e-ISSN 2723-9640

JoLMA
Vol. 6 — Num. 1 — June 2025

Performance Art as a Dynamic Imaginative Niche
Intersubjective Achievement of Seeing Differently

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Abstract In this paper, we intend to enrich the notion of a 'dynamic imaginative niche' that refers to how we actively construct the socio-material living environment to foster surprise and enhance playful exploration through 'intersubjective achievement.' We will stress the role of interpersonal imagination in the transformation typical of performing arts, where the participants collectively go from "seeing to seeing differently", as Noë writes in *Strange Tools* (2015). We think of achievement as a reconfiguration of perception, as a break in unreflective engagement with the world, calling attention to the structures and attitudes that shape our everyday experience. To do this, we will use Anne Imofh's performance Faust, presented at the Biennale of Venice 2017, as a tangible example..

Keywords Imaginative niche. Performance art. Intersubjective achievement. Surprise. Play.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-01-07
Accepted 2025-03-07
Published 2025-06-13

Citation Ianniello, Antonio; Habets, David (2025). "Performance Art As a Dynamic Imaginative Niche". *JoLMA*, 6(1), 11-30.

DOI 10.30687/Jolma/2723-9640/2025/01/001

1 Introduction

In this paper, we aim to enhance the concept of a "dynamic imaginative niche" (Ianniello; Habets 2025) by incorporating the idea of "intersubjective achievement" (Ianniello 2024; 2023; 2021; Gallagher 2008). The term "intersubjective achievement" describes a shift from "seeing to seeing differently" (Noë 2015), and involves a dynamic process of synchronizing perception in interaction. This interplay is shaped by a sensorimotor feedback loop and (subtle) social normativity, leading to a reorganization of ourselves (Noë 2015). We think of achievement in terms of perceptual change as a break in unreflective engagement with the world, calling attention to the structures and attitudes that shape our everyday experience. Such disruption allows us to see familiar things in unfamiliar ways, which is achieved imaginatively. We consider imagination radically situated (Van Dijk, Rietveld 2020) and an inherently intersubjective phenomenon that unfolds in skillful coordination with the socio-material environment (see § 4). The interplay between performers and audience, and the audience among themselves, in the performance arts, is exemplary to illustrate this process. We will use Anne Imhof's performance of *Faust*, presented at the Venice Biennale in 2017, as a concrete example.

The concept of dynamic imaginative niches refers to environments that foster open-ended and surprising forms of engagement, allowing individuals and groups to explore new possibilities through imaginative and creative interactions (Ianniello, Habets 2025), where meaning remains fluid rather than predetermined. We will argue that "intersubjective achievement" is situated in imaginative niches and offer an acceptance of engaging with irrational, fantastical, surreal, unfinished, nonsensical, subversive, or disturbing possibilities, without fearing the dismissal or rejection of their actions and communications by others as nonsensical (cf. Winnicott 1971, 75).

By gesturing with things, spaces, and other people in an exploratory manner – such as a piece of cloth in an improvisation exercise (see § 4) – participants surprise one another, allowing each other to see the cloth differently. The paper aims to contribute to a situated and enactivist account of imagination, so the phenomena of "intersubjective achievement" and "dynamic imaginative niches" are not meant restricted to the performance arts but occur across a wide range of creative, artistic, and everyday practices. Think, for example, of a moment when a colleague tells you a joke that makes you think differently about a complex and stressful situation at work. Drawing on our background in the performance arts and scenography, we will use participatory performances as exemplary examples to illustrate the concept of imaginative niches.

We will start our paper by presenting the performance *Faust* and the aesthetic concept of the "grey zone" (Bishop 2018) (§ 2). Then, we will deepen the notion of "intersubjective achievement" by combining the divergent enactive approaches to cognition of Alva Noë and Shaun Gallagher (§ 3). Then, we will present a theatrical exercise representing a paradigmatic example of enacted imagination as an intersubjective achievement (§ 4) that leads us to discuss *dynamic imaginative niches* in which intersubjective achievements are situated. In the final section (§ 6), we will return briefly to *Faust* to summarize the main concepts developed in the paper. This paper is part of the ongoing process of our theoretical and practical exploration that we are developing not only as researchers in the field of the embodied mind but also as an artist collective, *Future Monsters*, our ever-expanding imaginative circle.

2 *Faust* in a Gray Zone

Faust was first presented by Anne Imhof in the German Pavilion during the 2017 Venice Biennale Arte. The performance spans seven months – the Biennale's duration – and includes five–hour performance cycles, pictorial elements, and sculptural installations. The German Pavilion was radically transformed for the occasion by installing a floor of unbreakable glass raised about one meter above the ground. Above and below this floor, performers in ordinary clothes performed. The actions took place simultaneously in three different and interconnected rooms, meaning that the audience was actively called upon to define their own experience, i.e., what to see and how to take part in the performance. There was no canonical narrative development. The performers – almost indistinguishable from the audience – were engaged in a wide variety of activities that included pressing their bodies against the glass panes, licking the surface, standing open-mouthed for several minutes, burning objects, standing still two meters above the ground on other small glass panels, masturbating, playing the guitar, singing. All these actions were repeated simultaneously and cyclically in the three different rooms, and no delimitation or lighting was used to direct the visitors' attention. Spectators entering the German Pavilion space entertained themselves by looking at one performer and then moving on to another without using predetermined spectatorial styles: they stood still, photographed, posted online, grouped around, danced with, headbanged, moved around, chatted with their neighbors and left the scene at will. Not only did the performer's actions guide the audience, but the audience's responses created many moments that reorganized the collective body of performers and visitors. For example, one visitor joined in playing air guitar with a performer, others

followed, and soon people grouped around the scene, photographing and posting it online and attracting other biennial visitors nearby to be dragged into the performances via social media.

One only has to think of what immediately appears to the spectator upon entering such exhibition space: when in the Pavilion, the spectator is, first of all, literally immersed in a tangle of actions and reactions, gestures, affections, attentional paths, invitations, and technologies jointly deployed by the spectators based on the performers' gestures; each one is actively participating in "bringing forth" the performance itself. *Faust* is an exemplary performance to render intersubjective synchronization in and manipulation of (§ 4) of a dynamic imaginative niche (§ 5).

Faust is part of that broader trajectory that, over the past 15 years, has taken the performing arts from the stage of the experimental theatre, defined as the "black box" (Wiles 2003, 251), into the museum, or "white cube" (O'Doherty 1986). This has led to the involvement of a specific type of audience that frequents museum spaces as an active agent in the performances and creates a conflict between the typical normative experience of the museum and the theater. The conflict between these two dimensions is said to have given rise to an additional one, what art historian Claire Bishop has termed the "grey zone" (2018), in which the spectatorial posture, accelerated by the all-pervasive presence of digital technology, must be constantly renegotiated.

The "black box," popular since the 1960s, contrary to classic theaters, is characterized by the smallness of the scale (Wiles 2003, 251) and the fact that the rectangular room's ceiling, floor, and walls are all painted black. The space is organized primarily to emphasize the actor's presence and the proximity and intimacy between all participants. The spectators' behavior is regulated so they arrive at a designated place at a set time, occupy an assigned seat, and watch the performance synchronously throughout its duration with other spectators.

On the other hand, the term "white cube" refers to a gallery used for displaying works of art, which has been popular in Europe since the early 20th century. Square or rectangular, it consists of entirely white walls and is usually lit from above. The white cube became popular as an exhibition space capable of creating a neutral environment that allowed a direct and uninterrupted enjoyment of the works (O'Doherty 1986). Today, the white cube is globally popular and is the standard for museums, art fairs, and alternative spaces.

The grey zone unfolds in the white cube, which has accommodated the performing arts over the years, traditionally confined to the black box. A grey zone does not prompt normative behaviors typical of biennials, art fairs, or classical venues, such as theatres or museums. Performances unfolding in the grey zone display how interactions

between performers and audiences have become ever more important tools and means for artists to put on display our everyday engagement with each other in real life. *Faust* is exemplary of grey zone performance, which was performed in the context of one of the most important art biennials in the world.

In a gray zone, crucially, the object of attention is no longer framed by the stage or immobile on a pedestal but a living body acting and dynamically changing in time and space. Take, for instance, another paradigmatic performance that unfolds in a gray zone (Bishop 2018), *PLASTIC*, by artist and choreographer Maria Hassabi, who in 2016 developed a slow-motion performance on the MoMA stairs. The audience must follow the performance in slow motion up the stairs themselves. Museum stairs are usually used to move from one floor to another and not to present artwork. Alternatively, the untitled performance presented by Tino Sehgal at the Venice Biennale in 2013, in which, upon entering a room set up with sculptures and paintings on display, one encounters a small group of performers sitting on the floor performing minimal, almost imperceptible actions such as making sounds with their mouths and moving by them. Some visitors did not even notice them, others found it uninteresting and moved on, and others managed to stand still. This change in spectatorial posture helped them observe something that demanded quiet attention to be grasped, such as the subtle synchronization processes that were taking place between the various performers.

It is important to underline that all artistic performances, not just *Faust*, *PLASTIC*, or *untitled*, are characterized by the fact that they emerge as the result of interactions between actors and spectators. Art historian Erika Fischer-Lichte has spoken in this sense of an "autopoietic feedback loop" (2009)[1] to indicate how all performance art is to be understood as a self-organizing system within which new, unplanned elements are continuously integrated from time to time (165). Mechanisms of synchronization and desynchronization are integral to the performance arts:

> Performances are generated and determined by a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop. Hence, performance remains unpredictable and spontaneous to a certain degree. (Fischer Lichte 2009, 38)

1 This concept is based on a key idea in the enactivist framework, namely that of "autopoiesis," introduced in the wake of the cybernetic turn by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (Varela, Maturana, and Uribe 1974; Maturana, Varela 1985) to describe the defining activity of living beings, which make themselves (autopoiesis), in contrast to allopoietic systems, which are designed and constructed by others. Autopoietic systems are simultaneously producers and products: autonomous systems that survive through self-generation.

In practice, an artistic performance emerges as a collective enterprise in which all participants' affections, imagination, and skills are involved and put to work in a situation that must be constantly negotiated. It is precisely this that has been brought to the forefront by artists engaged in this art form since the 1960s (Goldberg 1979) when they placed the central characteristics of performance art such as co-presence, actor-spectator inversion, community creation, and contact at the center of their investigations (Fischer-Lichte 2009). By placing smartphones and their disruptive role in attentional processes at the center of the interaction between performers and the audience, *Faust* creates a performative situation in which reflection and questioning of acquired spectatorial postures become possible.

What we want to emphasize is that the challenge of the performing arts is emblematically directed at a community – one that includes not only all the spectators but also the performers – who, to "achieve" something, engage in a collective process that may involve subtle and complex dynamics of interaction. In this sense, performing art is an emblematic illustration of "intersubjective achievement" (cf. Ianniello 2024b) through "skilled co-presence" (Ianniello 2023).

3 Performance Art as an Intersubjective Achievement

To better define *intersubjective achievement*, we will draw on the enactive perspective of the embodied mind. Central to the enactive framework is that perception is not a process of passive reception, i.e., it does not happen in us, but it is enacted; it emerges from a skilled and embodied engagement with the socio-material environment (Varela et al. 1991; Gibson 1979; Chemero 2009; Noë 2004; 2012; 2015; Rietveld-Kiverstein 2014; Gallagher 2017).[2] What we perceive should be understood in terms of action and achievement" (Noë 2004; 2012; 2015) that we obtain through hard work and skill:

> 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;

2 Although this fundamental assumption is broadly shared by all scholars working in this field, there is an ongoing debate about how this engagement takes place and the emphasis placed on certain aspects of cognition. For a discussion of this topic, see Ward et al. 2017 and Gallagher 2017. Based on these various perspectives, different approaches to aesthetics emerge, yet they generally converge in adopting the Deweyan project of understanding "what arts does" and of eliminating the divide between everyday experience and aesthetic experience (Shusterman 1992; Johnson 2007; Freedberg, Gallese 2007; Scarinzi 2015; Noë 2015; Gallagher 2021; Feiten et al. 2022; Rietveld 2022)

> we are interested in the world and are continuously active in trying to secure access to it. (Noë 2012,93)

For Noë, art has value precisely because it "recapitulates" (Noë 2015, 102) the perceptual process – that is, it allows us to engage with a sculpture, painting, or performance in a way that reflects how we typically interact with the world, while also opening new possibilities for perceiving our environment. To do this, the work of art challenges us: "See me if you can" (Noë 2015); that is, by making things "strange," it dares us to bring it into focus, to grasp it. If we engage with the challenge, we can move "from not seeing to seeing or from seeing to seeing differently" (Noë 2015) as a reconfiguration of the perceptual process. When confronted with a work of art – a "strange tool" devoid of a determined purpose – our unproblematic engagement with the world is disrupted, and we are called to "figure it out.". In this sense, we can think of artworks, such as *Faust*, as perceptual exercises. Open-ended situations disrupt and, by doing so, invite reflection on the more practically inclined and often unreflective day-to-day engagement with the world (also see Brincker 2015). This process can potentially transform us. The *achievement* is not some realization of a truth about the artwork, but a reorganization of an individual's engagement with the world.

Although our proposal is firmly tied up with Noë's insight into art as an active achievement, there is an aspect that is problematized exactly by grey zone performances. We do not consider this process to unfold solitarily, even when a person approaches a painting in an empty gallery alone. The challenge of an artwork points us to the situation's interactive, communicative, and intersubjective character. Even if "others" are not directly present. In our view, this is where the view of a "solitary perceiver" facing an artwork becomes vulnerable to criticism. This is an instance of what has been called "sensorimotor loneliness" (Gallagher, 2008). For example, one can ask how the intersubjective dimension is present in one of Noë's examples, where he asks us to imagine ourselves in an unfamiliar city when trying to find the castle on the hill, considering two alternatives. We could consult a map – a metaphor for internal representation – or we could start looking around and move through space, actively engaging with our surroundings and thus exploring through a sensorimotor process – that is what Noë is suggesting (2004, 23). Gallagher's critique of such a question is, "Why not ask someone for directions to reach the castle?" (cf. Gallagher, 2008). This slightly comical example underscores the importance of taking the social dimension and interactivity in sensorimotor coordination seriously.

Think back to what happens in *Faust* when one enters rooms full of people taking and posting pictures while joining in and dismissing the performers' actions collectively. It challenges us to reflect on how

we "objectify" the performers, the props, and the situations they put into motion through the behavior of snapping, filming, and posting that has become normative in everyday life. This challenge emerges from a dynamic interaction between the performers and the participating audience in unfolding the performance. It offers possibilities to explore collective experiences beyond the performative situation. More generally, we suggest art experiences are to be considered an "intersubjective achievement." Even when alone in front of a painting, the situation at large is not devoid of others (cf. Alloa 2024). Later, after leaving the gallery, one might talk to others, ask whether they have seen the painting that attracted their attention, and share their experience to make sense of the moment of perceptual disruption. This is precisely because achievement, seeing differently, does not remain limited to the gallery's walls.[3]

How is "intersubjective achievement" practically realized in performances? Consider a traditional performance, where we sit in a darkened horseshoe-shaped theater and watch a comedy. On stage, an actor delivers a joke that ends up being extremely funny to one audience member, who starts laughing loudly. This laugh, an expression of a single spectator, may invite others to pay closer attention to the situation, helping them better grasp the particular aspect of the line that makes it so funny. This cooperation, triggered by the laughter, can spark a reaction in the entire audience – of course, this process can also unfold in the opposite direction. This laugh can alter the course of the performance, steering it toward a more comedic tone and thus shaping the collective experience in a specific way. Crucially, what transforms through the laughter is not only the response of the audience but also the performer's experience, who will then act accordingly, exploring specific cues in the text, gestures, and staging in alignment with an audience's laughter. We want to emphasize with this example that performance is a collective achievement in which spectators and performers participate, each within different (sometimes alternating) roles (cf. Gallagher 2021). Any stand-up comedian nervously trying out a new repertoire knows this thoroughly. What seemed hilarious on the writing table might drop flat during a first live performance.

3 In this paper we will keep the focus on the performative arts. In future work we plan to provide an illustration of the intersubjectivity at work in creative practices that at first sight may be thought of as solitary activities, such as 'reading a novel' or 'appreciating a painting in an empty gallery'. In the paper *intimate place,* Habets et al. (2024) we have argued that even solitary art experience depend on the societal acceptance and situatedness of phantastical, irrational and imaginative thoughts in specific places in the public domain, such as museums, theaters, galleries etc. in our living environment.

In a paradigmatic example of performance arts, *Lips of Thomas* by Marina Abramović,[4] it is possible to observe how artists foster 'intersubjective achievements' even more clearly. In this iconic performance, Abramović performs a series of self-inflicted actions – breaking glass and injuring her hand, carving a Star of David into her belly – until, after lying naked and bleeding on a block of ice, the spectators intervene to lift her and care for her, effectively becoming performers themselves and bringing the piece to an end. Abramović stood for a long time in pain and lay bleeding on the block of ice in a museum exhibition hall. This surely evoked the discomfort that moved some of the spectators to intervene. These spectators not only performed the actual carrying and caring for Marina's body but simultaneously enacted more abstract notions, like mutual care and martyrdom (cf. Reddy 1979; Lakoff, Johnson 1980; Gallagher 2017). The (spontaneous) joint action (Lindblom 2015) of Abramovic and the audience can be considered an articulation and accomplishment of complex thoughts, like martyrdom, through performing, contrary to some predefined concept represented symbolically in the performance. Performances are not just performed in the sense of executing pre-defined directors or performers intentions, but emerge from and depend on the interaction between actors and spectators. What *Lips of Thomas* does, and what characterizes the commitment of artists from around the 1960s, is that it shows that the experience of artistic performance depends on the skills, emotions, and imaginative capacities available within the pool of performers and spectators. Acting as a participant in an artistic performance – as simple as smiling at a joke or pulling Abramović off the block of ice – implies putting one's abilities into play, inevitably inviting others to act similarly (or act in refusal). Through this complex process of actions and reactions, the performance becomes defined as "funny," or Abramović's body is perceived as fragile and needing care.

4 In the Imaginative Circle: Action Possibilities for Intersubjective Achievement

In Abramovic's performance, as she was not really going to bleed herself to death, her actions became gestural. Gestures can be considered "action as a possibility for further action" (cf. Gallagher 2017, 243, Gallagher 2021). Rather than mere possibilities for transmitting information, gestures are integral to how we engage with and make sense of our living environment, bringing forth a new core of signification through them (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2012, 148; Goodwin

4 24 October 1975, at the Krinzinger Gallery in Innsbruck.

2003). It is in the artist's skills to guide the intersubjective process of gesturing, as give an articulation of "what is to be seen differently" (Ianniello 2025). To make this more concrete, we will look at a paradigmatic theatrical improvisation – first introduced by Tom Osborn – a playwright and reader at the Royal Court Theatre (Johnstone 1999, 306). Through this example, we will outline the role of gestures in intersubjective achievement.

In the exercise, students are arranged in a circle (see Fig. 1) and pass a tangible object to one another, manipulating it imaginatively. The object can be anything, typically an everyday item. In our description, it is a piece of cloth. Manipulated by one student, it is then passed to the next. The object offers multiple prompts and invites the group to explore the meaning that it can be given in the exercise. By playing, the participants guide each other's perception of the object through the gestures of its handling.

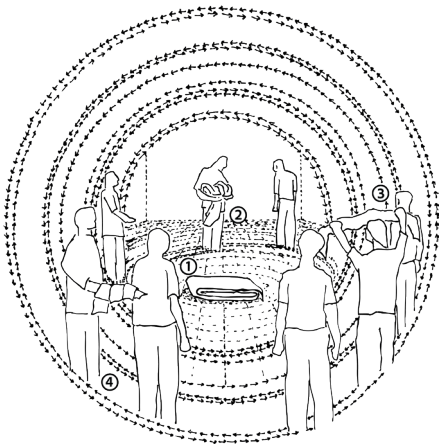

Fig 1 Illustration made by the authors. Circular theater exercise. 1) introduction of a real object, in this case, a piece of cloth; 2) imaginative play, caressing the cloth like a child; 3) imaginative play, a scarf in a stadium; 4) imaginative exhaustion, use of the cloth as a knife fails to establish correspondence with the material aspects of the cloth and in the group engaged in the exercise

Let us imagine a possible unfolding of the theatrical exercise. One student rolls the fabric, creating a ball-shaped form, and begins to rock it with an attitude suggesting that the imaginary child does not want to fall asleep. The exercise consists of giving tangible form to one's imaginative effort, which is ratified by the fact that the next person in the circle can coordinate with this effort. Once the action is developed, the student passes the rolled-up fabric child to the next person. The second student takes it and gently caresses it with great affection, then imaginatively transforms it into a scarf that they begin to wave vigorously in a stadium while cheering on their favorite team. In this process, we can observe various levels of attunement

and transformation: the second student embraces the imaginative material, ratifies it as an intersubjectively accepted possibility, and then further characterizes it before applying a radical transformation to the material aspects of the object in a way that is consistent with the structure of the fabric being manipulated. This can only go as far as the material at hand permits. For example, the next student takes the scarf, waves it proudly, and then tries to transform the fabric by rolling it into a knife. However, in this case, their imaginative effort does not align with the material aspects of the cloth, and importantly, it does not coordinate with the actions of the others. Practically speaking, the exercise ends here, as the possibilities for imaginative interactions have been exhausted.

We suggest that possibilities for gestural actions, like a piece of cloth rocked and gently caressed, can solely be understood as intersubjective achievements. In the unfolding of gestural activity, one can characterize certain aspects, making them salient and communicable, and letting them gain relevance for others, and come to see a fold of a piece of cloth as something different, such as a child's lips. The cloth does not merely offer practical possibilities for action, such as wrapping things in or as a picnic cloth to sit on the floor. In a situation like the theater exercise, the cloth provides opportunities to refer to other things, people, places, and phenomena through gestures. Gestural possibilities depend in part on the existence and material qualities of the object, as well as on the individual skills, abilities, and social practices available within the group engaged in the gestural activity (Ianniello, Habets 2025). Imagination is not something that happens solitarily inside an individual's head; it is then communicated to others through gestures (bodily, material, or mediated). We suggest considering gestures as an articulation and accomplishment of imaginative thoughts and feelings (cf. Van Dijk, Rietveld 2020; Goodwin 2003). Gestural actions are crucial for understanding a processual account of imagination.[5] Through gestures, we can partake in the imaginations of others, and this participation is supported by a shared imaginative setting, which we will call an 'imaginative niche.'

5 The possibilities for action offered by the environment to an organism were named "*affordances*" by the American psychologist James Gibson (1986, 127). In this paper we will not go into a discussion of affordances, but in earlier work drawn on an extended notion of affordances as developed by Erik Rietveld and Julian Kiverstein (2014) defined as follows, "affordances are relations between aspects of the material environment and abilities available in a form of life" (2014). In "Situated Imagination" (2020), van Dijk and Rietveld challenge the conventional representational view of imagination by examining the ethnographic details of imagining within specific contexts. They propose a relational and radically situated alternative, suggesting that the simultaneous emergence of multiple affordances during action can be experienced as imaginative. This indeterminate aspect of the coordinative process allows activities to expand and open up, introducing new possibilities for action.

5 Playing Together in Dynamic Imaginative Niches

Gesturing is never a solitary activity. Gestural possibilities lose their sense if solely performed alone, and gain relevance in situations in which we take the credibility of the imaginative thoughts of others. In many everyday situations that are often more practically inclined, mere gestural activity might be experienced as irrational or disturbing. Think of what you would think of a colleague who truly tries to convince you that the jacket balled up in his arms is a child. Or of a stranger on the street suddenly screaming 'to be or not be' while walking by. The relevance of gestures depends on the existence of situations in which one is accepted to communicate a flow of ideas, thoughts, and feelings as essential for fostering creativity (cf. Winnicott 1971, 74) and feel free to express otherwise irrational, fantastical, surreal, unfinished, nonsensical, or disturbing thoughts and feelings without fearing disapproval or rejection by others, and without depending on others' gullibility (cf. Winnicott 1971, 75). Crucially, we regard imagination as skilled engagement with the environment. In skilled action, 'situated normativity' shapes an individual's selective openness to possibilities of action that align with a community's social practices and expectations (Rietveld, Kiverstein 2014; Van Dijk, Rietveld 2018). Gestural actions are situated more normatively in some rather than other situations. As explained by the exercise above, "what is imaginable" is not unconstrained or detached from the materiality of such situations. So, there is a dependence on the specific materials in the environment (the cloth in this case) and broader social practices in which the imaginative niche is embedded (theater education, performance arts, and societal tendencies). Alternatively, in another example, think of children reenacting one of their favorite bedtime stories. What is played out depends on the materials (toys or random things) and the kind of children's narrative available in their family and broader societal situation. These shape what children imagine themselves to be: soldiers fighting a war with an umbrella for a gun, cars running a race, or a rabbit doctor healing their friend. Social norms, dominant narratives, and interaction styles constrain situated imagination. Playful situations are shaped in such a way as to evoke unpredictable elements of variation and creativity (Bateson, Martin 2013; Burghardt 2005; Spinka et al. 2001), while at the same time, they are typically constrained by rules of conduct, typical behaviors, and the materiality of the environment in playful situations. For example, the rules of staying in the circle and passing the object from one person to another can be understood as constraints.

Dynamic imaginative niches refer to situations that foster open-ended and surprising forms of engagement, allowing individuals and groups to explore new possibilities through imaginative and creative

interactions (Ianniello, Habets 2025). Importantly, we do not restrict imaginative ability solely to such situations. The concept emphasizes an amplification and situatedness of imaginative engagement in public life. Think of the theaters, cinemas, museums, festivals, galleries, etc. that enliven our cities and towns. However, also activities like parades, processions, theater exercises, or more day-to-day examples like reading a novel, telling a joke, or in child's play (or even specialized settings such as the psychotherapeutic setting, see Habets et al. 2024b for a comparison of artistic and psychotherapeutic settings). The places and activities on this heterogeneous and incomplete list all have a certain open-ended playfulness in common.

Our conception of *imaginative niches* is grounded in an enactivist approach to play proposed by Andersen et al., according to which humans engage in play as a deliberate means to create surprising situations (Andersen et al. 2023). Accordingly, play is understood as a method of informal experimentation through which individuals acquire knowledge and experience about their surroundings. Imaginative niches encourage uncertainty while reliably keeping an optimal zone for play between overstimulation and under-arousal (cf. Trevarthen 1979; Stern 2010). Play facilitates creativity and innovation by constructing environments conducive to surprise, precisely the unpredictability element conducive to the pleasure we experience while playing (Andersen et al. 2023, 467):

> Play can thus be described as a variety of niche construction where the organism modulates its physical and social environment in order to maximize the productive potential of surprise. (2022, 463)

Following Andersen and colleagues (2023), we suggest that the desire to play arises from the intrinsic motivation to encounter the unpredictable in a trusted manner (see Ianniello, Habets 2025). We underline that in play, we anticipate being surprised by the actions of others. By manipulating the environment, collective play and improvisation (see Noy et al. 2011) can be facilitated, where meaning remains fluid rather than predetermined. In that sense, imaginative niches facilitate and constitute people's intrinsic motivation to seek out *surprise and be surprised by* others.

In earlier work (Ianniello, Habets 2025), we have argued that openness of meaning sets "imaginative niches" apart from "cognitive niches" (Sterelny 2003) and "affective niches" (Colombetti, Krueger 2015).[6] Cognitive niches can 'scaffold' and offload cognitively

6 We want to underline that we do not consider cognition, affectivity and imagination to operate independently. We think there will always be overlap in real-life situations. The characterization of situations as typically cognitive, affective or imaginative

demanding tasks. An emblematic example of cognitive scaffolding comes from the history of the performing arts. Historians of English theatre have long puzzled over how the small troupes of Elizabethan theatres could have such large repertoires. As Evelyn Tribble (2005) suggests, it could be explained because, in those theatres, cognition was supported by a set of material artifacts – the theatre, the scripts, the actors' roles – and the theatre system was based on the use of verse and gesture, on a system of social apprenticeship and organizational practices within the companies. In practice, the performers anticipated and were dependent on the elaborate organization of the theater company to perform and effectively offload cognitive effort. What is anticipated of such a cognitive niche is that it reduces effort effectively.

Colombetti and Krueger have illustrated that the environment scaffolds "higher cognition" and affective states. This means that objects, places, and people can regulate our emotions as part of organism-environment interactions, which involve reciprocal influences that help achieve specific emotional states. Sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2011) cited the use of a bag as an illustrative example of this type of affective scaffolding.

> A handbag – including its content – functions as a highly portable, self-styled collection of technologies specifically chosen for regulating affect […], which accordingly generate feelings of confidence, power, and security. (Colombetti, Krueger 2015, 1163).

Starting from this example, we can think of the collection and manipulation of artifacts and spaces (Colombetti et al. 2018 1) in our everyday environment as the construction of affective niches (Colombetti, Krueger 2015, 4). In practice, we rely on certain places, objects and people to have a specific effect on us.

Returning to the theatrical exercise, contrary to cognitive and affective niches, the piece of cloth is not anticipated to be effective in a specific way, as the handbag. That is, the object's meaning for an individual and the group within the activity remains open-ended. Play with the piece of cloth not only makes it possible to see the cloth as something else. This 'something else' is only achieved intersubjectively in playful activity. It not only affords to see the piece of cloth, for example, as a baby. Those gestures also evoke the emergence of feelings, emotions, and moods associated with that imagined person (or thing, or place), which, through play, we can articulate, share, and explore together.

serves an analytic purpose to outline their differentiated situatedness within our living environment.

Similarly, *Faust* does not only put performers trapped behind the glass on display as fictional characters. However, it offers a space to explore the ambiguous moods and estranged feelings the performance evoked. The crucial point is that within *imaginative niches*, we can transform and are accepted to explore such feelings as shared objects of attention.

6 Intersubjective Dynamics, *Faust* as an Imaginative Niche

In this last section, we will use Ianniello's first-person experience of participating as a spectator in *Faust* during the performance at the 2017 Venice Biennale that took place in the German Pavilion to illustrate situations of intersubjective coordination. The ambiguity of what the performers inside the pavilion were doing contributed to the inherent disorientation that *Faust* staged. Performers enacted a series of actions in which the exercise of violence was a primary component – such as crushing their faces against thick sheets of glass or strangling themselves. Even the distorted sound of a guitar created discomfort and estrangement. Unexpectedly, it constructed an environment that was conducive to spontaneous and surprising reactions from visitors, which collectively altered the performative setting. The heterogeneous actions deployed in the grey zone demanded negotiation of the spectatorial posture.

In Ianniello's experience (in the remaining description, we will use the "I-form"), there was a moment when a performer picked up a guitar and began to play savagely. We can think of this sound as the balled-up, cradled fabric of the theatrical exercise. One of the spectators took up the invitation and started headbanging – consisting of violent head movements to the rhythm of music typical of metal music culture – inviting others to join. Headbanging here is comparable to the action of the student who, in the theatrical exercise, takes in the imaginary child and begins to caress it: although operating on the shared imaginative matter, an infant, he was characterizing it in a specific way based on his affective and imaginative coordination – the child was no longer like a fussy baby to be put to sleep but a small creature to be cared for.

Here, in *Faust*, my neighbor, solicited by a performer, allowed me to explore the performative environment differently in ways I possibly would not have explored alone. Our joint actions contributed to the transformation of the imaginative niche and surprised each other – including the performer. In practice, *Faust* can be seen as a hallmark of intersubjective imaginative achievement. By joining imaginaries, the audience was invited to make sense of the ambiguous, grim, and heavily mediated space it offered by participating in each

other's moments in going from seeing to seeing differently. One could say that there was *a mise en abime* of contact styles (Noë 2012), of perspectives that stand for *per-spicere*, "to see by means of" or, precisely, "to see through" (see Alloa 2024, 4).

In my specific case, I went from seeing the emaciated body of a performer harnessing a guitar, catatonic and isolated, deprived of bonds and enclosed in transparent walls, exhibited and violated – scrutinized by thousands of screens that photographed him at a hand's breadth from his face – to seeing a young body engaged in sharing its rage through music and inviting a physical connection, to tune into the rhythm and create a bond with a community. In short, by playing guitar and headbanging, we shaped our imaginative niche through an intersubjective achievement and found ourselves through a trusted surprise exploring unexpected possibilities.

I found myself no longer in a space resembling a lager or a bank in which the very lives of people were reduced to the bare minimum – photographed, consumed, locked up, segregated, spied on, and controlled. Thanks to my fellow headbanging imaginative explorer, a momentary and ephemeral component of the club – the imaginative circle – I now found myself among angry young people who use a medium – music – to express dissent, a burning dissatisfaction and in doing so, invite us to cooperate, that is, to shake our heads, intone rhythmically, and be part of a collective that breaks with normative violence of the standing order. Like *Faust*, art performances exemplify a better understanding of imagination as an intersubjective achievement, a collective effort that demands joint action. It involves creating and actively participating in situations that lead us from seeing to seeing differently. Like the collective handbanging as a form of resistance in a coercive space, an imaginative circle that can rendezvous anywhere and at any moment through the collective creation of imaginative niches, where there is a safe space for rehearsing to see the world differently.

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