

Weather

Today: Mostly sunny, breezy, milder. High 59. Low 48. Wind 10-20 mph.
Saturday: Mostly cloudy, windy, rain. High 65. Low 46. Wind 15-30 mph.
Yesterday: Temp. range: 31-43.
AQL: Good-25. Details on Page D2.

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The Imaginary Convention

Culture Meets Wry Society

By Ferdinand Protzman
Special to The Washington Post

During one of the Société Imaginaire's discussions about the world's cultural condition this week at the Kennedy Center, Misael Pastrana Borrero, a former president of Colombia, announced to fellow members that he had just made a remarkable discovery: A new, universal language was aborning.

"It is called Bahdeenglaze," he said. "Everyone who has spoken here today begins by saying, 'Forgive me for speaking Bahdeenglaze' [bad English]. Why do we need to be forgiven? We're developing a language that will replace Esperanto."

The quip cracked up the small group of writers, artists, politicians and intellectuals from Europe, South America and the United States, who have gathered for a week-long series of discussions and an art exhibition this week as part of the Kennedy Center's 25th-anniversary celebration.

Founded in 1984 by a Hungarian-born painter who calls himself Batuz (BAH-toos), the Société Imaginaire has grown steadily into a cultural phenomenon that is flourishing on three continents.

The Kennedy Center gathering concludes at 6:30 this evening with a public symposium by society members including American poet Mark Strand, novelist and Harvard Review editor Stratis Haviaras, Polish poet Julia Hartwig, German artists Michael Morgner and Mark Lammert and collector Olga Hirshhorn.

Batuz founded the Société with the idea of creating an informal international organization dedicated to overcoming barriers to direct communication between artists and intellectuals around the world. The free intellectual spirit would be its driving force.

"I saw that despite the phenomenal growth of electronic communications, writers and artists were becoming increasingly isolated on their little islands of national culture," the



BY ANDRAS MAHR FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Poet Julia Hartwig and writer Jacek Bochenski at the Société Imaginaire's Washington meeting. The group is a global salon for artists and intellectuals.

62-year-old Batuz says. "This was conducive to self-inflicted, incestuous, retrograde literature and art. And that is dangerous because it can allow culture to be infected by nationalism."

To counter that, Batuz, who has lived in Europe and South America and now resides in Upstate New York, began bringing artists, intellectuals, politicians or just people interested in culture together through meetings, correspondence and conversation.

That quickly led to more defined activities, such as the Correspondence Project, which links writers from different countries and then compiles and catalogues their correspondence with the assistance of the National Gallery of Art and the University of Maryland.

Its membership has grown to more than 500, including American poet W.D. Snodgrass, Uruguayan President Julio Maria Sanguinetti, Mexico's Nobel Prize-winning writer Octavio Paz, German Social Democratic Party Chairman Rudolf Scharping and Stanislaw Baranczak, a Polish poet and professor of literature at Harvard. Paz coined the society's name.

Exactly what membership in an imaginary society means is a matter of some debate among its members. Many, like Strand, oppose attempts at defining the group.

"I don't believe we should justify ourselves to anybody," Strand said at a discussion Wednesday. Over the summer he wrote an "antimanifesto," which said that the society "lives by refusal, by saying 'no.' It has no

manifesto, and will not be bound by any explicit formulation of its aims."

Despite its cerebral nature, the society does have an annual budget of about \$320,000, according to Batuz, with the money coming from federal, state and local governments in Germany and other countries, as well as donations from businesses and individuals. The money is used to pay members' travel to and expenses at its meetings.

Almost any event the society stages seems to become performance art. The Kennedy Center meetings have been no exception.

"They really are almost a performance," said Sheldon Schwartz, the center's director of programming. "It's wonderfully crazy. They're all on another planet. Maybe it should be called Planet Imaginaire."

In the society's universe, artists and authors are free to create works anonymously. "It's a chance to be free, not to have to protect our reputation," Haviaras said. "The product is less important than the process. Our role is communication through the arts in as great a scale as possible."

On the wall of the Kennedy Center, a plaque quoting an article by John F. Kennedy for *Look* magazine in 1962 seems to echo that thought: "To further the appreciation of culture among all the people. To increase respect for the creative individual, to widen participation by all the processes and fulfillments of art—this is one of the fascinating challenges of these days."

For this day, at least, the imaginary society seemed to be at home.