

ESTETICA E PARTECIPAZIONE

Participating Monsters – dynamic imaginative niches

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[The following description is based on a drawing made by David Habets, proposed as the opening of the essay during the final stage of our collaborative writing process on the 22th of April 2022.

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 for - 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 laying in folds on the floor affords multiple solicitations, seemingly inviting the group to play with its meaning]

“Again and again I must submerge myself in the water of doubt”¹.

¹ L. Wittgenstein, *The Mythology in Our Language. Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*, (German/English parallel text), transl. by S. Palmié, ed. by G. da Col and S. Palmié, Hau Books, London 2020, p. 32.

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 reports², 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, but the play immediately disappears as the cloth, its materiality, does not support such an imaginative use. In this instant, some have lost their *correspondence*³ with matter and others. This exercise is paradigmatic for our understanding of affordances. An affordance, a neologism coined by the American psychologist James Gibson, is an invitation to action offered by the environment⁴. In the enriched version used here, an affordance is the relation between an aspect of the sociomaterial environment and an ability available in a form of life⁵. In manipulating the sociomaterial environment through collective imaginative action, as in 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, but my activity – cradling it, caring for it, making noises – will ensure that together we can *open up to new aspects of the sociomaterial environment*. Where the piece of cloth folds, it is possible to see a mouth that can stimulate different types of activity. Here the transition that allows someone to perceive differently is related to the *collective manipulation of imaginative sociomateriality* that brings into stake different skills. In playful activities, we are able to participate in each other's imaginaries, this participation takes place through the scaffolding of collective imaginative niches.

² K. Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers. Theatresports and the Art of Making Things Happen*, Faber and Faber Limited, London 1999, p. 304.

³ Cfr. T. Ingold, in the Introduction of *Imagining for real - essays on Creation, Attention and Correspondence*, Routledge, London 2022.

⁴ J. J. Gibson, *The ecological approach to visual perception*, Psychology Press Taylor & Francis group, New York 1979.

⁵ E. Rietveld & J. Kiverstein, *A Rich Landscape of Affordances*, in «Ecological Psychology», 26:4, 2014, pp. 325-352.

Our notion of participation is indebted to Colombetti & Krueger notion of “affective niches”, «instances of organism-environment couplings (mutual influences) that enable the realization of specific affective states»⁶. The way that things, places and people can help regulate one’s emotional and affective states is most clearly elucidated in their use the example of the handbag⁷:

A handbag—including its contents—functions as a highly portable, self-styled collection of technologies specifically chosen for regulating affect [...] which accordingly generate feelings of confidence, power, and security⁸.

Following Sterelny⁹, Colombetti & Krueger point at how «one can find many cases of environmentally scaffolded capacities that involve interactions of various individuals with collectively structured environments»¹⁰. The reference is to a study of Elizabethan and Jacobean theater by Evelyn Tribble¹¹ that shows how through a cognitively distributed theatrical system, the actors in the early modernity were able to master a large number of roles in a short time and with very few rehearsals. Tribble primarily analyzed the question of how actors are able to remember their parts. This was possible because, in these theaters, cognition was distributed across an assemblage of material artifacts – playhouse, plots, actor’s roles, playbooks – and the theatrical system was based on the uses of verses and gestures, social apprentice system and the organizational practices within the companies. This cognitive ecology, as Tribble-Sutton writes «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»¹². Following Colombetti & Krueger in extension of the example of the use of the handbag, this distributed theatrical system, we suggest, can be understood as an affective niche, which enables all those who participate in the system – actors, play-

⁶ G. Colombetti & J. Krueger, *Scaffoldings of the affective mind*, in «Philosophical Psychology», 28, 2014, p. 1160.

⁷ J. Kaufmann, *Le sac: Un petit monde d’amour*, J. C. Latte’s, Paris, 2011.

⁸ Ivi, p. 1163. The example of the handbag is based on the analysis of its use and meaning by sociologist J.C. Kaufmann, in *Le sac: Un petit monde d’amour* cit.,

⁹ K. Sterelny, *Thought in a hostile world, the evolution of human cognition*, Blackwell Publishing, New Jersey 2003.

¹⁰ G. Colombetti & J. Krueger, *Scaffoldings of the affective mind* cit., p. 1161.

¹¹ E. Tribble, *Distributing Cognition in the Globe*, in «Shakespeare Quarterly», Johns Hopkins University Press, 56: 2, 2005, pp. 135-155.

¹² Evelyn Tribble & John Sutton, *Cognitive Ecology as a Framework for Shakespearean Studies*, in «Shakespeare Studies», 39, 2011, p. 94.

wrights, clowns, educators, spectators – to amplify and regulate emotions and moods in unfolding the play from rehearsal to performance.

Looking closely at examples from folklore rituals, Nazi propaganda and contemporary art performances, we intend to extend the notions of affective niches into the scaffolds of playful sociomaterial practices, we call these *dynamic imaginative niches*, as means to regulate affective states and moods of a specific community on the long term. As a form of play, that allows for communal emotional regulation in the face of remote, or future threats. To develop our understanding of these affective scaffolds better we will adopt an enactive approach to “playing” as developed by Andresen and others¹³. We will specifically hone in on environmental aspects that allow for the establishment of *affective trust* among participants. This notion of trust, we suggest, is an important environmental constraint for playful behavior to commence. This notion of *affective trust* is not neutral but it is relational and situated in the sociomaterial practice¹⁴ groups of people are engaged in.

Our aim, more precisely, will be to try to observe how, in different historical contexts, *the figure of the monster* has been used as a “from of trust” (cf. Ingold¹⁵) to produce a specific affective scaffold, which we call an *imaginative dynamic niche*. Our methodology, to describe the 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 and folklore rituals we do not join sides with monsters, nor do we mock them¹⁶. We follow 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

¹³ M.M. Andersen, J. Kiverstein, M. Miller & A. Roepstorff, *Play in Predictive Minds: A Cognitive Theory of Play*, in «Psychological Review», June 2022.

¹⁴ We follow Kiverstein & Rietveld’s useful distinction between affordances and relevant affordances or “solicitations”, «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», in E. Rietveld & J. Kiverstein *A Rich Landscape of Affordances*, «Ecological Psychology», 26:4, 2014, pp. 325-352.

¹⁵ An alteration of Ingold’s *form of fear* in *Dreaming of Dragons: On the Imagination of Real Life*, in «The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute» 19: 4, 2013, p. 737. The figure that we focus on in this current paper is the Schnappvicheer, which is remotely based on the figure of the Dragon that Ingold elaborates on.

¹⁶ Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *The Mythology in Our Language. Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough* cit.

people do all this out of sheer stupidity»¹⁷. Meaning is to be found in the specificity and situatedness of the play. By means of description of archival images of various periods and rituals we try to describe the specificity, non-objective and non-neutral character of participatory engagement and collective attunement. We will find “the monster” to be seemingly equally at home in a harvest festival as amidst a nazi-parade. We intend 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. In following it, we will activate a playful attitude and transform and immerse ourselves in unusual contexts.

Trusted Monsters

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

In earlier work¹⁸ we 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»¹⁹ and collective anxieties.

By *transfiguration* we mean the act of altering the form and other aspects of the body or the environment, as an invitation to openness of one’s field of affordances. Thus, to explore unexplored affordances that lead to a process of *transformation*, in which habitual ways and on the long term sociomaterial practice can be altered. *Transfiguration* is a means towards *transformation*. For *transformation* in the face of potential catastrophes, future threats or other living altering events to take place, we suggest, 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 we call a *trusted monster*. At

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 32.

¹⁸ A. Ianniello & D. Habets, *Enacting Monsters* (forthcoming).

¹⁹ T. Ingold, *Dreaming of Dragons: On the Imagination of Real Life* cit., p. 737.

present, we suggest that our notion of monsters is an extension of the scaffoldings of the affected mind, extended into playful sociomaterial practices as a means to regulate emotions of a specific community.

Play we regard as a practice that structures communal mind-body-environment relations in the specific community commenced in the activities. We use 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 meaningful»²⁰.

We suggest that our monsters are a specific playful practice, a form of playing together, that allows for communal emotional regulation in the face of remote, or future threats. The monstrous play offers affective attunement intended not as solution-based style of coping, but as a creative practice to navigate unexplored affective modes, or in other words novel embodied-coping-styles²¹. Looking at “monsters” as such, one can regard rituals in cyclical pastro-agriculture traditions, which are generally or 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 activity²² 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, we think takes place along a similar sequence.

²⁰ J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens - proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur*, H.D. Tjeek Willink & Zoon N.V., Haarlem 1938, pp. 1-2 (translation by authors from Dutch to English).

²¹ G. Colombetti & J. Krueger, *Scaffoldings of the affective mind* cit., p. 1169.

²² D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Tavistock Publications tvd, London 1971, p. 75.

In his book *Playing and Reality*, he positions play as follows²³, «it is play that is universal, and belongs to health». «The natural thing is play», he writes, «and the highly sophisticated twentieth-century phenomenon is psychoanalysis», as a highly specific form of play. The dependency on a state of trust for play to take place, he already developed in his seminal essay *transitional object and transitional phenomena* in 1953. As an example, Winnicott first describes early forms of playing by newborns. Parents recognize and safeguard these possibilities. Iconic is the stuffed animal, which when it gets dirty, over 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. We want to draw attention to how this notion of trust is provisional for play, and makes space for «*respected*» interpersonal «*illusions*»²⁴. So, for our Monster to transform a situation into situated play, to set playing with the situation in motion, 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. 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 anxieties, an explanation or a hypothesis of the situation does not suffice. Wittgenstein described this as, in his remarks on Frazer's analysis of monstrous practices as follows: «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»²⁵. Beyond calming down, it doesn't afford space for creativity necessary to explore new ways of living to "outgrow anxieties".

We want 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 play to take place one must be in a state of "relaxation" in the condition of trust. This "state" we think can be under-

²³ Following J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens - proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur cit.*

²⁴ «It is an area that is unchallenged, ...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»; D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality cit.*, p. 4.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 34.

stood as an «affective niche»²⁶. 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. Recently Andersen et al. published an insightful paper on an enactive play. Their notion revolves around the predictive processing framework²⁷ of active inference. Anderson et. all. 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»²⁸. Human beings play to surprise themselves and to try to respond to surprise. The unexpected element has to be not too predictable and not too overwhelming to enable a fun and rewarding play, and, crucially, playing is fun because you reduce error prediction faster than expected. We actively search for the potential space where errors are trusted, a 'sweet-spot', Anderson et. all call this behavior 'slope chasing'.

We emphasize that humans not only exploit environmental aspects in play but deliberately create them; we are not only "slope chasers", but "slope-builders". We actively create challenging situations for ourselves in such a way that we still *trust* in ourselves, others and the environment to play. In this paper we are particularly interested in the way «playful agents may create and establish an environment tailored to the generation and further investigation of surprise and uncertainty»²⁹. We will see how through monstrous practices the element of surprise is regulated and amplified by creating a trusted community of things, people and places. A monstrous practice is a «training for the unexpected»³⁰ only if it enacts *trusted* surprises. The way the authors characterize the "sweet spot" gives an opening towards 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 we suggest are a scaffold of an immediate sense of *affective trust*.

²⁶ Cfr. G. Colombetti & J. Krueger, *Scaffoldings of the affective mind* cit.

²⁷ T. Parr, G. Pezzulo & K.J. Friston, *Active Inference: The Free Energy Principle in Mind, Brain, and Behavior*, The MIT Press, Boston, 2022.

²⁸ Marc M. Andersen, J. Kiverstein, M. Miller, & A. Roepstorff, *Play in Predictive Minds: A Cognitive Theory of Play* cit., p. 7.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 1.

³⁰ M. Spinka, R.C. Newberry & M. Bekoff, *Mammalian Play: Training for the Unexpected*, in «The Quarterly Review of Biology», 76(2), 2001, p. 141.

It should not be underestimated, that surprising ourselves may «galvanise the emergence of new behaviour which, if they persisted over time and were transmitted between individuals, could be added to the cultural repertoires of their populations»³¹. Thus, 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»³², 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 behavior. To participate in play is a way to transform and reorganize³³ ourselves for the better or the worse.

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 smart-phone, still taken at 0:06.

³¹ Marc M. Andersen, J. Kiverstein, M. Miller & A. Roepstorff, *Play in Predictive Minds: A Cognitive Theory of Play* cit., p. 27.

³² translated by authors from *Homo Ludens - proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur*, H.D. Tjeck Willink & Zoon N.V., Haarlem, 1938, p. 13.

³³ A. Noë, *Strange Tools*, Hill and Wang, New York 2015.

Seven monstrous figures of 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 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 body of the monster.

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 clearly an action by the swordsmen of 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 of the 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 towards 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 through the scene. The laughing and excited "ooehs" and "aaaahhhhs" amplify the feeling of the monsters being part of a festive parade passing by.]

The scene we transcribed is part of the 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 as to chase away the winter and to welcome the spring³⁴. The monster we described is called a Schnappviecher. They are among several other "wild men" that appear in the parade. We learned about the Schnappviecher through the photography book *Wilder mann - the image of the savage* by Charles Fréger. It was the catalog to a photography exhibition in 2012 at the Musée international du Carnaval et du Masque in Binche, in Belgium. The amount of remaining European monsters in the book gives the impression of a living tradition of pre-Christian beliefs and a "culture of savages" in Europe that for many generations was assumed to be lost entirely. On closer examination the monsters that we recognized seemed to be part of festivities where traditions are made into mere tourist attractions. The monstrous figures seem to be part of

³⁴ C. Fréger, *Wildermann - the image of the savage*, Dewi Lewis Publishing, Heaton Moor, 2011.

what we call the re-festivalisation of Europe. We don't want to glorify folklore practices in any sense, yet we regard them as part of a tremendously rich repertoire of practices that have helped and can help us understand transformation of the communities we live in, in the face of distant threats. What strikes us in watching these contemporary "walk-by" video recordings is the close physical contact and familiarity that seems to be at play. The actors are from the village, dressed up, and visually present every time the slit in the linen body opens us during bouncing. The audience participates in being chased into laughter and loud screaming by the monsters that approach. Acknowledging the obvious, a villager has become monstrous.

Community monsters

Familiarity is the base of trust in this play. Many people seem to be familiar with each other in the scene or seem to trust its outcome based on trust through experience, by knowing *who* the monster is, not *what* the monster is. As the scene continues people are squeezed and pressed together which in many situations would lead to anxiety and panic. In the play of the Egettman pageant it offers the possibility to be closer to one another than normally acknowledged as comfortable, as the parade with Wild men and pageant rides passes the people on the sides of the road are left covered in feathers and sooth. This interactive physicality is a means to at least temporarily open up new possibilities of getting to know one another in the community. Reservations and appropriate distancing that takes place in everyday life is temporarily relieved. The monster bouncing and snapping his way down the street marks the moment in the play where the *trusted* can become the *familiar* by the close proximity at which the monster brings one to another. Monster pressed against the spectator, spectator against spectator, hunter against monster, hunter against spectator forming a mashed up temporal community.

Here we can see *participatory sense-making*³⁵ at work. Based on the notion of *sense-making*, central to enactivism, De Jaegher and Di Paolo mean by *participatory sense-making* «the coordination of in-

³⁵ H. De Jaegher & E. Di Paolo, *Participatory sense-making An enactive approach to social cognition*, in «Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences», 6(4), 2007. De Jaegher and Di Paolo in this essay 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.

tentional 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»³⁶. The co-construction of meaning during social interaction occurs through the coordination of their 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 take place. What we are interested in 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»³⁷. 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 De Jaegher & Di Paolo state that «interaction is not reducible to individual actions or intentions but installs a relational domain with its own properties that constrains and modulates individual behaviour»³⁸. In an 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 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 a 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 pass. The autonomy that determines social interaction does not exclude the autonomy of the individual. We suggest that this “specular dance” is constrained by a relational notion of trust, of the two individuals in one another and a more general sense of trust in the space they are moving through.

Beyond the physicality in this example, we see that the monster which has become a trusted “form of fear”. Familiarity with one an-

³⁶ Ivi, p. 497.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 498.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 494.

other scaffolds a form of “recreational fear”³⁹. We are not so much interested here in the question “How is it that we derive pleasure from fear?”, but we are interested in describing the different “forms of trust” that enable us to play with fear and anxieties. “The monster” in this case is less the scaffold of fear or anxiety, then it is a scaffold of trust and familiarity. This is not an opposite to fear, anxiety or stress in one’s experience of a situation, but a constitutive constraint for 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, we don’t regard them as “neutral” or “objective”, a person can find oneself familiar and trusted with practices and world views that radically differ from our norms, or the norms of the time and place one is situated. The monster as part of a carnivalesque tradition makes much sense in considering a remote community that had to deal yearly with collective anxieties, like famine, diseases or bad weather. Transposed within a contemporary village, the future threats the monster represents, have drastically changed in the context of globalized agricultural economy, so dependencies have changed, but the establishment of trust and familiarity in a village community can still have a valid place, in which the monster can play a role as a figure of the community.

The monster as a dynamic imaginative niche

Regarding the monster as a dynamic creative niche for community building, we can see how the Schnappviecher, and other Wild Mann, are not mere representations of some “ancient” and revived tradition, but are active vectors that give form to the village community. The “lived monster” doesn’t give an explanation of what the monster is (as mere hypothesis) but gives us a notion of who gives form to a contemporary sense of agro-pastoral culture. Persistence of a village, in a remote mountain valley, depended on a community to remain flexible and changeable in face of impending disasters. The “monsters” as members of the community are allowed to change,

³⁹ 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»; M. Malmdorf Andersen, U. Schjoedt, H. Price, F.E. Rosas, C. Scrivner, M. Clasen, *Playing With Fear: A Field Study in Recreational Horror in* «Psychological Science», November 2020.

and are actively remade and reinvented by members of the community. This slow transfiguration of the figure of the Schnappviecher, can be read as the transformation of the form of communal fears over time.

What is normally considered as 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, emergence of new skills, the change of the route on the basis of 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, social media through which the event is promoted, are all ways to remodel the monster. By *dynamic imaginative niche*, we mean a sociomaterial niche constructed *for* and *through* playful practices that invite an openness to unexplored affordances. For this playful practice to be enacted we suggest it is crucial that the individuals and the group have a sense of trust in the situation as a whole. We think of this sense of this trust as a constraint to openness to multiple affordances, or indeterminate affordances⁴⁰. 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 of the community is explored. Too little constraints might lead to individualistic explorations in which *correspondence* is lost and individual skills no longer lead to changes in the group dynamics of playing together, or in other words, of educating each other's attention. 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.

⁴⁰ L. van Dijk & E. Rietveld, *Situated imagination*, in «Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences», September 2020.

Antonio Ianniello e David Habets, Participating Monsters

A monster amongst Alpine peaks



[The following description of the enactment of the Schnappviecher is taken from a video clip named Egetmann Umzug 25. Februar 1941, of 2:55 minutes, uploaded on the 8th of March 2014 by Unser Tiro on youtube. The film was originally shot during field work of Prof. Dr. Richard Wolfram and edited by Dr. Lisl Waltner in commission of 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 camera man is rather concerned following the slapstick-like act of the farmers figures in the foreground. The other scenes are shot with the mountains and skies as background.

From 0:32 till 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 body of the monster in the front shows. 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 we transcribed is part of a archival film document kept at the University of Wien and shows a special edition of 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 war⁴¹. 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 theatre as an epic, glorifying its claims on an ancient Germanic racial lineage.

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"⁴² that stiffen the fluidity of existence. The Schnappviecher in this account becomes an exemplary heritage of conservative preservation⁴³, freezing a supposed timeframe as a "safeguarded" fact, such as its "ancientness". This monster becomes a guardian of the eternal, eternally guarding totalitarianism.

⁴¹ J.R. Dow, *Heinrich Himmler's Cultural Commissions - Programmed Plunder in Italy and Yugoslavia*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2018.

⁴² «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»; J. Dewey, *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*, The Macmillan Company, New York 1916.

⁴³ E. Rietveld & R. Rietveld, *Hardcore Heritage: Imagination for Preservation*, in «Frontiers in Psychology» 8: 1995, 2017



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

Such “bad habits” scaffolded by Alpine Monster «put an end to plasticity, so that they possess us instead of us possessing them»⁴⁴. 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»⁴⁵. Cultivating “bad habits” is a way to acclimate themselves to standardize 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 re-

⁴⁴ M. Maiese & R. Hanna, *The Mind-Body Politic*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2019, p. 60.

⁴⁵ S. Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics*, Indiana University Press, 2003, p. 65.

striction of creative interpretation necessary for a monster to be means of communal coping. This is the monster of pre-given rules that promotes *collective stupidity* or even worse *collective sociopathy*⁴⁶.

The angry monsters of the Männerbunde

To understand better how Schnapviecher can enact “collective sociopathy” and the formation of “non-inclusive” communities, like the national socialist empire obviously attempted to establish, we return to the question: Not *what* the monster is, but *who* the monster is? 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 fixed to its Germanic descendants that safeguard Germanic culture. 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 Nazi’s were the pedagogic and educative programs, like the Hitler Jugend and the revival of a culture of Männerbunde, boys clubs. As Wolfram notes of the Schnapviecher and other Wild Men; *Das war Männersache*” (It was a men’s thing)⁴⁷. 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 (boys clubs). Singing together, sports and the enactment of Germanic rituals were pedagogical means to establish a conservative sense of community.

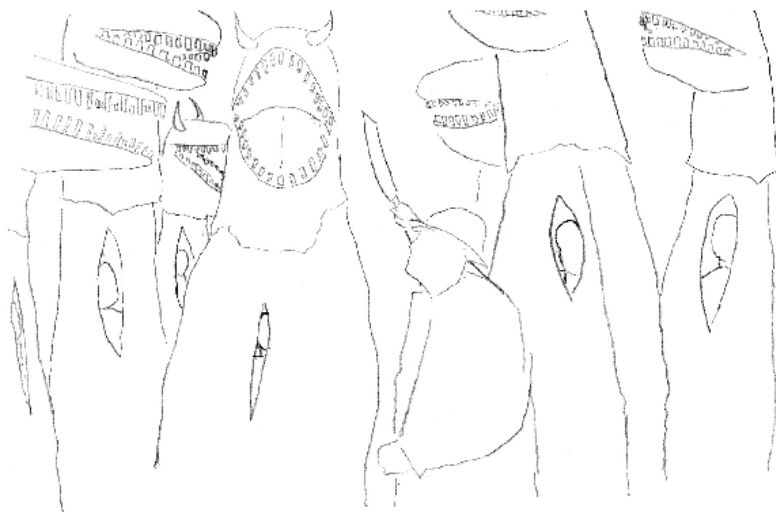
The monster here in 1941, becomes a “form of distrust”, the form of fear of others and interpersonal anxieties. For distrust is confirmed by the inclusivity of who can play the monster. Among a select group of people, in this case based on race, trust is established, the monster enacts the strife, the war, to ensure the preservation of its lineage. The material form of the costume of the monster did ample change, but we want to draw attention to the way of representation in Wolfram’s film. By leaving out the participation of the audience, and the hunter figure that tames the swarm, the Schnapviecher are left to fight amongst each other. From 0:41 onwards the monsters snap at each

⁴⁶ M. Maiese & R. Hanna, *The Mind-Body Politic* cit., Chap. 2, pp. 35-87.

⁴⁷ J.R. Dow, *Heinrich Himmler’s cultural commissions: programmed plunder in Italy and Yugoslavia*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin, 2018, p. 155.

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other's bodies fiercely. An experience of communal anger that emerges from the "swarming behavior" if left unattended by the hunters. 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. The potential for enacting aggression can also be seen in contemporary videos of the Eggetmann pageant.



[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.]

The slit in the costume acts as a frame of the face, amplifying expressions of aggression and fatigue. In this sense, the monster, contrary to being a neutral material artifact, finds itself clothed in affective musculature. The kinetic sensorimotor stimulation, a faster heart-

beat, an increase of blood pressure, rising levels of lactic acid in the muscle are all aspects of the *bodily affective style*⁴⁸ of the performance, which in turn characterizes and increases the rhythm and intensity of actions. Play is established in rallying and fighting with the 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 Schnapfieber, for initiating a revival of a Germanic tribal warrior culture. Here a social manifestation 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»⁴⁹. 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 more open ending or surprise in the game, since it is set up for the conservation of the predetermined community.

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 are 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.

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

⁴⁸ M. Maiese, *Affective Scaffolds, Expressive Arts, and Cognition*, in «Frontiers in Psychology» 7:359, 2016, p. 1.

⁴⁹ G. Colombetti & J. Krueger, *Scaffoldings of the affective mind* cit., p. 1167.

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national tradition". Transformation of the community is no longer allowed to be a form of participatory play but relies on a design of pre-determined intentions. It is important to note that the monsters we are describing are relatives, yet scaffold radically different forms of situated trust. The nazi monster builds "cognitive walls" in respect of which the subjects feel «stuck in rigid and inflexible habits or established ways of thinking»⁵⁰. To be "comfortably" stuck in crystallized practices closes off possibilities for personal and collective transformation: a monoculture of bad habits.

Pioneering monsters



[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 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 towards the United States of America. The monster is transported in a car that resembles an ambulance. On arrival it is

⁵⁰ M. Maiese & R. Hanna, *The Mind-Body Politic* cit., p. 301.

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]

Of course, Joseph Beuys 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, we give ourselves the freedom to play with our own methodology and alter the selected footage by sketching alternate stills from our imagination. Much has been written on the meaning of Beuys's iconic performative art work and of its constituents, like the felt and the coyote⁵¹, but our specific interest here is with the allocation of this blinded transfiguration'.

On the video documentation of the one-of-performance 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 fence⁵². Fenced off from the intimate play between the felt figure and the coyote. When we look at his figure as one of our monsters, we see a cloaked "Wildermann", traveling to another continent, a blinded European encountering a coyote in the white cube of a gallery space.

The allocation of the monster intrigues us. It is not a monster cast into eternity, like the Schnappviecher during the national socialist oppression, but a monster cut off from cultural constraints of the community to which it gives a form and to which it is bound. Beuys for us resembles a *pioneering monster*, a cosmopolitan wild man that roams freely in an attempt to reconcile newly assembled communities. The "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.

We take the freedom to transfigure such an iconic and important performance because for us it is emblematic of the tendency of contemporary performative works imbued with "shamanic" and "ritual" qualities. It is important to note that Beuys consciously blinds himself

⁵¹ C. Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys: Coyote*, Schirmer/Mosel, Munich, 1988, p. 228.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

in the journey of “a European artist” to the Americas, the transcontinental aspect of the play’s characters is emphasized rather than universalized. In Beuys’s performance, contrary to for example his *Information Action* lectures held in the same years, the audience is separated from coyote and artist by the wire fence. It is consciously a scene to be looked upon, not one to participate within. The *pioneering monster* is creating a boundary, literally a fence in this case as a constraint, by which the play as so is creating a temporal community of stander-byes.

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 and a “monstrous shepherd”. 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.

Surprise and uncertainty are amplified by Beuys’s skillful education of attention of the audiences but not by an active audience itself. The spectators are invited to reflect upon the artists actions, or as Beuys call it “reconciliation through healing of the wound” of which Beuys speaks, is to be found in the successive audience interpretation, contrary to Beuys himself, the enactment of the “burdened encounter” does not open the audience up to new possibilities to deal with lived anxieties, other than an intellectual reflection on the constitutive parts of the performance afterwards. The trust in which this form of play is based is in the artist solemnly, not in a temporal relationship between artist and audience and environment.

The constraints of modern play

What is elicit in the video documentation but which remained hidden from the “one-of” audience 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 the visitor is made into a passerby, cut off from the possibilities to form a persisting temporal community. Although in the extension of the performance its actors move through the “*public domain*” there is no “*real-life*” participation enacted, or in other words the monster roams freely through the world. The video shows Beuys walking unencumbered by by-passers in the strange activity of walking and covering

his hands with his eyes on arrival (0:28 - 0:44), and similarly on departure (36:18 - 36:42). Without overstressing this detail, for us the lack of response of the others to Beuys shows how the play is actually confined to the trust embedded into the gallery space.

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 the 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 and theater. 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.



[In memoriam of Hermann Nitsch: 29 August 1938- 18 April 2022]

Around the time we were writing the concluding paragraphs to our paper, we 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 for how the monster, as a trusted figure, gets ripped apart. Uncloaked and slit open, its intestines and ribcage are exposed and on display.

In our imaginary version of the play a Schnappviecher is cut open, drawn and quartered. The trusted figure is sacrificed as a means of physical and sensual arousal. The audience is covered in droplets of its blood and experiences the end of its life intimately. In the violence and disgust of the play Nitsch stretches the constraints of what is to be trusted in a gallery space. Testing and crossing these limits is supposed to lead to deep sensual reflection on existence. We suggest seeing this scarification as a form of "broken" play, in which the audience is confronted with the limits of their trust in the space, and in that moment the illusion is broken and one is confronted with the gruesome reality of "real-life" of the moment. Left behind in "shock", specks of blood everywhere, with one's trust in a way of life broken by an iconic actionist performance. The space that was left for "respected interpersonal illusions" of our trusted monster disappears in this instance, and with it a transformative space in which the audience can dwell together with its monsters. Shock with 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 we are trying to describe.]

The alienation or outcast of monstrous figures, of forms that have been with us for a very long time, is symptomatic for an understanding of the arts as a practice that looks upon itself as segregated from everyday life. It is exemplary for an understanding of a «play as not being part of "ordinary" or "actual" life. As a departure from the temporary atmosphere of activity with an intended purpose»⁵³ 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»⁵⁴.

⁵³ J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens cit.*, p. 12.

⁵⁴ T. Ingold, *Imagination for Real cit.*, p. 6.

Our aim is to situate “monstrous play”, and with it contemporary performative 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 over-spill the limits of conceptualization and representation, into unmapped realms of conscience and feeling»⁵⁵. 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 our 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 an “trusted collective imaginary” into everyday situations.



[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 2:55 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.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 4.

In the video we see the dog actors arriving by boat at the Giardini della Biennale in Venice. The Giardini is void of visitors, feels empty and desolate with incidental piles of trash and leftovers from the previous biennial. 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 dog trainer and dogs to stage the absence of human presence in Mc Queens video.

Our 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. Absence as in many contemporary works of art and performances invites monstrous playing.]

Abstract

Attraverso la figura del mostro inteso come forma di fiducia, il nostro obiettivo è estendere la nozione di *scaffolding* delle nicchie affettive (cfr. Colombetti & Krueger, 2017). Pertanto, proponiamo di intendere i mostri come nicchie immaginative dinamiche. Per farlo, sviluppiamo un'etnografia visiva in cui seguiamo la figura dello Schnappviecher che, in quanto figura di transizione, viene utilizzata per la costituzione di comunità sia nel contesto dei villaggi alpini dell'agro-pastorale del Nord Italia sia nell'ambito del programma culturale di Himmler. Per approfondire la nozione di mostro, ci prendiamo la libertà di utilizzare questa figura mostruosa per esplorare le opere d'arte contemporanee, per considerare la separazione, la frattura tra immaginazione e realtà (cfr. Ingold, 2022).

Through the figure of the monster understood as a form of trust, our aim is to extend the notion of the scaffolding of affective niches (cf. Colombetti & Krueger, 2017). Therefore, we propose monsters to be understood as dynamic imaginative niches. To do so we develop a visual ethnography in which we will follow the figure of the Schnappviecher who, as a transitional figure, is used for the constitution of communities both within the context of agro-pastoral alpine villages in northern Italy and within Himmler's cultural program. To explore our notion of monsters further, we then take the liberty of using this monstrous figure to explore contemporary works

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of art, to consider the separation, the rift between imagination and reality (cf. Ingold, 2022).

Parole chiave: partecipazione, mostri, immaginazione, ecologico-enattivo, fiducia.

Keywords: Participation, Monsters, Imagination, Ecological-Enactive, Trust.