



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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# CANCELLED TIME: COVID-19 AND THE POWER OF TIME IN PERFORMANCE AND POLITICS

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## Preliminary remark

Please note that this article was written in the autumn of 2020. It responds to the situation of theatre, dance, and performance in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### I.

The aim of this essay is to make a contribution to the discussion of the genuine interruptions that the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced to the realm of contemporary performing arts. While the outbreak of the novel corona virus has manifested first and foremost as a global threat to the physical, social, and economic dimensions of well-being and survival, the continuity of theatre, dance, and performance too has been put under severe strain. In the autumn of 2020, as I am writing these lines, it is still too early for the assessment of long-term consequences, but it has become clear that the art of theatrical performance has undergone some significant, even if perhaps temporary changes. One of the crucial challenges that I see for theatre studies, performance studies, and performance philosophy is to commit ourselves to the thought of the political potentials that might reside in the COVID-related alterations to the operations of performing arts. These political stakes might not be obvious or self-evident—quite on the contrary, the relative disregard for the fate of theatre, dance, and performance by administrations from

around the world would seem to suggest that their status is socially and politically irrelevant—but all the more there is a need to construct an argument for the eminently political value of the situation of performing arts in the early stages of the corona crisis. In other words, I would like to concern myself with the nexus of performance and politics at the onset of the pandemic, and more precisely, I would like to suggest that this nexus can be drawn up by an analysis of the temporality of politics and performance during the pandemic.

My hypothesis, in this regard, is that the first months of the pandemic have witnessed the event of what I would like to describe as the complex of *cancelled time*. This temporal intervention folds into two different expressions of time, one of which corresponds to performance, whereas the other one relates to politics, or rather certain political, if not anti-political forces, namely the proto-fascist tendencies in countries such as Brazil and the United States of America. Whereas the spheres of performance have undergone the occurrence of a *time of cancellation*, coming to pass as mass cancellations of performance events in theatre venues from Brussels to New York, the administrations of Jair Bolsonaro or Donald Trump headed for nothing other than the *cancellation of time*, or the demise of a future horizon for their respective populations and states. Although the *time of cancellation* in performance and the *cancellation of time* in proto-fascist politics are not causally related, I choose to discuss them together and subsume them under the notion of *cancelled time* so as to make a case for the promise of resistance that the former holds vis-à-vis the latter.

This argument will be unfolded in four steps: first, I will consider the current state of COVID debates in public forums, academia, and performance milieus, from which I will derive the need to talk about cancellation as a distinct issue (II). From there, I will engage in an analysis of the particular case of Ruhrtriennale, one of Europe's biggest performing arts festivals, which was entirely cancelled in 2020. The discussion of Ruhrtriennale and two of its cancelled performance productions will lead to a possible understanding of the *time of cancellation*. In the absence of an existing theory of cancellation in performance, I will make use of the opposing positions of Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben as a way to underline the ontological preconditions of addressing the time of cancellation (III). Next, I will develop the contrasting notion of a *cancellation of time* through an analysis of the temporal strategies that contemporary proto-fascism tends to employ in the face of COVID-19. For this task, I will rely on a commentary from Brazilian philosopher Vladimir Safatle, who describes the current condition of his home country as that of a "suicidal state," a notion that he borrows from Paul Virilio. In rereading Virilio, but also Deleuze and Guattari's notes on fascism, I will add to Safatle's account with respect to the temporal aspect of the suicidal state of proto-fascism (IV). Finally, the conclusion will attempt to highlight how the politicisation of performance's *time of cancellation* might serve as an antidote to the politics of the *cancellation of time* (V).

## II.

Taking a look at the state of public debate in the first six or seven months of the COVID-19 pandemic, some of its chief features revolve around an unparalleled production of ad-hoc commentary as well as the cementing of previously established principles and opinions. Indeed the most striking aspect of the unfolding of critical discussion has been the mere intensity and speed of output: within a matter of days or weeks, virtually anyone with a public profile, from philosophers to sociologists to theorists from cultural studies and the arts, drafted opinion pieces, put out essays or blog entries, answered questions in live or written interviews, and participated in teach-ins or discussion rounds in soon to be ubiquitous Zoom calls. Giorgio Agamben, Naomi Klein, Franco “Bifo” Berardi, Judith Butler, Bruno Latour, Sergio Benvenuto, and Paul B. Preciado were among the quickest and most vocal to respond, although it was Slavoj Žižek who beat everyone to the punch by publishing a book-length account less than a month into the new COVID state (cf. Žižek 2020). At the same time, journals, magazines, and online platforms hurried to set up discursive frameworks such as “Letters against Separation” (e-flux) or “Notes from Quarantine” (Texte zur Kunst), which comprised series of intimate as well as political interjections from the time of confinement during the first period of national lockdowns and beyond. Soon enough, theatre institutions as well as theatre and performance journals initiated similar formats, with Schauspielhaus in Zurich, for instance, having commissioned articles on “Lockdown Theatre” for their website, while Performance Studies international’s own Global Performance Studies invited “Responses to COVID-19.” It did not take long either until publishers released initial anthologies and monographs on the corona pandemic, some of the very first ones having counted *The Politics of Care* (Verso) and *Die Corona-Gesellschaft* (*The Corona Society*; Transcript). The editors of the latter anthology from Germany epitomised the situation of analytic overdrive in a fairly cynical testimony when they exclaimed that “[m]ehr Motivation zum Schreiben gab es selten!” (“there has rarely been more of a motivation to write!”) (Volkmer/Werner 2020, 12).

In the teeth of this discursive frenzy, some academics remained sceptical of the value of the plethora of short-term diagnoses. Literary scholar Joseph Vogl remarked that “[j]ede so-genannte Krise erzeugt Deutungsnötigung und Deutungsnot. [...] Alles wird von allen gesagt und dann noch einmal wiederholt, überboten und variiert” (“every so-called crisis creates the necessity and the affliction of interpretation. [...] Everything is being said by everyone and is then repeated, outdone, and modified.”) (2020, n.p.; cf. also Gehring 2020). Perhaps the most striking, because utterly unpretentious refusal of discursive participation stemmed from the COVID forum of *The Drama Review* editors, in which Anna Deavere Smith declared: “I am taking another stance with all of this which is not to know. If I do come up with any wisdom I will let you know, but for now I am speechless” (in *The Drama Review* Editors 2020, 193). Elise Morrison, in the same forum, reported that she could not deliver much writing although she had hoped to:

Despite my hopes to contribute to *TDR’s* Covid Forum, it has been impossible to find the time and mental space to craft something meaningful [...]. The shift to providing full-time childcare for my two young children [...] has radically limited my ability to work these past months. That, coupled with the shifting ground at work,

as my colleagues and I adjust to the impacts of the pandemic and respond to the deeply necessary calls to enact antiracism in our departmental culture and practices, has taken all I have to give right now. (in *The Drama Review* Editors 2020, 222)

Morrison's short account of her inability to write is particularly instructive: in making transparent the challenges to her everyday life as well as the racial injustice that was intensified by the killings of George Floyd and other black bodies in the midst of the pandemic, she portrayed the stakes of the current condition in a manner that makes a lot of longer commentary on the status quo seem somewhat redundant.

Overall, however, comparable acknowledgments of the limits of analytic prowess were relatively rare. For the most part, critical debate seemed to be getting ahead of itself in wanting to determine the multiple effects of the pandemic sometimes before they could even be felt. Having been confronted with a global crisis of unforeseeable consequences, it seemed that the position of knowledge production itself was displaced: it was not enough to propose an analysis, but neither did it seem appropriate to dabble in the shaky business of prognosis. Instead, it seemed necessary to assess the future now as if one was already there, slightly ahead of time so to say, which would allow the anticipation of the near future so as to be able to act on it. This tendency could be observed particularly in political commentary with an emancipatory or revolutionary charge, where it seemed vital to understand the meaning of the crisis prior to its full manifestation so that it could be stirred into the direction of equality and justice as it would further unfold. In March 2020, for instance, Judith Butler asserted with certainty that "[s]ocial and economic inequality will make sure that the virus discriminates," while urging that the lack of universal health care generates a "time of the pandemic" in which "none of us can wait" (2020, n.p.). The point is not that Butler's statement was right or wrong, but that its rhetoric, along with that of many similar declarations, suggested a shift in the conditions according to which it could first be considered meaningful or true. The truth of the moment needed to be known before the moment had arrived, and hence the status of truth and knowledge as such was readjusted with respect to its pragmatic or utilitarian value for confronting the immediate future. This epistemological alteration is most likely to signify the underlying cause of the extreme velocity with which critical and engaged discourse reacted to event of COVID-19.

Whether it was in spite or because of the fast pace of the debate, the nature of discursive reactions was often conservative, namely in that the new COVID reality was assessed on the basis of inherited theories and concepts which were applied without consideration for the possibly alien aspects of the contemporary situation that would have asked for modifications to a given corpus of knowledge. This attitude was best exemplified by Giorgio Agamben (2020a, 2020b), who famously identified lockdown events in Italy and elsewhere as proof to his long-established theory of sovereignty, which depicts rule via the state of exception and the reduction of citizenship to bare life. At the same time, Agamben proved a particularly bizarre exception to the overall pandemic discourse in theory and philosophy, as he went so far as to state that the restrictions to rights and freedoms during lockdowns in Italy were in excess of the disregard of human freedoms during

Nazi times and both world wars. Overall, a lot of authors felt their social and political stances confirmed by the crisis, such that COVID-19 became the catalyst for many different, but also interconnected agendas, from a Marxist critique of capitalist exploitation and destruction to feminist theories of reproductive labour and care to black and de-colonial perspectives on racism to ecological concerns. It is hard to say, then, whether the prominent view that the corona crisis came to expose and exacerbate preexisting political and economic inequalities is indeed an adequate assessment of what has been going on, or rather a symptom of the recycling of preexisting theories and philosophies—or indeed both.

The current debate in theatre and performance, both in academic and artistic milieus, is overall indicative of the same tendencies. Within a few months and particularly in Europe, discussions solidified around the issue of the economic survival of institutions and practitioners on the one hand, and the aesthetic and technological challenges of producing and delivering performance under social distancing regulations on the other hand. The former aspect was mostly addressed with respect to the ever growing need for more substantial and continuous public funding in the independent and freelance milieus—a demand that had been made for years—whereas the latter unfolded as a call for the ramping up of digital and interactive theatre forms, which unfortunately tended to lack knowledge of both the existing traditions of algorithmic and cybernetic theatre works from the 1950s and 60s onwards, and the implications that information based technologies of communication have in terms of technologies of power and the control of perception (cf. amongst others Otto 2019). Another output concerned volumes such as *Why theatre?* (2020), *and then the doors opened again* (2020) or *Lernen aus dem Lockdown? (Learning from Lockdown? 2020)*, in which curators, dramaturges, and practitioners asked their fellow colleagues to think of the temporary closures of theatre spaces caused by lockdowns as an opportunity to reconsider the fundamental values of theatre and performance. As practitioners were unable to go about their daily business, they were invited to engage in a renewed search for the meaning of what it was that they were normally doing, and what they wanted to do in the future. This collective exercise however did not result in radically new conceptions of the making and presenting of performative work, but rather it reflected a range of updates to approaches that had been introduced in the past. The urgency of useful theatre that has an immediate impact on and emerges from the involvement in social matters, the defence of aesthetic difference and its irreducible force of imagination, or the theatre as a space for vulnerable and subaltern bodies that is still in need of becoming more open or inclusive—these were among the most common, at times contradictory tropes which were reiterated by theatre, dance, and performance makers.

If this rough and fragmentary sketch of corona conversations from scholarly and artistic circles paints the picture of intellectual and creative consolidation rather than groundbreaking invention, then this is not necessarily to suggest a lack of ingenuity, but it goes to show that the COVID-19 pandemic did not completely overthrow the political and artistic state of affairs after all, even if some commentators bet precisely on that. Franco “Bifo” Berardi embodied this spirit in a message from the beginning of the virus outbreak, in which he held that “[w]e face two political alternatives: either a techno-totalitarian system that will relaunch the capitalist economy by means of violence, or the liberation of human activity from capitalist abstraction and the creation of a molecular

society based on usefulness" (2020, n.p.). While Berardi's estimation might not be too far off from reality, the rhetorical strategy of presenting the corona event as an all-determining watershed moment that will once and for all decide the future path of social life and human existence has certainly lost its appeal over the past months. In the end, the conjuring of COVID-19 as a messenger of apocalypse or utopia is the most conservative gesture of all, as it falls back on the age-old etymology of crisis as a question of life and death, which, although certainly descriptive of the terrible situation of millions who actually caught the virus, does not necessarily serve as a model for the explanation of the overall political developments during the time of the pandemic.

Neither the assertion that everything will be different, nor the view that the problems of performance and politics largely remain the same is entirely appropriate for the analysis of the corona pandemic. Authors like Paul B. Preciado show that there is a third option, which consists in the minute exploration of emerging differences that, although not necessarily turning everything on its head, have a significant impact on the parameters of social existence. Preciado's statements on the pandemic are certainly not shy of hyperbolic claims (cf. especially 2020a), but this does not get in the way of precise observations on the state of subjects and bodies under COVID-19, who, as he notes, "do not have skin; they are untouchable; they do not have hands. They do not exchange physical goods [...]. They do not gather together and they do not collectivize. They are radically un-dividual. They do not have faces; they have masks" (2020b, n.p.). In performance and dance studies, Gerko Egert, for instance, expanded on the changes to the image of the body in remarking that social distancing rules and the new awareness of virus droplets in the air have led to the choreography of a "*Luftbewegungskörper*" or "*Aero-Körper*" (an "air movement body" or "aero body," cf. 2020).

In the following, I will attempt to add to analyses of the socio-political differences resulting from the pandemic by taking a look at how both performance and politics have seen considerable alterations to their temporalities—alterations that, although manifesting in very different ways, allow for a constellation of performance and politics that can be described as a matter of *cancelled time*. I will start with an account of the temporal changes to performance, before turning to the radical politics of time in these days' proto-fascism.

### III.

For the performing arts, the most immediate effect of the spread of the novel corona virus and subsequent political regulations was the closure of venues and the cancellation of performance shows for weeks and months to come. The visible reminders of these cancellations were to be found on the websites of theatre institutions, which, like *Tanzquartier Wien* and *Hebbel am Ufer* Berlin, chose not to delete the contents of their cancelled shows, but add a note that informed the audience about the cancellation or cross out the titles and dates of the events—which rendered them perfectly in-visible in their status of cancellation. Many artist websites followed suit, and on some occasions, practitioners were interviewed about the experience of such unwanted interruption of their professional practice. US performer Jibz Cameron aka Dynasty Handbag was asked: "What's the experience of the thing you do being canceled for the time being?" They replied:

I'm glad you brought this up because I am not having an easy time with it. And I'm not putting myself in any kind of special category; but when this broke out and became very serious last month, immediately everything I was doing was canceled. And nothing moved online. It just completely stopped. (Cameron 2020, n.p.)

While cancellations are not generally alien to performing arts, they do not usually happen on such a massive scale and in connection to global events. What interests me about this particular case of mass cancellations during the corona pandemic is not so much a discussion about whether they were indeed necessary from a political and epidemiological point of view; I will not concern myself with the fact that the cancellations were rather imposed on theatres from the outside, that is, by their respective national governments. Rather, I want to consider the moment of passivity that is inscribed in the temporal nature of a cancellation itself, and that may have politically charged implications relating to the issue of power and sovereignty. To that end, I will investigate the cancellation of Ruhrtriennale 2020, a renowned performing arts festival in the German Ruhr Area whose entire programme got scratched in the early period of the pandemic. As I am not aware of any substantial theory of cancellation in performance, I will not presume a given notion of cancellation, but rather develop it from the case study of Ruhrtriennale. A German anthology on cancellation as a cultural practice was published very recently (cf. Assmann/Kempke/Menze 2020), but its theoretical perspective on cancellation as a performative act is not helpful for my analysis, as I consider the cancellations of performances precisely as an event that undoes the capacity of the subject to engage in wilful performative action, at least in part.

Ruhrtriennale was one of many European festivals that suffered from COVID restrictions, most of them having had to cancel their original programmes as they were scheduled for the spring and summer when lockdowns and regulatory health safety measures made large-scale cultural events practically impossible. Other than theatre venues that operate throughout the entire season, festival institutions with their limited duration had even less wiggle room to adapt to the new corona situation. Some festivals like Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels were able to substitute smaller events in the autumn for their previous timelines, while many had to reschedule performances for 2021 or accept that certain projects would not be realised at all. Ruhrtriennale, however, had to face a particularly bitter predicament, as 2020 was Stefanie Carp's final season in her position as artistic director, which implied that she and her team could not postpone productions until even a few months later, when they would no longer be working for the festival. It was an undeniable fact that the original constellation of performative works under the curatorial guidance of Carp and her team was not going to materialise, even if several commissions may eventually be presented under new artistic management at some point in the future.

The cancellation of Ruhrtriennale 2020 sparked intense public debate, which in part had to do with the fact that the decision to cancel had been taken by the supervisory board as early as April, at a time when the late summer opening of the festival was still months away and when alternatives to the full cancellation still may have been available. Furthermore, it was speculated that the board's decision process may have been influenced by the political controversy around the invitation of Achille Mbembe as the lecturer for the opening ceremony of the festival, as Mbembe was accused

of having propagated antisemitic views in statements on Israel and Palestine. However, none of these factors concern me here, as I do not intend to discuss the reasons for the cancellation. Instead, I want to focus on the situation that Carp and her festival team were put in due to the cancellation, and on the curatorial response that they drew up to confront the situation.

The festival was not going to take place, but Carp and staff still had their jobs until the end of their contracts, and thus they effectively encountered a period of empty time that spanned from the moment of the cancellation until the moment when the festival would have ended. The cancellation had created an interval time-space for the festival, a present that was still imbued with the many prearrangements from up until the final cancellation, and a present that, at the same time, was devoid of any future. In other words, the prospective 2020 edition of Ruhrtriennale had turned into a future that would never become present, but that had immediately returned to the past, and that still lingered in the present. It was a future that had become past without ever having been present, a future in the past, or a past future which was only present in its absence. I would like to propose that this past future outlines the contours of the *time of cancellation* as one of the two sides of *cancelled time*. It is a time that suggests a view which was very aptly condensed by Candice Breitz, a South African practitioner, who was to exhibit a video installation at Ruhrtriennale, and who, in the aftermath of the festival cancellation, had asked: "How do we remember an event that never took place?" (2002, n.p.).

Breitz's question was published as part of a text that joined preparatory materials from performances, concerts, movies, and workshops of other Ruhrtriennale artists in the newly created "Archiv der verlorenen Ereignisse" ("Archive of Lost Events," cf. Ruhrtriennale 2020). Carp and team set up this archive in the form of a website which gave access to traces and fragments from the many creative endeavours that had begun to flourish before the cancellation made them come to a halt. All projects were listed with full credits and the additional header: "Geplant war," "intended was" or "planned was" this specific event at this specific time and place with these specific people. Supplementary descriptions and Carp's introductory statement to the archive made explicit use of the conditional perfect, summoning "was gewesen wäre" or "was stattgefunden hätte," "what would have been" or "would have taken place." In a gesture of ironic self-reflection, Carp also admitted that the cancellation of the festival could be seen as an apposite culmination of the overall leitmotif for her three-year artistic directorship—the leitmotif having read "Zwischenzeit," respectively "In-Between Time."

Among the individual entries of the archive was a video from January 2020 that showed early rehearsals for Brigitta Muntendorf, Stephanie Thiersch, and Sou Fujimoto's dance production *Archipel*. In light of the curatorial remarks on "lost events," on what "would have" and "could have been," the snippets from these early rehearsals took on a peculiar quality for the viewer: watching Brigitta Muntendorf (musical composition) and Stephanie Thiersch (choreography) discuss ideas, seeing dancers and musicians improvise materials in the studio or practice movement phrases and musical themes, one tended not to see the planning and testing of something to come, but the engagement in a futurity that now, from the viewpoint of watching the video after the cancellation, belonged to the past: the practitioners were visible as rehearsing for shows at Ruhrtriennale that

would never take place, and therefore the video of their actions generated a sense of a past future. To be precise, it did not offer an experience of a future that was gone, but it offered a glimpse into a future that continued to exist precisely as being gone. The video of *Archipel* rehearsals contained an unrealised performance that subsisted as something that will always be what it did not become.

A video from a different production further corroborates the idea of a specific *time of cancellation*. As if to suggest that Carp was aware of the festival cancellation before it even happened or before anyone even knew of COVID-19—which of course she was not—she had originally commissioned Swiss theatre director Christoph Marthaler with the creation of a new musical theatre production that happened to carry the title *Die Verschollenen* (*Those who Disappeared* or *Those who are Missing*). In the “Archive of Lost Events,” Marthaler’s project was featured with a short film by Hans Peter Boeffgen, who had edited a montage of photographs and videos that stemmed partly from the time when the production process was still up and running, and partly from after it had been cancelled. In less than five minutes, the film captures the past future in a most poetic and precise way: sitting in front of a computer, a member of Marthaler’s artistic team reads aloud an email that speaks of the so-called “Bauprobe,” the staging of the performance’s set design from the initial stages of production; in revisiting these lines after the cancellation, the reader’s voice assumes a reflective and retrospective quality that conveys a faint impression of the past futurity that the email record now holds. At home alone with their instruments, musicians are replaying some isolated notes on the violin or string bass, but they do not seem to be rehearsing the score, neither are they playing what and how they would have played it if the performance had taken place, rather they seem to engage in a fragmented recollection of how they performed the notes in the past when the chances of a premiere were still intact. Marthaler, for his part, stares into camera, lets some moments pass, and simply says one word: “verschollen”—“disappeared,” “missing,” before he eventually lowers his gaze and looks to the ground, as if to underline, with this delicate mimic expression, his appreciation of *Die Verschollenen* having fulfilled the meaning of its title by having gone missing itself.

In its subtle play with intonations, gestures, and meanings, Hans Peter Boeffgen’s short film comments on the *time of cancellation* as that of a past future which is accessible only insofar as one respects its irretrievability. The set design and musical performance only come into view via cautious words and actions, non-actions almost, which speak of an acceptance of the future of the performance having turned to a past from which it will never return—but in which it has gained a life which it would not have otherwise had: a future existence that will never be exhausted because it is enclosed in the past. In all its fragility, the film insists that the cancelled future cannot actually be turned into an image and hence cannot actually be seen, just as much as it cannot truly be remembered, as any memory involves a process of actualisation which would necessarily transform the past, and the past future in particular, into something else than what it was. Being aware of these restrictions, Boeffgen’s film walks the line of evoking, but never attempting to grasp and consequentially lose the reservoir of a futurity that only exists in and through the impossibility of it becoming present.

In the light of considerations like these, it is almost impossible not to think of a particular reference from philosophy: after all, did not Giorgio Agamben use very similar expressions to describe his early concept of potentiality? “What is essential is that potentiality is not simply non-Being, simple privation, but rather *the existence of non-Being*, the presence of an absence,” he stated in his reading of Aristotle from “On Potentiality” (1999, 179, original emphasis). It might seem, then, that Boeffgen’s short film or the video of early rehearsals for *Archipel* can be conceived as the paradigmatic display, or rather the paradoxical non-display of the past future as a time of potentiality. Yet, in a crucial sense that requires some explanation, Agamben’s notion of potentiality rather tends to obstruct a deeper understanding of the past future. The crux of the matter concerns the ontological underpinnings of his theory: as the above quotation from “On Potentiality” shows, Agamben defines potentiality as the existence of non-Being. With non-Being, however, since it is defined exclusively in negative terms, there can be no recognition of differences except for its own difference to Being or the realm of realisation and presence. The insufficiency of this ontological account with respect to the idea of a past future concerns the delicate passage of and in time that the past future represents: the future transitions from its status as something that may indeed come about, to something that is retained in its status of never coming about. If one were to translate this transition into Agamben’s terms of potentiality, the result would be a tautology: one would have to say that the future migrates from non-Being (it may come about) to non-Being (it is retained as never coming about). In other words, what is lacking in Agamben’s theory of potentiality is a vocabulary for the differences of that which is not simply present.

The solution to this problem may lie in replacing the theory of the difference between Being and non-Being with a theory of the multiplicity of differences of being otherwise. Instead of the duality of the real and the potential, a Deleuzian notion of the actual and the virtual might prove helpful here, a notion which does not define the virtual as un-real and non-existent, but as the reality of multifold abstract differences that are not actualised and that are differential in themselves. On that basis, the passage from the future to its own past comes to signify a passage from one state of virtual difference to another state of virtual difference, both differing from the sphere of the actual and from each other. Recalling Gilles Deleuze’s famous reading of Bergson, one might also think of the metaphor of the cone and the surface, where the cone with its many layers represents the virtual past, whereas the surface, which balances on the tip of the cone, represents the present. In this metaphor, the past future performs the detachment of the future from its actualisation on the present surface, initiating instead a relocation on a layer in the depths of the cone of the past (cf. Deleuze 1991, 59f). With this in mind, Boeffgen’s film and the video of *Archipel* rehearsals can be understood as attending to a movement between different and differentiating states of virtuality that have nothing in common with an undifferentiated void of non-Being.

The alternative between Agamben and Deleuze has consequences beyond the ontology of the past future. Insofar as the past future implies an ability or inability to act, the theories of potentiality and virtuality equally involve two different conceptions of power. Agamben’s potentiality foresees a subject that essentially possesses the power of powerlessness or the “potential not to act” (1999, 181). *Vis-à-vis* the past future of cancellation, the non-action of the subject can be imagined as a process of remembrance, in which the necessary failure of remembering the past future—after all,

remembering it would be to lose its particular past future condition—serves as the exact and only possible way of matching it. In not actively remembering the past future, in accepting that it can only exist if it is not remembered, the non-action of the subject remains in a state of potentiality that ends up mirroring the potentiality of the past future which it did not engage in. Hence, in a paradoxical and dialectical sense, the powerlessness of potentiality signifies the highest power, which is the power of conjuring even that which escapes power. While this implies that potentiality tends to confirm power especially when it tries to escape it, a Deleuzian approach of virtuality offers a different view: it effectively considers the interplay of power and powerlessness as only one layer of the struggle of forces underneath or inside of which there subsists another regime of forces that is known as desire (cf., amongst others, Deleuze 2007). Desire as a third category next to power and powerlessness signifies virtual degrees of intensity and energy that are not related to the subject and its actions, but that can still be felt on a level of sensation. It does not take much, then, to imagine that the past future is indeed a temporal container of desire in which the intensity of future imaginations and aspirations for performances has been conserved in exactly their future state.

Overall then, the notions of virtuality and desire provide a meaningful conceptual reference for the deeper comprehension of the short film on *Die Verschollenen*, the *Archipel* video, and the “Archive of Lost Events” as a whole. As a reaction to the COVID-related cancellation of the entire Ruhrtriennale festival, the archive hints at the un-actualised desires from and for future presentations, exhibitions, screenings or workshops which, although they will never take place as they were supposed to, still have a life in the past of the archive space. In fact, if the festival cancellation had not taken place, and if the archive had not become necessary, the past future of so many performative and other works would have never existed, which is why the event of this past future and *time of cancellation* can be regarded as specific to the circumstances of the COVID pandemic. Its political value, however, will only become evident in juxtaposition with the COVID-19 event that marks the other side of *cancelled time*, namely the *cancellation of time* in proto-fascist politics.

#### IV.

On the political world stage, local governments have confronted the corona crisis in ways that correspond to diverse and sometimes contradictory modes of power: heavy lockdowns in many European countries were reminiscent of disciplinary power, whereas the concurrent test and trace programmes and the dynamic management of infection curves were rather symptomatic of liberal governmentality. In states like South Korea, the digital implementation of control allowed for the continuation of movement in the public, but the relative freedom to move came with the price of the surveillance of every single step of each citizen. Not least, some countries enforced their strict lockdown policies with a mindset of authoritarianism, chancellor Sebastian Kurz of Austria, for instance, having chosen a tactic of fearmongering to make people conform to the rules.

Probably the most radical, because most deadly political position was however to be found in countries such as Brazil and the United States. The essentially proto-fascist conduct of Jair

Bolsonaro or Donald Trump not only led to a terribly high number of avoidable deaths, but it made death an instrument of power and sovereignty that did not even shy away from the idea of suicide and total self-destruction. I consider this wilful self-annihilation to be about the ultimate sovereignty over life and death which, from a temporal angle, expresses itself as the *cancellation of time*. I will try to develop this view by dwelling on an essay from Vladimir Safatle about the pandemic in Brazil, but first, I will outline my basic understanding of fascism.

When I speak of fascism, I refer to a political or rather anti-political movement, a movement that wants to transgress and undo politics, whose most generic characteristic was first observed by José Ortega y Gasset in 1927. Writing as a contemporary of the early phase of Mussolini's rule in Italy, he noted that

[f]ascism is illegitimate, one might almost say illegitimatist, in a most peculiar and almost paradoxical sense. Every revolutionary movement seizes power illegitimately, but the curious thing about it is that not only did fascism seize power illegitimately, but that, once established, it also exercised it illegitimately. (1974, 195)

Fascism's novelty consisted in the fact that its terror did not seek the cover of the law even after it had seized the state. It comprised a form of dominion in which power came to replace the principles of right and order with nothing but itself, such that the only law was power in action—the violence that performed its legitimacy through its own occurrence. The same tendency was recognised by Hannah Arendt (2017) in her definition of totalitarianism: although her terminology distinguished fascism precisely as the taking control over the state in which crucial aspects of totalitarianism were missing, her account of totalitarianism as maintaining the centre of power in the movement, in the party and not in the state, identifies the same phenomenon that fascism denotes in Ortega y Gasset. Beyond signifying the vital strength of the organisation of active party members, the movement, in Arendt, gave a name to the process of constant change which was totalitarianism's only mode of being. It had to be in never ending motion, because every stagnation, every crystallisation of stability and order implied the danger of individual decision making which would harm the total identification with the movement. Referring to Arendt amongst others, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) eventually rendered the duality of fascism and state in terms of the duality of war machine and state apparatus. The war machine describes fascism as a pure and abstract force in which the logic and being of power is untied from virtually any conservative moment of representation, stratification, or reterritorialisation, as Deleuze and Guattari's vocabulary would suggest. In fact, the power of fascism, in being of such a particular kind, becomes almost indistinguishable from the realm of becoming and desire, such that it can be defined as desire's dark and destructive forces.

When talking about the contemporary Brazil of Bolsonaro or the United States of Donald Trump, I address them as proto-fascist countries, because the main characteristic of pure violence is clearly present although the erosion of state institutions is not fully developed. Historically speaking, the designation of contemporary tendencies as proto-fascist allows for their comparison with the fascism of first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while still enabling a view that indicates their differences. In this sense, I tend to follow journalist Masha Gessen, who, in her monograph *Surviving Autocracy*,

termed Donald Trump “an attempting autocrat” (2020, 166), a man in the first stages of erecting an autocracy.

Staying with Gessen’s analysis, it can be said she delivers an insightful portrait of Trump’s administration as a “government of destruction” (59) that tears down democratic bodies and procedures, that ruins public discourse and political debate, that wrecks the distinction between true and false or right and wrong, and that wants to abolish politics as such. Despite Gessen’s special instinct for all this destruction, what escapes her gaze is the self-referential violence of proto-fascist rule: the fascist desire is not merely one for the annihilation of the other and everything around it, but it is ultimately a lust or *jouissance* for the annihilation of the self. This is Vladimir Safatle’s argument on the political, or again anti-political course of action in Brazil during the early months of the COVID pandemic, where, according to him, a “flirting with self-destruction” (2020, n.p.) was characteristic of the measures of the local government. In stark contrast to authoritarian rule, which seized the moment to tighten their grip on the population via strict limitations to their everyday lives, the early response from Bolsonaro, similar to that of Trump, was to neglect the call for regulations to public life and instead surrender his people to the virus. Safatle is quick to add that this reaction does not simply fall into the category of necropolitics or a “necro-state,” but, rather, that the systematic submission of the entire population to the threat of death has the inherent quality of a suicide mission. The state turns into a “suicidal state.”

Safatle lent the notion of “suicidal state” from Paul Virilio (1998), who saw this state be perfected during the “total war” of the Nazis, while the “total peace” of the post-war period was according to him just the continuation of the war by other means, and hence the suicidal state’s further consolidation. (Interestingly, in 1976, the same year that Virilio published these thoughts, Michel Foucault in his lectures at the Collège de France performed his famous inversion of Clausewitz’ formula that resulted in the aphorism “politics is the continuation of war by other means,” cf. Foucault 2003, 15.) Virilio unravels the principal logic of the suicidal state in a passage that starts out from the indication of Nazism’s horrible fascination for the unusual, and that finds its essential clue in a quotation from Hitler:

It is in this horror, divided between everyday life and its milieu that Hitler will finally find his most certain means of government, the legitimization of his politics and of his military strategies, and this up to the end, since, far from weakening the repulsive nature of his power, the ruins, the horrors, the crimes, the chaos of total war will generally only augment its scope. Telegram 71: “If the war is lost, let the nation perish,” in which Hitler decides to associate his efforts with those of his enemies in order to achieve the destruction of his own people by annihilating the last resources of his habitat, civil reserves of every sort (portable water, fuel, provisions, etc.)—is the normal outcome of the politics of dialectical retreat of the man who had written: “The idea of protection haunts and fulfills life.” (1998, 40, original emphasis)

The suicidal state is the utterly irrational, anti-utilitarian, but entirely logical conclusion of the pure force of chaos and destruction which does not follow any rules except its own drive toward actualisation; or as Deleuze and Guattari put it in commenting on Virilio, fascism denotes a “war

machine that no longer had anything but war as its object and would rather annihilate its own servants than stop the destruction" (1987, 231, original emphasis). At the core of fascism's self-destruction is what Safatle called "an experiment in libidinal economy" (2020, n.p.): the suicidal tendency is not the negation of pleasure, neither is it the mere arousal of life forces vis-à-vis the possibility of death, but rather it is the final coalescence and consummation of desire and power in the moment of ultimate sovereignty which is defined as the sovereignty over the death of one's own and everybody else's lives. In the moment of deciding over the death of a people, a nation, and the self, desire realises itself as the indulgence over the illusion of omnipotence. This is why Hitler's telegram is not to be read as a concession of defeat, but as the final demonstration of ecstasy and control, as no one other, certainly not the enemy, was authorised to the sovereignty over death, only the leader himself. Deleuze and Guattari correspondingly speak of the "[p]assion for abolition" (1987, 227).

And yet, as if that was not enough, the fascist desire for total sovereignty is not completely accounted for until the destruction is comprehended in its most abstract and wide-ranging sense, namely as the destruction of the transcendental categories of time and space:

Time and space become a pure problematic. Represented and projected magnitudes are there no longer but imperfect programs; they appear in turn eminently subject to expression, expressive and being a part of the subject as much as of the milieu. It is in the progressive annihilation of the independence between:

TIME SPACE  
SUBJECT

this integration of dimensions, in that which remains to the man of expression (the morality of the end), that, for the Third Reich, the last act, telegram 71, quintessentially plays itself out. (Virilio 1998, 41, original emphasis)

The highest virtue of fascist suicide is that the end of the self, of the people, and ideally mankind is the final realisation of the identity of subject and time in death. It is in and through self-inflicted death that one becomes the master over time, and such is the true meaning of the *cancellation of time* in fascism.

In the time of COVID-19 pandemic, proto-fascist governments showed their commitment to the suicidal state in relatively open form, but the most blatant demonstration of the will to total sovereignty was probably displayed by Donald Trump. Not only did his administration refuse to coordinate a nation-wide COVID health strategy, not only did he continue to hold rallies—which he had to, because this was his way of staying connected with the movement that fuelled his power—, but in early October 2020, when he had caught the virus himself and was released from medical care, he spoke to the public and said: "Don't let it [the virus] dominate you, don't be afraid of it" (cf. Kennedy 2020). These words are the perfect summary of Trump's mode of power: whereas authoritarian governments pushed their people into fear of the virus, Trump denied that anyone should be worried, which is only logical given that to accept a feeling of fear is a demonstration of impotence and weakness. For the same reason Trump was reluctant to wear a mask, after all,

masks suggested that one had to protect oneself against the threat of a virus which the body cannot fight on its own. The fascist logic at work in Trump's attitude is that the virus is the ultimate test to sovereignty: either the body of the individual and the body of the nation is strong enough to confront the virus and survive, which shows unlimited power against any harm, or the confrontation ends in death, which goes to show that one would rather die than live a life that is tainted by the humility of having to accept one's own limitations. What is essential is that, as Trump said, the virus does not dominate your life, but your life, or your death, acts as a sign of you dominating the virus. Therefore, the virus needs to be collectively embraced and desired as the event which can fulfil the drive toward ultimate power over life and death and time.

## V.

The *time of cancellation* from performance and the *cancellation of time* from politics do not share any obvious connection except for the fact that they both emerged in the initial phases of the corona pandemic. They have in common a certain geographical overlap, as cancellations of performances also took place in cities in proto-fascist Brazil or the United States, but there is no causal, no immediately visible political or social relation between them. And yet, I would like to argue that a distinctly political relation can and should be constructed precisely in the face of the lack thereof, such that the *time of cancellation* and the *cancellation of time* form the bigger political question of *cancelled time*. For this purpose, I am taking inspiration from Walter Benjamin's notes on art and politics from *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter der technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (2003), in which he famously claimed that the fascist aestheticisation of politics is answered by the communist politicisation of art. In the same spirit, I would like to suggest that the proto-fascist *cancellation of time* can perhaps be answered by the performative, or rather non-performative *time of cancellation*, even if this answer may only come in subtle alterations. Namely, if the *cancellation of time* acts as the unbound actualisation of desire in the form of a final interruption to life and time after which there is no future except the eternity of death, the *time of cancellation* indicates an interruption which generates the transition of future desire into a space of the past, where it stays alive. Whereas the *cancellation of time* is the complete exhaustion of desire and power, or desire as power in total violence, the *time of cancellation* retains a momentum of desire or intensity that will never exhaust itself in violence or any other possible act, except if the active memory of it betrays it. In other words, against the backdrop of the fascist phantasm of the end of time and future life, performance's cancelled status performs a subtle counter-measure in which the future is preserved—a future that cannot become present anymore, but a future that stands in the way of time's annihilation.

The question remains, then, how performance might account for this past future in the future, when theatre venues open again and when the production of creations resumes. For this final thought, I would like to return to Marthaler's *Die Verschollenen*, a project whose title references Franz Kafka and his novel *Der Verschollene*, *The Man Who Disappeared* or *The Missing Person*, which is also known as *Lost in America*. As is widely known, *Der Verschollene* is one of Kafka's unfinished novels, which does not have an ending, but is framed by two fragments that were created after

several interruptions. Interestingly, one of these fragments provides an indirect reference to these interruptions, and as such, it provides testimony to the kind of preliminary or *temporary cancellation* that preceded it. In the fragment on the so-called “Theatre of Oklahoma,” or “Teater von Oklahama,” as Kafka spelled it (cf. 1983, 387–419), the protagonist Karl Roßmann wanted to join the theatre which promoted itself by stating that “[j]eder ist willkommen!” (387), “everyone is welcome.” Having entered the reception point for the application process, Karl suddenly noticed his friend Fanny, who worked for the theatre and happened to be dressed as an angel, playing the trumpet on a giant pedestal. Fanny encouraged Karl to apply for a job—“es ist ja das größte Teater der Welt” (394), “it’s the greatest theatre in the world”—and in the end, he was indeed admitted. The only curiosity, however, is that Fanny was nowhere mentioned in any earlier part of the novel. Her character is treated as already known and always having been a part of the storyline, but in fact it was not introduced before. It is this little inconsistency that, whether willingly included or not, acts as a visible trace of the temporary interruption or cancellation in Kafka’s writing process, and as such, it reveals a possibility that would not have existed in a linear progression of writing. In a noticeably theatrical manner, that is, in presenting Fanny *as if* she had always already been in the plot, the script highlights the temporary anomaly of the writing and identifies the fact that other futures of the plot did not get realised, that other characters could have featured instead, which therefore happen to exist as past futures of the novel. Fanny, the friend, the as-if is a stand-in, a medium for this past future of the novel; the theatrical gesture of the as-if is the friend of the past future, as much as the past future is a friend to the novel. In a way, the entire fragment on the Theatre of Oklahoma is a celebration of the as-if, after all, Karl got accepted to the theatre despite or because he did not give his true name—he called himself “Negro” instead—which suggests that the theatre is indeed a place where everyone is welcome, no matter who they are and especially if they pretend to be someone else.

What this final deviation is supposed to suggest is that performance can perhaps use the as-if and other theatrical measures to install impossible reminders not only of its own past futures, but the past futures of many social and political events: political events and experiments that had to be interrupted or terminated due to the COVID pandemic, due to proto-fascist violence, or due to other reasons. In their status as past futures, they will not be recovered, but their intensity might still serve as an impulse for necessarily other future actions that stand out against the desire for self-destruction. This, perhaps, is the promise of *cancelled time*.

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