

The Pandemic as a Spectacle

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I would like to outline some possible directions for performative practices during the time of the pandemic. This contribution will be more or less fragmentary for two reasons. Firstly, it is concerned with a period of time that we are still intensely living through, which makes it difficult to provide any conclusive viewpoints. Secondly, this will allow my writing to remain open and undogmatic, with the hope of encouraging potential readers to further reflection. Most likely, my text will be riddled with contradictions brought on, according to Dolar, by the pandemic itself. These are in no way new – the pandemic Blitzkrieg has only shined a new, blinding light on them and revealed some heretofore unseen ones, I imagine.¹ At the time of writing, some of the topics I addressed were present only as potential but have now grown to become an everyday part of our inter-Covid (not nearly post-Covid) reality. Who knows what they will look like at the time of publication?²

In its present form, the pandemic stigmatises both physical bodies and the social body, with the greatest threat to the physical body represented by violent state interventions into medical matters.³ Apart from its real dimensions, the pandemic also possesses a strong symbolic note, since it is accompanied by fear, violence, various methods of excommunication, and other trauma transposed from the physical onto the social body – and vice versa. We can speak about pandemic signs marking the social body and its skin, signs akin to those detected and used by performative arts. It would thus be difficult to exclude pandemic performance from the field of the political – the body art it produces, i.e. the performing of the subject, is always at the same time society art, i.e. representation of the object, or to put it more precisely, of the objective in its continuous relationship to the subjective. Entering the body of the subject, directly and symbolically manifested by the virus, on the one hand, and the

¹ “Dr Mladen Dolar. Interview, news programme.” Televizija Slovenija, 7. 3. 2021. <https://www.rtvsl.si/4d/arhiv/174758854?s=tv> (last accessed on 17 Sep 2021).

² My text speaks of Covid reality and its derivatives. The very confusion of what words to use to name and describe these times we live in – Covid times, corona times, the time of the epidemic, pandemic ? – is proof enough of their intensity. Even though the novel coronavirus was named SARS-CoV-2, a virus causing the COVID-19 disease, non-medical usage requires simplification.

³ For more see Dominique Chevé, “Epidemija” (Epidemic), in B. Andrieu, G. Boëtsch (eds.), *Rečnik tela*, Beograd, Službeni glasnik, 2010, p. 122.

state, on the other, is never merely “subjective”, a matter of physical “intimacy”, but is also objective and, in Lacanian terms, *extimate*. Performative arts created during the time of the pandemic thus cannot avoid the dialectics of outside and inside, or rather, the dialectics of surface which creates a specific, subjective “depth”. In other words, we feel the epidemic on our own skin, but this very skin is always also social, communal.

Pandemic as an Attack on the Collective Body

The late 1970s supposedly spelled the end of epidemics in the industrialised West, but the illusion was soon shattered by the emergence of AIDS in the 1980s.⁴ As we know, the circumstances surrounding HIV infections (which primarily affected drug users, homosexuals, or persons deemed promiscuous in some other way) and the concomitant moralistic attitudes resulted in the epidemic not being taken seriously, even more, it was considered divine retribution for the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Some twenty years later, the West similarly considered the second wave of pandemics (mad cow disease, bird flu, rat fever) as happening somewhere “else”, as diseases of the “third world”, Africa, Asia – a result of poverty, squalor, slums. If the lethality of AIDS represented a frontal attack on singularity, on (albeit specific and stigmatised) subjectivity, and thus the end of a particular way of life or world, the COVID-19 pandemic is an assault on collectivity, community, this time no longer specific but generalised (with some exceptions, of course, which are part of the immanent contradictions of capitalism), planetary, an attack on the collective body.

The pandemic has reopened the question of the relationship between the individual and the community. We are faced with double circumstances: on the one hand, the individual is shown to be an inextricable part of the community, since their personal infection with the virus always also acts as a potential danger for the infection of others, i.e. the collective. This is why the individual has to think, first of all, of themselves (Foucauldian care of the self) and, if uninfected, protect themselves from infection, or self-isolate (quarantine) if infected; and secondly, think of the community that also needs to be protected from infection, all of which, for now, is the only known method of preventing the spread of the pandemic – apart from vaccination. This relationship is further disrupted by the state, with its advisory, protective, or restrictive mechanisms which follow a different agenda: in case the state shares

⁴ For more see Jean-Jacques Courtine, *Histoire du corps. 3. Les mutations du regard. Le XX. siècle*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2006, p. 26.

this communal consciousness, i.e. sees its role as enabling the survival (and well-being) of the community, its interventions are positively reflected on the individual level; in cases where it follows its own interests, i.e. thinks itself as a superordinate "community", it denies the individual and subjects it to the perspective of state prosperity or totality. Apart from the relationship between the individual and community, this also establishes a relationship between the community and the state, which is not unequivocal and needs to be continually reinterpreted – also within the field of performance.

We should also mention the resulting paradox: as already said, the danger of infection (illness, the presence of suffering and death) shifts the individual's focus onto themselves, their own bodies and symptoms which now act as new organs of a sort, both real and phantom, as monstrous signifiers; they become a personal internal (and inert) world. At the same time, however, the individual is constantly preoccupied with the thought of the outside world, with what we could call a planetary consciousness, since in a perverse way the pandemic turns the world into a barely thinkable whole, which is a negative response to its globalisation. Within the field of performative practice, the pandemic also opens up to the world, in real time – we can follow, for instance, the global rise in infections on the Johns Hopkins University online map, where the linear and algorithmic diagrams of pandemic trends in themselves function as a (visual) spectacle.⁵

In short, the pandemic is the (new) state of the world as a whole (like Artaud's plague),⁶ and Covid, so it seems, the only disease in existence, a hyperdisease; to be healthy means to move within the parameters of RVT (recovered, vaccinated, tested), health is a category which is evidently in need of redefinition.⁷

Phenomenology of Protective Equipment in the Theatrical Context

In the pandemic context, which is (or when it is) superordinate to all that is collective and individual, the incursion of the foreign body=virus into the (performative) body is unplanned; the only thing that can be planned for is prevention. Various protective measures – masks,

⁵ Available at: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> (last accessed on 29 Nov 2021).

⁶ See, for instance, the (too) often quoted chapter essay "Theatre and the Plague" from his book *Theatre and Its Double* (Knjižnica MGL, Ljubljana, 1994).

⁷ The relationship between health and disease is a philosophical-medical category as it is, and cannot be unequivocally defined; for more see Élodie Giroux, "Bolest" (Disease), in B. Andrieu, G. Boëtsch (eds.), *Rečnik tela*, Beograd, Službeni glasnik, 2010, p. 69.

plastic visors, disinfectants, vaccinations, etc. – can be first thought of as a necessary functional and preventative (medical) means against infection, and then as a pacifying (political) means against the pathological and ideological revolt of the body temporarily freed from exploitative relations. Finally, they can be seen as (symbolic) props which, apart from fulfilling the function and means of coercion, also represent the (aesthetic) field of pleasure as a surplus value of social (performative) exchange.

In the context of theatre, the phenomenology of coronavirus prevention reveals other means, spontaneously or deliberately produced by social (self)protection. Empty spaces in the auditorium during a theatre performance or the distance between audience members of a performative event belong to this category. Even if this does not, in principle, affect the performance itself, we need to be aware that performers notice these gaps and react to them spontaneously, especially if they differ from the events taking place on stage, where preventative measures are ostensibly suspended (closeness and contact between performers, failing to wear masks, disinfect, etc.). In times of Covid, the auditorium is overdetermined with empty spaces, the pandemic, the virus; in a way, the state, in the shape of ordinances and laws, “sits” amongst the audience. In the times of Covid, state repression, which in “normal” times would have stayed outside, enters the theatre at the main gate.

Similar is true of testing before seeing a performance or preventative vaccination as a condition of being able to see it. More about this below, for now let us just establish that after centuries of struggle and democratic effort to bring in social equality of the audience and viewing conditions (cf. Artaud’s and Vilar’s circular theatre), the pandemic has turned the theatre into a place for the elites once again, i.e. it returned to the phenomenon of elitism; all of a sudden, a specific segment of viewers is discriminated against, the democratic paradigm, which was an achievement of 20th century theatre, is (temporarily? forever?) lost. It is only a matter of time before theatre rediscovers the meaning of subversion, i.e. the unlawful, subterranean, and illegal methods of performing or seeing performances, similar, perhaps, to the Second World War (cf. Slovenian national theatre in liberated territories) or the besieged Sarajevo half a century later. In truth, this is no longer a question: a certain segment of theatre production has already developed a consciousness of rebellion, a desire to form a parallel community in search of forbidden pleasure, even at the cost of exposing the body to infection. All of the above has nothing in common with conspiracy theories or various antivax movements, which are largely socially reactionary. We are talking, and will continue

to do so below, primarily about a critical reflection of the outlined relations and the part which the state plays in them.

If we dig deeper into the phenomenon of the pandemic itself, we find other methods of prevention, with an even more obvious political, and especially economic differentiation: consider only “Trump’s privilege” when he was treated for COVID,⁸ the retreat of the elites from the pandemic into removed resorts, and even work from home, which is only feasible with specific activities or professions, but not available to the “simple”, direct worker, which increases their exposure to infection, disease, death, etc. The pandemic is, and there is nothing new to this conclusion, also a class problem.

Testing and Vaccination

Out of all the means of testing for infection or preventing it in the first place, testing and vaccination are the most intrusive from a bodily perspective. In the performative context, testing has become a constitutive segment of the performance, on par with various introductory rituals of viewer identification in some well known (interactive) performances (calling out or indexing the audience, recording personal information, drawing up contracts between audience and performers, admission interviews, etc.), since it involves the inspection of the spectator’s physical (in)aptitude for seeing the event through a direct invasion of their body. In other words, it is an initiation ritual, one not directed by the director or the performer (even though they may make use of it), but rather by the pandemic with the help of the state. Testing is thus an integral part of the “pandemic spectacle”. Similar is true of vaccination, however, this is generally not done before the actual performance but very much in advance (as a result of different time spans before the vaccines become effective). Attending a performance demands preparation, in view of which we can see recovery as an unexpected “present” gifted by the infection. In short, the phenomenological field of reception suddenly integrates a new organisation of audience time.

Vaccination represents a more aggressive intrusion into the body than testing, since it permanently injects it with a new, foreign substance. Even etymologically, inoculation implies grafting, inserting, or implanting, all of which indicates aggressive entering of the

⁸ I am thinking here about the use of new, experimental medicine and medical treatment unavailable to the general population.

body. As a rule, of course, vaccination is not part of a performance (as far as – like the pandemic itself – all the events surrounding the introduction and dissemination of vaccines are not some sort of a durational performance). In reality, it is part of preparations for it, and yet the performance or event can only be seen by audience members who were vaccinated (or comply with other RVT conditions) and who thus “contain” vaccines – a sort of code or microchip (meant metaphorically and not literally), which can be “read” and which will, for a time at least, remain an indubitable sign of their cultural, racial or class identity. In this sense, vaccination is becoming an unquestionable means of indoctrination and truly conforms to the other meaning of “inoculate”, to introduce something in the mind, such as a dogma or ideology. If the great theatrical reforms of the 20th century put their faith into the democratisation of performance, audience, and their mutual relationship, and thus refuted the traditional bonds of bourgeois theatre, vaccination as an ideological act represents a (possible) return to bourgeois theatre, since this “new” theatre is no longer available to unvaccinated audiences. Where, now, are the Rancièrian possibilities of the emancipated spectator?

Of course, the “ordinary” mask is not without its own bodily (phenomenological) connotations, since it is an interface between the air and lungs, holding certain particles of air (and with them the virus), but also permeating the body with its own materiality. By covering the greater part of the face, it robs it, and the body as a whole, of an essential capacity of expression. If we accept the proposition that we “think” (transparently) with our face, a masked body can only think obscurely. Despite the requisite wearing of masks, it is not always precisely specified (except in special circumstances) what type of mask, so the mask has also become, as we now well know, a means of differentiation: surgical masks are the cheapest and most widespread, a people’s mask, while politicians wear specially tailored masks embossed with state insignia, names, and functions – the mask has become a small performance in itself and a new way of expressing a political stance (think, for instance, of the mask with the slogan “Trump won”, worn by a Republican congresswoman, or the red star on the black mask of a Slovenian MP from party Levica (The Left). Here the mask emerges as an object of libidinal economy, which adds its own symbolic value to theatre.

In theatrical or performative contexts, protective equipment thus becomes an object of symbolisation and subjectivation. On the one hand, it covers the performance with a unifying ideological veil, but then also rips it apart with individual and libidinal interventions into the symbolic.

The Medical Mask in the Theater

Let us further expand our consideration of masks within the space of theatre: what does a mask represent if worn by a performer during rehearsal and what during the actual performance? What does it imply when worn by the audience? Apart from limiting close contact, reducing mimical (emotional) and verbal expression and a certain degree of concomitant unification, masks also dictate a different type of acting and theatre – one is reminded of the specifics of the so-called mask theatre. This presents artists (director, actor, costume designer, etc.) with the additional task of having to consider how to integrate masks or masked acting into the production concept, the “philosophy” or aesthetics of the performance. This is especially important if the actors also wear masks during the performance itself. An audience wearing masks – if we imagine a radical situation – responds differently to a performance than the one not wearing them; it is similar to a cloned, cyborg mass of irresponsive or programmed automata, which is sitting in the auditorium following a directive of sorts. It was chosen to attend through a process of institutional selection, and will leave, despite protection (which, we know, cannot be one hundred percent sure), with a sense of “aesthetic” pleasure tinged with a more or less uneasy sense of exposure, fear, or even with actual infection – all of which will affect their future decision about whether to attend theatre again and the overall perception of a play or theatre in general.

Let us ask ourselves directly (even though we shall not answer): how can we perform or theatricalise masks or other protective equipment, alienate or domesticate them? Should masks, for instance, be considered a new given or should we systematically oppose them and establish theatre as an “autonomous zone”? Does this make any sense at all – or is it a mere manifestation of social escapism implying an underlying acquiescence to political reality? Or does this new reality simply need to be reflected in order for us to find anchor points for critical consideration of its phenomena, both the new social relations and the anomalies caused by it? While all the while keeping in mind the thin line between avoiding confrontation, systemic critique, and reproduction of conspiracy theories proliferating at this time.

During the time of the pandemic and its related political measures, theatre performance is marked by a Derridean “closure of representation” – not only the “closure” of performance or theatre, but also, as Derrida writes:

*To think the closure of representation is thus to think the cruel powers of death and play which permit presence to be born to itself, and pleasurably to consume itself through the representation in which it eludes itself in its deferral. To think the closure of representation is to think the tragic: not as the representation of fate, but as the fate of representation. Its gratuitous and baseless necessity. And it is to think why it is fatal that, in its closure, representation continues.*⁹

The pandemic marks as "fatal" both the performance being performed in circumstances of prevention, since it is the subject of constant threat and horror of infection, as well as the performance not being performed in circumstances of restriction, which establishes a wider, pandemic, social, and political context: as already mentioned in the introduction, the pandemic is a social spectacle par excellence.

Spectacularization of Infection

The ubiquitous "staging" of a state of emergency during the time of the global pandemic can also be seen as a specific (perverse) spectacle – images of the disinfection (deratisation? dehumanisation?) of empty cities by fully costumed disinfectors are downright spectacular.¹⁰ Even a glimpse of overflowing hospitals, which we also witnessed during the first wave of the pandemic (in Italian Bergamo, for instance) inescapably reminds of "theatre of death" – this is not to callously deny the fatal consequences of the pandemic, quite the contrary, we are trying to establish a different, more real perspective on it. At a first glance, a theatre performance on the topic of the pandemic might seem as a doubling of reality;¹¹ the new reality can be used by the performance as a source of "pure" poeticis",¹² a performative distancing from reality into some other, pre-Covid, post-Covid, "fantastic" and "exotic", time defying reality, which, however, is always in danger of being understood as escapism, an

⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Gledališče krutosti in zapora predstave", in E. Hrvatin (ed.), *Prisotnost, predstavljanje, teatralnost. Razprave iz sodobnih teorij gledališča*, Ljubljana, Maska, 1996, p. 103. Translation from "The Theatre Of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation", in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass, London, Routledge, 2001, p. 316.

¹⁰ These were mostly measures during the first wave of the pandemic.

¹¹ See, for example, topics related to Covid in modern theatre texts and performances in Slovenian theatres during the last season.

¹² I am reminded of CNN's short photographic segments on Covid times, "still lifes" featuring portraits of people across the globe during the pandemic. "The defining photos of the pandemic — and the stories behind them", *CNN*, 12. 3. 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2021/03/world/coronavirus-pandemic-cnnphotos/> (last accessed on 17 Sep 2021).

escape from physical and social reality.¹³ The key question here is how to think the pandemic, so that it is both a reflection of the pandemic and its subversion, a critique of spectacle while at the same time a production of a new “spectacle” (or rather: non-spectacle) containing aesthetic, socially mobilising, emancipatory strength.

Let us dive deeper into considering the possibilities of spectacle in a time of global spectacularization (of course, Debord’s “society of the spectacle” has been a well established sociological and phenomenological notion for over half a century). Adam Zaretsky highlights an interesting aspect of performative pieces during the time of the pandemic in relation to measures aimed at preventing infection (here, the connection with the pandemic is my own; he speaks about a different libidinal economy of aseptic measures). He believes that protecting our bodies from infection has gained new dimensions and is interested in the way the culture of use of personal protective equipment has affected the libidinal economy of latex and medical fetishists and strangulation addicts.¹⁴ So what is the connection between protection and its transgression, between risk and pleasure? We need look no further than “classic” body art to find answers. This topic can be easily connected with performing in a time of pandemic, where, more than the outbreak itself or the general prevalence of the disease, prominence is given primarily to infection, i.e. contact with the virus as the thing causing it.

Infection means the invasion of the body by a virus, penetration of an alien organism (as much as a virus is an organism) into – in the performative context – the organism of the performer or spectator. In traditional theatre, the spectator’s body is invaded by psychological and affective representations, while the performers themselves are penetrated by the playscript, i.e. by different levels of texts, transformed or sifted through the director’s production concept. In performative practices, the invasion of the performer’s body by foreign bodies is relatively common;¹⁵ it is also more likely with the spectator’s body, compared to dramatic theatre, but not necessarily a rule (we are reminded of the inhalation of smells during an olfactory performance or the ingestion of food in participatory performance,

¹³ This was my understanding of the staging of classic Japanese Noh performances, *Silk Drums*, in 1994 in the besieged Sarajevo; the performance was also shown in Slovenia.

¹⁴ Adam Zaretsky, “Interpersonal Protective Equipment: The Libidinal Economy of Aseptic Containment”, Conference talk at *Taboo – Transgression – Transcendence in Art & Science 2020*, 26.–28. 11. 2020. <https://avarts.ionio.gr/ttt/2020/en/presentations/171/> (last accessed on 17 Sep 2021).

¹⁵ To illustrate this, I would like to mention the various performances of Ive Tabar. See Blaž Lukan, “Politični bodiartistični performansi Iveta Tabarja”, in B. Orel, M. Šorli, G. Troha (eds.), *Hibridni prostori umetnosti*, Ljubljana, Maska and UL AGRFT, 2012, pp. 119–138.

which sums up the possibility of participation in modern, (post)dramatic theatre). In both contexts, theatrical and performative, all of the above is planned. Perhaps we could say that any theatre performance by actor or performer in times of Covid is “body art”, in a way, since it always thematises the actor’s body, their sensibility, vulnerability, infectability, even when it is performed in a purely traditional dramatic context and with the help of an interface (such as Zoom).

Reception under the Regime of Prohibition

Performance in times of Covid is thus necessarily participatory, it is always a case of that famous “autopoietic feedback loop”, since the space of performance is ineluctably overdetermined with the “state of facts”, which defines both production and reception. If we think back to specific performative events from pre-Covid times, e.g. performances by the Via Negativa Group, their attempts at inviting audience participation may now seem innocent and naively exotic, self-referential, or referencing only some general universal cultural topics of sorts, which sooner or later turn out to be “elitist”. Performance in times of Covid – but we do not wish to generalise – seems more binding and especially more “democratic”, in the sense that both performers and the audience find themselves in the same “boat”. The Via Negativa Group performance, *Physis*, which was created during the pandemic, is solid proof of this changed performative awareness;¹⁶ even though it was only performed via Zoom, its spitting scene, which uses saliva as a performative prop and is part of a wider context of their inquiry into the performativity of bodily excretions, acquires an entirely new performative, social, and ethical power, since it opens up a series of questions which were alien to a performative inquiry of the past. As if performance suddenly reacquired its somewhat forgotten status of the socially responsible, ethical act, involving both the performer and the participant, where, more than to the aesthetic dimension of the event, precedence is given to “fluidity”: the performer turns out to be a medium enabling the “flow” of time, while the performance acts as an authentic, ritual(ised) practice with no therapeutic aspirations. Despite this, it undoubtedly shines a new – critical – light on current social relations.

If we expand the above view to include the spectator, we can see that the circumstances of theatrical and performative activities permitted during the pandemic are restrictive. The artist

¹⁶ The performance premiered online on 9. 4. 2021.

may deny them or submit to them, but they may also recognise them as an opportunity for a new type of performance and pleasure or as an unexpected input into a specific libidinal economy. The same goes for the spectator. As an example, I would like to refer to my experience of (illegally) attending two performances in the time of pandemic (a dance performance and a storytelling performance),¹⁷ where some completely new elements were at/in play: performance and attendance as breaking the law, i.e. disregarding a ban on these kinds of events, and also only limited adherence to preventative measures (the audience had to wear masks, but not for the entirety of the performance, and only loosely maintained distance from other audience members). This offers a completely new definition of legality, i.e. collective submission to law: with aesthetic experience, even in restrictive times (or precisely because of them), there is a higher order at work than the mandated anti-Covid measures, which involves – let me put it this way – the law of subjectivation. Despite the ban, the spectator tries to maintain a certain level of their own (awareness of) subjectivity, a sense of presence, of emancipated reception. They are trying to establish that fluidity between the stage and the auditorium which enables them to enjoy the event in one way or another, to immerse themselves in its “awareness”, on the one hand, and to gauge themselves out of it into their own awareness, on the other. In doing so, they can interiorise the new circumstances of attending the event or (consciously or unconsciously) avoid them by breaking them. “The role of the spectator” in Covid theatre is potentiated, whether they are wearing a mask (which makes it difficult to breathe, fogs up their glasses, and makes it hard to accept their new, obscured image) or whether they take it off and risk the intervention of a fellow audience member, ticket taker, inspection ...

Staging and attending a performance under the regime of prohibition tenses up the body in a way not known under “normal” conditions of attendance, since these are more or less a result of commodification. This context all the more activates the body and its organs (e.g. senses); suddenly (this was my experience) I can also hear, not only see the dance in a dance performance, in fact, I could just listen to it and the receptive process in my “head” would reconstitute an equally intense show as if I was watching it. In the second case, I, as a spectator, painfully feel the absence of physical contact with the performer (this is a one-on-one, interactive performance), even though it may never have been imagined as part of the event, but the absence of the possibility of contact establishes itself as an empty space which cannot be filled by any other performative means, not even an intense piece of storytelling.

¹⁷ Because the events broke the ordinance banning public events, their titles will remain a secret.

My third experience was a mixture of both: during the performance of the *Škofja Loka Passion Play*, produced by Prešernovo gledališče Kranj and directed by Jernej Lorenci, the actors on stage are close together, they touch each other and embrace, at a certain point they are naked, and the show is quite lengthy. In the auditorium, however, the audience members are sitting at a required minimum distance, some of them separated, others (family members) next to each other, with masks on their faces, evidently aware of the pandemic... This was before the RVT requirement for admission, but we know that the actors were tested before the premiere. Despite this, the relationship between the performers and the audience is, in a way, “unequal”, even though “legally” irreproachable. More than being a lament about discrimination or privilege, maybe this gives all the more force to an ancient and by now lost sense of the stage as a place of freedom, of actors who – in this case – do not suffer instead of you but rather enjoy themselves ...

In performance theatre, the distance or difference between the performer and the participant may prove a greater problem, since being caught in the same “loop” is part of the definition of performance. If one or the other is robbed of the possibility of interaction, this gives rise to a kind of invisible border between the two of them, which brings into question the very ontology of the performative event; in itself, this border is not “aesthetic”, but rather ideological, political, and in any case, “decreed”, enacted even when the real danger (let’s say that all of the participants recovered from Covid, are vaccinated, or tested) is no longer there. We are witness to ideological censorship which affects the very ontological nature of performance, its “theory” and “philosophy”. In times of Covid, it might therefore be necessary for performance to continuously reflect the circumstances of its enactment, to problematise them, make them its meta-performative focus, and continue to also look for possible impulses for their “performing” within the auditorium. The reflective possibilities for performance thus include some “old” topics, which were believed obsolete: e.g. the phenomenon of “constant excitement” (Bruckner), the issue of sovereignty, naked life, and implementation of state of exception (Agamben), a new definition of *Gestus* (Brecht), considerations of new class identities and the social unconscious, etc.

Let me briefly describe my “pure” experience of performance during Covid times: a greater exposure of body, but not merely physical, perhaps also “metaphysical”,¹⁸ openness towards the other (fellow audience member, performer), but also, put somewhat pathetically, towards life as it is (after all, even though Covid is not the plague, it may have an unpredictable outcome), perhaps towards death? At the same time a resignation of sorts, lassitude, since we no longer have complete control of our bodies and lives (as if we ever had!). And the inescapable question about what life really is, what is naked life, what are the potential consequences of my “unruliness” and what of my “submission”; and does attending a performance during Covid times imply a silent (or, obversely, manifest) assent to the possibility of infection, i.e. not betting on “luck” but, on the contrary, on possible “misfortune” weighed against desire and pleasure? Is this experience a manifestation of dualism or the achievement of a (new) unity? Is this new “freedom” and new “democracy” or merely a revitalised “old existentialism”? Is it still possible to have a purely banal economic reaction: “Am I at all pleased with what I got for my money (when I bought my ticket)?” Are economic matters in Covid times, i.e. in a period of massive state interventions into the economy, culture, etc., still relevant?

Zoom Theater

In this context we have to ask ourselves, in conclusion, how the body is affected by the ultimate measure of shifting live theatre action online and watching (live) performance through an interface or application (most commonly Zoom). Here, we will relinquish any attempt to define or even lament the “loss” of theatre online, which is thus transformed into “film”. We are more interested in the effect of this presentation of theatre (which, in itself, is representation, or even better, re-representation), which may be part of a post-humanist understanding of culture and art, since certain technological processes have already infiltrated the creative process and newly adapted performances. In reality, theatre in times of Covid is technological theatre, as yet unadjusted to by the reception body (leaving aside the performers) – but the adaptation surely will not take long.

¹⁸ Well, there is less metaphysics during the current pandemic than there was during the plague, but Covid times are not entirely free of it either. It might not be an exaggeration to say, however, that nowadays metaphysics is substituted by conspiracy theories, which thus became a sort of metaphysics for the new age.

It is a fact that the spectator's body is safe from infection while watching a performance via Zoom, even when they are invited to co-operate and participate interactively. The actor is partly exposed to the threat of infection by their colleagues or technical staff, so the online performance also needs to follow restrictive, protective measures. But is the spectator's body truly safe? Because there is no immediate contact with the performers and other audience members, the spectator's body is only exposed to the possibility of contact with a fellow spectator in front of the TV or computer screen, which is a more manageable danger (unless they are watching the stream in the company of strangers or in a foreign environment). So we can speak of safety, but one which is also sterile in a way, removed from the theatrical event, even when it is being watched in real time (i.e. "live", which may be misleading, however, since this "liveness" needs to be newly defined or thought through criteria of mediation or transmission). It is safety which is essentially alien to attending a theatre event, since the latter is defined precisely by the contemporaneous and unpredictable living presence of the performer and the spectator within the same space. It is safety which is self-referential, a category separate from theatre and inconsequential for it. The spectator's safety during a Zoom performance is thus negligible, but reveals as the underlying, suddenly unrealisable quality of theatre precisely its danger, in-security or risk. The absence of the three aforementioned categories, which in truth are one and the same, i.e. the exposure of body (subject) to event and its contingency, is what defines them as essential for its performance and reception in the first place. Risk, openness, unpredictability, exposure of body not only to infection but to basic insecurity of development in time, despite the potentially high degree of the event's programming – which is more true of dramatic theatre than it is of performance theatre – are thus categories that fundamentally determine any "live" theatrical or performative event. Of course, they can still be partially found even in online streaming of performances (which still allows for acting mistakes, technical errors, power outage, etc.), but with an essential lack: the spectator's risk.

What can we do – and what are we really doing – while watching a performance online? Does our body respond to our desire when we consume theatre in this manner? How did desire for theatre change with technologically mediated theatre (which, according to Auslander, is not at all new): do we still want *such* theatre? Or are we talking about a necessary transformation of desire, which, in truth, has been occurring throughout the history of theatre, and particularly intensely in the 20th century? Of course, we cannot avoid mentioning the performers: the key question here is what it means to create an online

performance? In itself, this does not necessarily affect the process of preparation, except when the online performance is basically a film, since rehearsals are conducted in standard ways, as well as the production and montage of theatrical signs. The change occurs in its presentation, its first and all subsequent performances – when these involve more than the projection of the recorded premiere. – This is an extensive subject and perhaps not as important for our context, so let us stop here.

Let me conclude by recounting an experience of watching an online event during the pandemic – a series of performances which were part of the eco-project *Be-coming Tree Live Art*.¹⁹ Quite aside from the presence of interface, one could physically feel a specific distance, separateness, self-sufficiency, bizarreness of the project and its performers, as if they were coming to us from some other, pre-, post- or extra-Covid world, but also a hardly describable, contagious sovereignty belonging to a different, “better” (?) world or system, a sort of spontaneous humanity, humanism as rebellion against technology and also surrender to new reality; not “back to nature” as an imperative but as an entreaty, a yearning for an impossible return, either to the body or extra-bodily reality in which infection, if indeed still seen as such, is only another sign of universal humanity, life in itself. Utopia? Perhaps not.

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The present contribution looks at possible performative practices during the time of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic, which stigmatises both physical bodies and the social body, with the greatest threat to the physical body represented by the violent interventions of the state into medical matters. Apart from its real dimensions, the pandemic also possesses a strong symbolic note. In its discussion of the “phenomenology of Covid prevention in the performative context”, the paper touches upon the use of protective masks, minimum distance between audience members, testing, and vaccination as intrusions into the spectator’s body, the participatory potential of performative events during the time of pandemic and limitation brought about by their online (Zoom) performances.

¹⁹ See: <https://becomingtree.live/> (last accessed on 17 Sep 2021).