and social changes are re-examined in the light of personal ones.

In this transposition from the level of artistic production to the level of social production, the tools of (self-)reflection can be crucial – the method which offers the possibility of developing a specific climate and serve for the elaboration of joint work. (Self-)reflection is a guardian of both equality and emergence – it gives vitality to practice, openness and dynamics, understanding of external pressure and recognition of invisible forms of censorship. Personal experiences are shared, concerns become aspirations and solidarity is empowered through the continuous production of affective meanings, which are a kind of pledge of commoning. Moreover, when a high level of trust is established, it opens a space of de-tabooisation, reconsideration of own positions, awareness and even dissensus, which underlines the necessary and always present need for re-politicisation of practices. Methods thus become a tool of meta-censorship and subvert systemic perpetuation. At the same time, the processuality, evident in the dynamics of the social imaginary, guarantees the community's openness to change. Provided that the imagination is not reduced to reactive mental representations, this becomes the drive of practice: the material manifestation of certain relations, their testing, in reality, their growing and simultaneous performing, on the path towards new forms of collective, and perhaps collective autonomy.

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