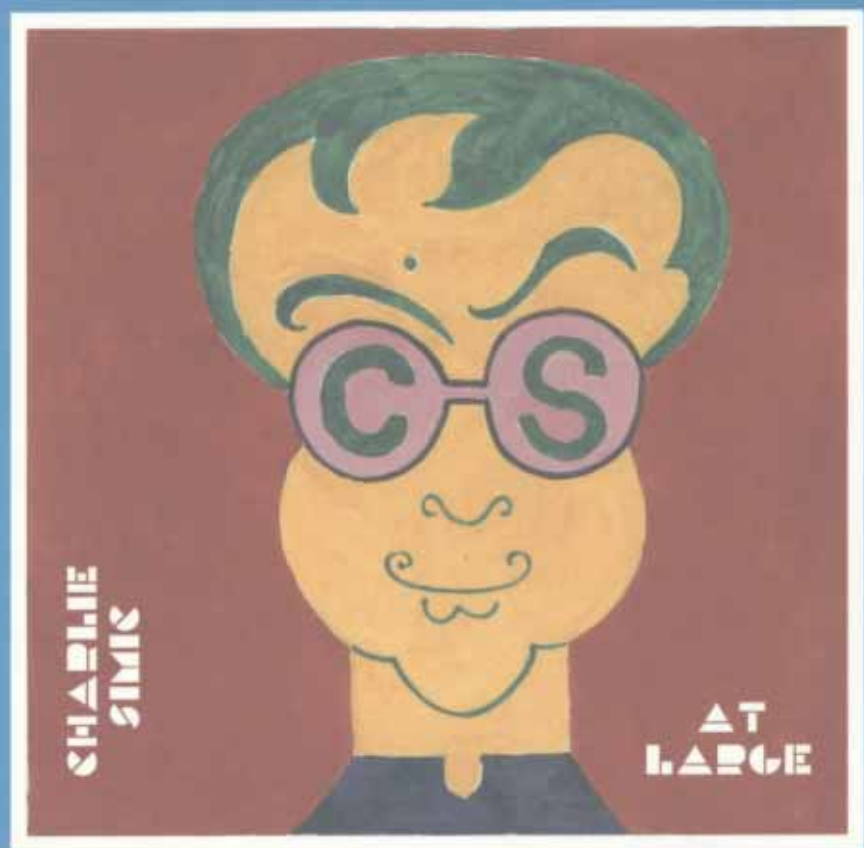


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SOCIETE IMAGINAIRE

Report from Cadenabbia III

The third annual gathering of the Société Imaginaire, hosted by the Adenauer Foundation in Villa La Collina in May, 1997, was the most exciting and focused one so far. Perched on a hilltop on the shores of Lake Como, the Villa, its conference center and extensive landscaped grounds, offer an ideal retreat for the week-long meeting of prominent artists, writers, and government officials from Europe and North and South America, who brainstorm and debate on inter-cultural communication through literature, art and architecture, and trade and economics.

Half of the twenty-four participants were new recruits, six of them from Harvard and MIT—a dramatic initiative by Batuz, the founder and guiding spirit of the Société, to raise the level of discourse and to stimulate the generation of ideas in several disciplines at once. The three newcomers from Harvard included Werner Sollors (Henry B. and Anne M. Cabot Professor of English Literature and Professor of African-American Studies), Professor Marc Shell (comparatist), and theater director Robert Scanlan (until recently

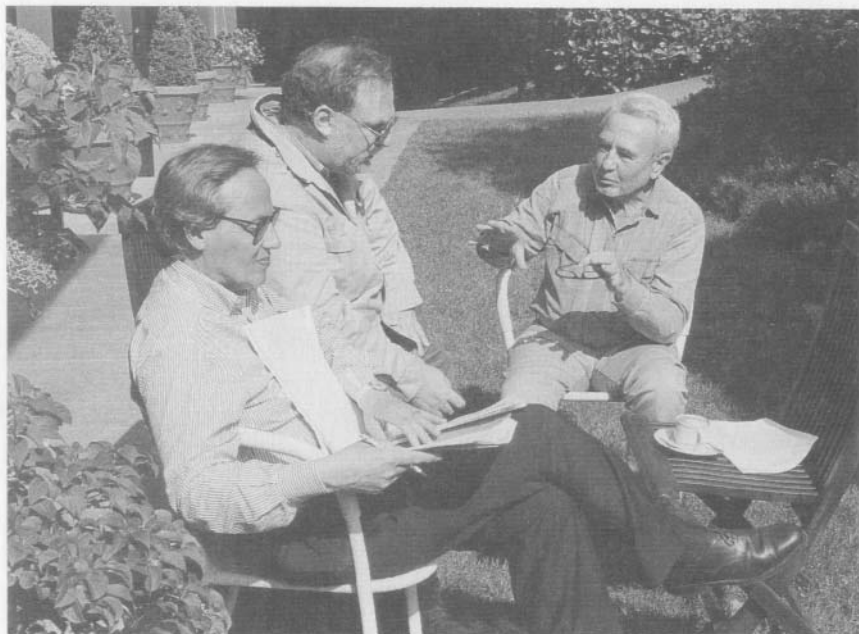


In session: Limmer, Batuz, Rossler, Reuter, Kaiser, Haviaras, Wyatt, Scanlan (speaking), Slachta, and Sollors. Photo by Nancy Royal.

Literary Director of the American Repertory Theater and Lecturer in Dramatic Arts). Edward O. Wilson, (best-selling author, Pellegrino University Professor and Curator of Entomology in the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard) another Harvard recruit, was unable to attend, attaching to his greetings by FAX a proposition to investigate common cultural ground by attending to "inborn biological origins" of creative expression. From MIT's Science, Technology and Society Program, came Leo Marx (Professor of American Cultural History, Emeritus) and Kenneth Keniston (Andrew Mellon Professor of Human Development and Director of Graduate Studies). Stanford Anderson (Professor of Architecture and Urban Planning, and Chairman of the Department of Architecture at MIT), was accompanied by his wife, Nancy Royal (whose excellent photographs of the gathering illuminate this article).

Other first-time participants included Marilyn Wyatt, an American diplomat until recently stationed in Bonn; Dr. Rodolfo Campero, member of the Argentinian National Congress; Herbert Limmer, former Ambassador to Argentina and Brazil and an expert on MERCOSUR*; Matthias Rossler, Minister of Education of the Free State of Saxony (keynote speaker of the gathering); Jose Luis Dicenta-Ballester, Spanish General Consul in Zurich;

*A free trade zone formed in 1992, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay, and this year Chile (as an associate member), after the US Congress turned down that country's bid for entry into NAFTA.



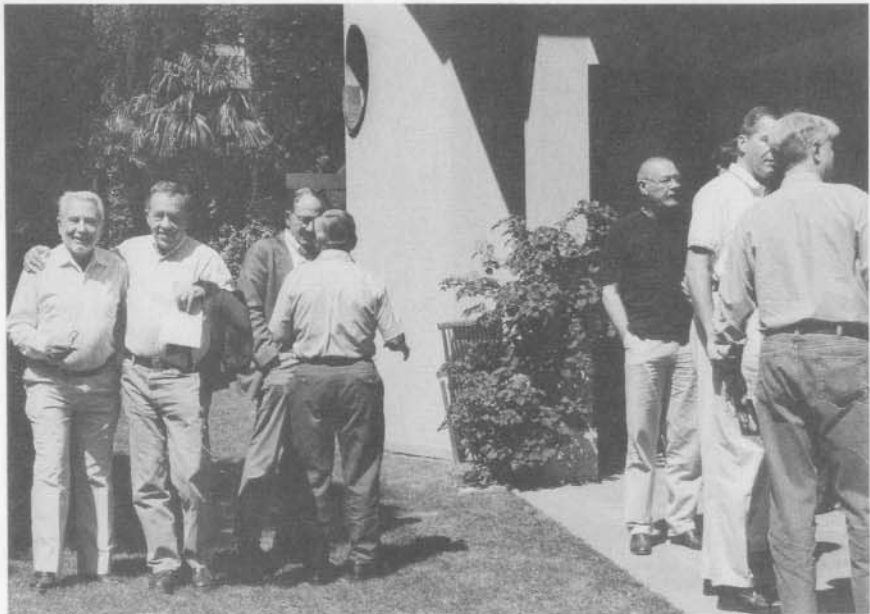
Sollors, Shell and Batuz during coffee break. Photo by Nancy Royal

and Julio Martinez-Mesanza, author and Director of the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid.

Beside Batuz himself, and Franz-Jozef Reuter (of the Adenauer Foundation (Germany)), seasoned associates included Ana Maria de-Fatima Juez-Perez, Secretary-General of the Batuz Foundation (Argentina); Jochen Boberg, Director of the Art Schools of the Art Museums of Berlin (Germany); Professor Stefan Slachta, Rector of the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava (Slovakia); Marcos Aguinis, novelist and former Minister of Culture of Argentina; Timothy Keating, Dean of Franklin College in Lugano, Switzerland; and the editor of *Harvard Review* and writer of this report.

The informal sessions, prefaced by Franz-Jozef Reuter, were conducted in the Foundation's conference room in English, German, and Spanish, with addresses, statements, and follow-up comments made in each of these languages being translated simultaneously into the other two via wires and headphones. Each morning, four teams of five participants met separately, debating on a wide array of issues, general and specific, and each day's work culminated with reports and recommendations.

Organizationally central to the week-long deliberations was the coming-of-age of the Société from its protean, definition-defying youth (see the Société's anti manifesto by Mark Strand in *Harvard Review* Number Nine Fall 1995) to a "product-oriented" *Polis* of "like-minded people who think



Batuz, Marx, Kenison, Boberg, and others, following group meetings. Photo by Nancy Royal.

along completely different lines." As Bob Scanlan put it, "a stubbornly intractable independence of mind is deeply rooted in the people Batuz recruits for his Société, for he appeals to non-ideological artists and thinkers who have carved out original areas of thought and expression for themselves—and have come to Batuz's attention because of it." Referring to an earlier comment by Professor Leo Marx concerning a failed attempt to define the Humanities (which "is constantly changing"), Batuz stated, "I gave life to the Société Imaginaire. My view of it is the same as that of my painting: defining it is the kiss of death. If Leo Marx and his colleagues couldn't define the Humanities, how can I define the Société Imaginaire?"

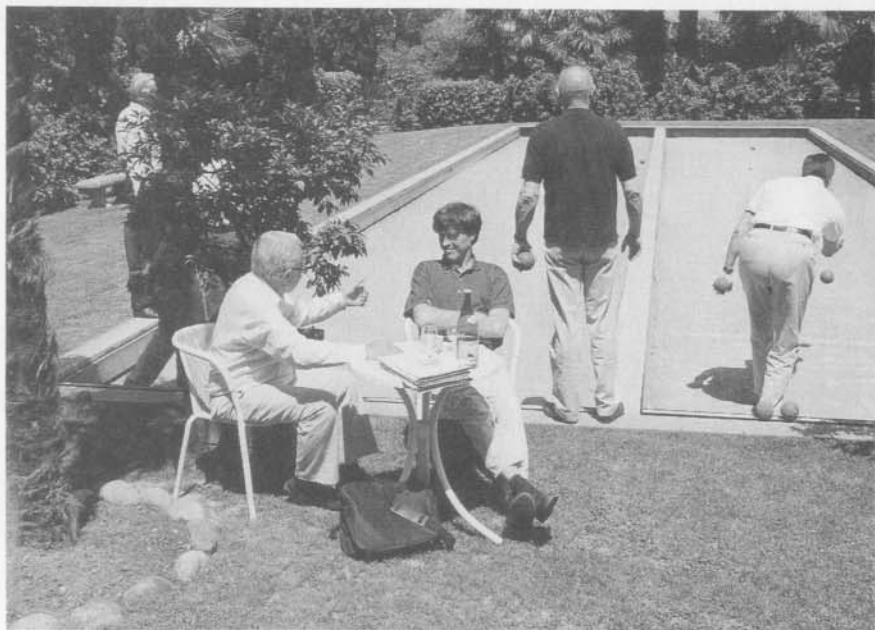
To which Marx replied: "We appreciate the fact that you don't like an air-tight, dictionary-type definition. You obviously believe you can identify people. You recognize attributes in people. We propose to identify and recognize attributes of issues."

Batuz: "The Société Imaginaire has many aspects, and if it is to be defined, it will be defined in many ways, and there will be many definitions."

Marx: "Perhaps we should replace 'define' with 'describe'".

Reuter: "I propose that Batuz help define the Société only for the next few years."

Thematically, central to the agenda was an envisioned "Cultural and Economic Integration between the European Community and MERCOSUR," in the context of which Marcos Aguinis read a letter of greeting from the



Batuz and Rossler by the bocce court. Photo by Nancy Royal.

President Julio M. Sanguinetti of Uruguay ("the intellectual leader" of MERCOSUR), who in November of 1996 hosted the Société and its conference on Constructivism and proposed permanent representations of the Société in Montevideo and of MERCOSUR in Altzella, Germany. At this point, Batuz announced his intention to submit the recommendations of the Cadenabbia gathering to President Sanguinetti and to Prime Minister (of Saxony) Kurt Biedenkopf.

Other topics introduced or responded to by the participants concerned the enormous disparities between developing and developed countries as well disparities within countries—Sollors; democratization, Cuba, and the US role in Latin America—Wyatt; differences in understanding democracy between North and Latin America—Mesanza; virtual communities and the Internet, and making such communities real—Keniston; the importance of association with students,** and the pursuit of environmental issues—Anderson; translation projects, multilingualism, endangered languages—Sollors; the implications of European monetary union versus linguistic division—Shell; the theater as a collaborative art of writers, directoractors, graphic artists, composers, and translators, and a theater for

**This past summer, a group of Anderson's architecture students from MIT did go on a residency, working on related projects at Altzella, and there are plans underway to expand such programs.



"Happy Birthday, Batuz!" Limmer, Reuter, Juez-Perez, Batuz, and Marx. Photo by Nancy Royal.

Altzella — Scanlan; the revolution in communications, the superficial (but democratic) mass communication culture and the observation and reinforcement of traditional cultures—Keniston; funding for the arts, the powerful and the powerless, “the need to be clear in our sense of principles”—Leo Marx; pragmatism versus art, information, misinformation and manipulation of the news—Limmer; “institutionalizing” the Société and expanding its [non-]membership—Campero; the danger of over-organizing and bureaucratizing the Société —Batuz; the danger of replacing individual ideas with general consensus—Aguinis.

All in all, while the debate on the identity and promise of the Société as a *Polis* of ideas continued unabated, the participation of several prominent Americans from Harvard and MIT seemed to effect a virtual bridging of the gap between *theoria* and *praxis*. In this fashion the Société Imaginaire may continue to defy definition but not purpose, and at this stage of development its partnership with the Adenauer Foundation can continue flourish.

Needless to say, unlike the Société and the Humanities, the exquisite micro-environment of Lake Como had not changed in the least since the retreat of May 1996, and the Valpolicella and Grappa served by the staff of the Villa was surpassed only by the pleasures of late-night discourse. New friendships were forged, and the retreat came to a close as before with a motor boat sight-seeing tour of the Lake and a sumptuous buffet dinner that sent participants away to deliberate the gathering’s emerging ideas in their respective environments in preparation for next year’s meeting.

Stratis Haviaras



Photo by Nancy Royal.