

At a time when the relation between art and society is under permanent scrutiny, the utterance *What can theatre do* serves as an open invitation for artists and thinkers alike to reimagine the potential agency of the performing arts. The formulation of this sentence is both ambitious and ambiguous since the affirmative or interrogatory status remains undefined. The intonation of the sentence can provide both a sense of hope and belonging or a nihilist sensation of powerlessness. It could provide a resource for research development and analytic inquiries, but could also serve as a suggestion to trigger political action.

From fictional interviews to recipes, social-media exchanges to dramaturgical texts, theoretical essays

# *What Can Theatre Do*

*edited by*  
Silvia Bottiroli and Miguel A. Melgares

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## **We in the plural. Performance gestures of antifascism**

Valeria Graziano and Giulia Palladini

—*Non sei mica fascista?—mi disse.*

*Era seria e rideva. Le presi la mano e sbuffai.*

—*Lo siamo tutti, cara Cate,—dissi piano.—Se non lo fossimo, dovremmo rivoltarci, tirare bombe, rischiare la pelle. Chi lascia fare e s'accontenta, è già un fascista.*<sup>1</sup>

—*Cesare Pavese, La casa in collina*

This text is a gesture we make in the attempt to interrogate the political potential of performance in light of what seems to us the core question of our times: how to confront, grapple with, name, survive, and ultimately counter fascism? What could be the premise, the parameters, the points of entry of such reflection? What would be the grammar of its articulation? How might we gesture towards an antifascist future from the ruins of the present? In setting up the terms of such reflection, we already stumbled upon a paradox. We just spoke of “our times,” and yet the historical configuration of such times necessarily blurs before our eyes. We are *in* fascism,

<sup>1</sup> “—*You’re not a fascist, are you?—she told me. She was serious and laughed. I took her hand and sighed. ‘We all are, dear Cate,’ I said softly.—If we weren’t, we’d have to revolt, throw bombs, risk our lives. Anyone who leaves things as they are and remains content is already a fascist.*” Translation by the authors.

immersed, soaked in it, in various dimensions and across multiple directions. We have been, in fact, for a very long time. And who are “we,” after all?

Writing these words, we are descendants of those who have lived under Mussolini’s fascism in Italy before and during the Second World War: our grandfathers were taught at school that Italians were triumphantly occupying Ethiopia, and our grandmothers that their only prescribed destiny was that of mothers of future soldiers. Our coming of age politically and culturally is marked by the lasting consequences of past regimes of fascist governance, by their enduring violence in the present. We came of age commemorating the brutal murder of Auro Bruni, a 19-year-old boy from Rome of Eritrean origins, who was beaten unconscious and then set on fire in the occupied social centre Cortocircuito, in Rome, on the night of 19 May 1991. We were already part of the ongoing Italian diaspora when, in 2018, a Lega Nord party member perpetrated a mass shooting targeting Black people in the streets of Macerata.

Writing these words, we are also two people who have recently left the UK; living there we saw how imperial violence interlocked with fascism in and around the insular mentality of the British far right is informing police behaviour, border control, the privatisation of the public sector and of education, and racist abuse at every level of society. We have seen fascism in action when Theresa May’s government, in 2018, denied legal rights, detained and in many cases deported hundreds of people of Caribbean descent in what came to be known as the Windrush Scandal, that was a prime example of the UK Home Office’s “hostile environment” policy. We and our Black and migrant friends experienced micropolitical aggressions daily, at very different levels (of class, gender, race, status, education); they crippled our life in the UK, as toxic elements which reminded us that we “did not belong.” Writing these words, we are women who experience fascism as the ideology underpinning state laws regulating our bodily capacity to reproduce: if the state has the power to ban abortion, women have withdrawn, by law, their right to determine whether they want to be mothers or not, hence their bodies are intrinsically marked as disposable. We are witnessing with increased concern the consolidation of interests behind the 2020 Geneva Consensus Declaration, a document currently signed by 37 nations that formalises an organised

challenge to abortion and same-sex marriage as human rights, in the name of promoting “the rights of women and strengthening the family.”

As a ubiquitous political ambience, contemporary fascism is a tricky object to contour; maybe such a defining exercise is not necessary after all. We commenced to name fascism not with a definition, but an accumulation of episodes, starting with our memories, the memories we have inherited and those we have encountered along the way. We do so because we want to understand how embodied memories create continuities and ruptures in history and in language, and what is at stake in the very act of naming something as fascism. We are trying to approach fascism first as a bodily affect, and only later as language: starting to name fascism by dissecting the effects it produces on our bodies, those of our ancestors, those who will come after us. Our *we* therefore needs to become more capacious, to include those who have been incarcerated, tortured, made to disappear by fascism before us. Those who still are, currently, incarcerated, tortured, disappeared by a form of fascism. Those who might be in an anterior future unfolding before us, one in which fascism has not yet become impossible.

You recognise fascism when you see it, we learned, or rather: when you see them. Fascism—as Alyosha Goldstein and Simón Ventura Trujillo recently argued<sup>2</sup>—must be thought and taught in the plural. As Indian president Nehru powerfully put it, echoing and anticipating others—such as Simone Weil, Aimé Césaire, Hannah Arendt, Amílcar Cabral, Susan Sontag—fascism is “an intensified form of the same system that is imperialism”<sup>3</sup> and it is intrinsically entangled with ever-changing transformations of enduring colonial legacies, resurfacing in the present, and already gesturing towards multifarious future forms of historical erasure, always forthcoming modes of violent domination. Nehru’s remark, today, gives a shiver, especially in light of India’s current president Narendra Modi’s obsession with ethnic purity, and persecution of those considered racially undesirable. Fascism always responds, in a sense repairs, a crisis of capitalism: it is a terror predicated on a “volatile cohabitation of silence and monumentality”<sup>4</sup> which institutes regimes of

2 Alyosha Goldstein and Simón Ventura Trujillo, “Fascism Now? Inquiries for an Expanded Frame,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2021),

<https://manifold.umn.edu/read/ces0701-introduction/section/f9ffb32b-958a-4577-b03d-a6ecdb10b153#chapter1-7> (accessed 19 March 2023).

3 Quoted in: Michele Louro, *Comrades against Imperialism: Nehru, India, and Interwar Internationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 230.

4 Goldstein and Trujillo, *ibid.*, 2021.

knowing, living and dying, that ultimately operate a radical reduction on the potentiality of the world itself.

The word *fascism* which for almost a century has been off-scene, in public discourse, has recently resurfaced in language on the world stage. It suffices to name a couple of examples, accounting for the ubiquitous nature of this category. Just a few days before these words were written, in February 2023, international news reported Israel's Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich proudly defining himself "a homophobic fascist," at once making evident an explicit continuity with a political tradition of colonial violence and state terror, and disregarding the years-long performance of "pinkwashing" that the Israeli government has put forward, in recent years, in the attempt to disentangle their regime from its otherwise rampant policies of discrimination. The performance of such a statement speaks volumes on the complex stratifications nesting at the core of the category of fascism: its capacity to hand itself over to the future, and always select and welcome in specific reverberations of the past, while operating distinctive forms of erasure of rights, human dignity and the biosphere in the present. In her first public discourse in parliament as Italy's prime minister, Giorgia Meloni—often saluted as the first woman to perform the role of prime minister in Italian history—has not used the word fascism, which has otherwise thoroughly characterised her own political history. However, she made clear that with the instalment of the new, rightwing government in Italy a certain legacy was finally redeemed, in language and in the public space. Those who for a century had to be rightfully ashamed, at least in public, of the language and the ideology they inherited through Mussolini's regime—at least, until the memory of fascist horror was still on the skin of those who had undergone it—could now again proudly reclaim it. As Henry Giroux wrote: "fascism begins not with violence, police assaults, or mass killings, but with language."<sup>5</sup> And yet, it does not end, neither is contained by language alone. It is first and foremost a relation, marked by continuities and ruptures. Or, echoing Enzo Traverso, fascism always exists in, and is constituted of, a tension between language and history.<sup>6</sup>

Reflections on fascism thus keep compelling those who write to include definitions that are always partial. Rather than corresponding to a stable position, fascism functions as a hybridised configuration of interests, a libidinal glue capable to hold

<sup>5</sup> Henry A. Giroux, *The Terror of the Unforeseen: Rethinking the Normalization of Fascism in the Post-Truth Era* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Review of Books, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Enzo Traverso, *Le mutazioni delle destre radicali nel XXI secolo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2019).

together even contradictory positions, such as those espoused by radical rightwing populist groupuscules, respectable conservative parties, religious fundamentalist circles, and crypto-libertarian milieux.

Fascism is never quite returning, then, it is always beginning again. As much as language, it is not an abstraction, but is embedded in contexts and sensible matter, in contingent spaces and time. Fascism is always gestating: under capitalism, a system that can only function at the expense of those marked as inferior in terms of gender, race and class. It is a drive that finds many assemblages across which it can multiply. Alexander Reid Ross captured this understanding of fascism as a “creep,” a relentless, insinuating, underlying movement that aims to revolutionise society by violent means.<sup>7</sup>

In this text we decided to think about such continuous gestations of fascism by bringing to the surface also the countermovement of gestation in which antifascism, in the meantime, operates. We did not inherit, from those multiple pasts we have earlier evoked, only histories of defeat. We have also inherited a history of antifascist actions and workers’ revolts, we have inherited gestures of resistance (in a collective imagery that is still in the making, as it is characterised by an intense masculinity due to the historical erasure of women’s role in partisan struggles). We have inherited technologies of political affirmation, which may or may not be useful for the current and future struggle, but equip us with an international cartography of resistance, which—like fascism—should also be thought of, and taught, in the plural.

In this text, then, we think through a plural series of gestures. The examples we discuss in this text are in no way emblematic cases of antifascist resistance. They are rather part of what seems to us a transhistorical repertoire, in which we recognise, seek, spot possibilities of what we named *defascistisation*. They are scenes or, otherwise said, figurations performing a particular work of *defascistisation*, by political subjects gesturing towards—so to say—the other side of the political spectrum, through performance. They are strategies to construct not only at a macropolitical, but also at a micropolitical level, a horizon of life in which fascism has become an impossibility, not so much because it has disappeared as a thinkable option, but because society has honed in the skills to prevent fascisms from

<sup>7</sup> Ross Alexander Reid, *Against the Fascist Creep* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 16.

encroaching onto modes of relation and production. In this horizon, we dare to think, those skills will not just exist as language, but be memorised in living, gesturing bodies and imaginaries, and will be passed on, as such, to future remembering bodies. Our thinking exercise is an engagement with multiple temporalities: like that of a gestation that implicates and holds within itself all the antifascist pasts, not only white and European, but also the crucial legacy of anticolonial and anti-imperial struggles. In such gestation, we start composing a tentative repertoire of gestures that represents fragments of defascistising assemblages for the future.

The performative potency of these gestures is an invitation, reaching out to the spectators as political subjects, to venture into a space which is not familiar, they address subjects who are seemingly not *us*, while also complicating—by the very fact of taking place—the conception of *us*, and *them*. These are gestures reaching out into what seems an army, the fascist mob, the indifferent crowd, but is in fact a potential multitude.

## **Gestures of Defascistisation—1**

### **Paper planes**

In the middle of the night, a multitude of paper planes fly over the barbed wire fence of a military base. It is 3 January 2000, and we are in Mexico, more precisely in the Selva Lacandona (Lacandon Jungle), in Chiapas.<sup>8</sup> This episode is the last act of a performance of resistance endured over five months on the part of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN): a response to the military occupation enforced by the Mexican army over a land long reclaimed by Indigenous people who, three decades ago, have started fighting and won, and later managed to control natural resources, as well as the political and economic organisation of the region where the Lacandon Jungle is situated. Moreover, what the EZLN and the National Indigenous Congress have established, in Chiapas, is the inextricable connection between economical, political, educational, and environmental justice, their metabolic relation with any form of life in common. Affirming the necessity to address all those facets of justice together, as intrinsic to the mode of existence and

<sup>8</sup>We'd like to thank Rodolfo Suárez Molnar for first introducing us to this story.



cohabitation of the world among humans, the EZLN has built a grammar to confront forms of extractivism and violence that have outlived colonial occupation, and metamorphosed into contemporary forms of fascist power, disguised into fictions of political representation. This is the vision that the EZLN has long counterposed to the acquisition of State power, this is the message that—like an echo of sorts—powerfully resonated all over the world, in the mid-1990s, out of the jungle and into the cities, across the Atlantic and into our very houses. This is, as a matter of fact, one of the most powerful resonances of that sense that “another world was possible,” interwoven into the fantasy of a generation coming to age in the 1990s, it is a sense that has shaped the political imagination in which we who write have learned to name capitalism, as well as the joy of resistance to its miseries—at least on the level of imagination. It is perhaps the very fantasy that allowed us to name, to identify a *we*, even as and when *we* were so far apart. Thinking back at that time from the landscape of the future, the access to the grammar of that adolescent political imagination was not a given—the sense that it was joy, rather than misery, that could “move” us to live otherwise, was something specific to that moment, to that collective reverberation of a world waking up to say that, as opposed to what Francis Fukuyama had declared in 1992, the predicament of enduring misery and exploitation, of capitalist domination and planetary dispossession, was not, could not be, and won’t be the end of history.

Indeed, what this reverberation has activated—at least for a while—is an impossible extension of the present and the future, which functioned as a powerful antidote to what Enzo Traverso has described as a distinctive historical regime characterising the beginning of the twenty-first century: “presentism.”<sup>9</sup> Presentism, in Traverso’s terms, connotes a condition in which humanity is portrayed as stuck in a perpetual present, absorbing in itself both the past and the future. Such a regime corresponds to a neoliberal ethos that eternises the current economic order and social system, and in so doing tries to prevent any form of collective action. What is more, this temporal regime seemingly works to obliterate any memory of past collective actions as well. Traverso suggests that the regime of historicity he calls “presentism” followed the fading away of communism as an historical project, and left the political culture that had nourished and was shaped by such a project haunted by a widespread “left-

<sup>9</sup> Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia. Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

wing melancholia.” The disappearance of the utopian horizon of social emancipation as actual historical possibility (one which was rooted in an international movement, reinvigorated by different anticolonial struggles happening around the world at different times, shared among a diverse population and inscribed in a common yet multifaceted historical narrative, which unfolded over the last two centuries) corresponded to the increasing affirmation, on an international level, of capitalism as the established and forever current “state of things.” What Traverso refers to is not only the failure or definitive transformation of the most prominent examples of “realised socialism” in the state form. It is the loss of that sense of collective political potentiality which punctuated the history of the twentieth century, and was in a sense inherited by the riots, hopes and forms of political organisation elaborated already since the nineteenth century. Taking a stance before the temporal politics of “presentism,” then, means to liberate the present from its captivity within this very logic, saturated with defeat, stuck in a condition of perpetual scarcity even on the level of imagination.

But all of this was much later, or much before, and elsewhere. Let’s go back to the *ejido* (shared land) Amador Hernández, on that night of January, at the beginning of a new century in which fascism was supposedly a thing of the past. Let’s zoom into the performance that the EZLN enacted, inventing what later came to be known as the Fuerzas Aéreas Zapatistas: not an air force, to be sure, but rather a performative vehicle for messages that would reach the soldiers using their own language—performing an attack with aeroplanes—but turning it upside down, reaching the soldiers not in their training camps, but in their dormitory, while asleep, in the attempt—so to say—to wake them up. The paper planes carried messages, written using a typewriter and then reproduced in carbon-copy, and they were addressed to the Mexican army not as soldiers, but as labourers, as fellow citizens, as exploited humans, as political subjects:

*Soldiers, we know that poverty has made you sell your lives and souls. I also am poor, as are millions. But you are worse off, for defending our exploiter.*

*We do not sell our lives. We want to free our lives and those of your children, your lives, and those of your wives, your brothers and sisters, your uncles and aunts, fathers and mothers, and the lives of millions of poor exploited Mexicans. We want to*

*free their lives also so that soldiers do not repress their towns by the order of a few thieves.*<sup>10</sup>

*We want to create the peace of the future, have a home with no walls, we want our children to walk on solid ground, to look up, to sing freely.*

The letters written by the EZLN, on the paper that was later folded in the form of planes, also talked about the high price soldiers were obliged to pay for merchandise sold in the camp, a price established by the very government they had sold their lives to. The messages highlighted the paradox of spending most of their salaries to pay for a life that, ultimately, was not theirs, but someone else's property. They talked about the daily humiliations the soldiers had to undergo, choosing not to join the common struggle for a different life.

Incidentally, while the EZLN used the military language of "air force" to communicate with the soldiers, in the previous days the army itself had used performance as an instrument to "protect" the soldiers against the EZLN: while 400 campesinos gathered in the area and joined the EZLN, in their celebration for the new year and in their protest within the jungle just across the encampment, the soldiers who were sent to occupy the Zapatista land had received from above the order to play opera in order "not to hear" the protest. Allegedly, for days the jungle resonated with fragments of *Carmen*, *La Traviata* and *Guillermo Tell*.

In a sense, then, the Indigenous protesters performed in this scene the role of the sirens in the famous episode from the *Odyssey*: their songs and screams, their political messages, were treated by the military officials, acting as dramaturgs of the whole operation, as an irresistible force of pure desire. So much so, one might speculate, that they deemed it appropriate to prevent the soldiers from exposing themselves to this seduction, not shutting their ears with wax, but suffocating the Zapatista call coming from behind the jungle bushes, with loud European, imperial opera music.

This gesture interests us not so much for its efficacy—although as a result of that protest later on, in 2001, Mexican President Vicente Fox had to accept the withdrawal of the military from the occupied land. The potency of the paper planes

<sup>10</sup> Matt Bernico, "The Zapatista Air Force," *Geez Magazine*, [Winter 2023 Issue](https://geezmagazine.org/magazine/article/the-zapatista-air-force), 2 January 2023, <https://geezmagazine.org/magazine/article/the-zapatista-air-force> (accessed 20 February 2023).

gesture nests in the simplicity of its performative enactment, made of volatile props, using toys disguised as bombs of political desire, in a form of “reaching out” that could almost come across as a joke, in the face of the serious discipline enacted in the military camp. Instead, it was an honest, perhaps infantile but essential political gesture. As children, we often wondered why the soldiers did not join the revolution everywhere, and always thought that this would be the solution for the realm of communism to come. It is as simple as that, if you think of it. If the soldiers did not desire to keep living the life they were trained to live, and to enforce it upon others, if they did not desire to work for a state who arrested, tortured, dispossessed, abused, humiliated life, they could join another army, one of freedom and autonomy. “Another world is possible:” it was as simple as that. It is the minimal shift in imagination needed to challenge “capitalist realism,” it was the “what if” of children’s games that, however, in somewhere like Chiapas, happened to be a reality. This is perhaps the reason why all over the world the Zapatista resonated as a powerful force gesturing toward an antifascist future: because their theatrical potency has almost always performed in a playful, extraordinary wit, with a tender care not only for the messages sent, but also for the forms which surrounded the delivery: their performance, and because a performance of surrender, of desertion, of quitting, of shifting sides, might ultimately take place.

Such was, in a sense, also the recent trip to Europe in a rusty vessel named La Montaña, that the EZLN organised in 2021, five hundred years after the Conquest of Mexico, with the aim to meet grassroots organisations and militants in Europe. Figures, toys, jokes (like the vessel, mocking and reversing the Conquest) conjure possibilities to glimpse desire, outside of the constraints of a fascist life. This is what the paper planes put on the table, across the bushes, in the jungle, that night. The possibility to reach the soldiers as political subjects, and confront them with their maybe childish, surely irresistible desire to come out and play, to partake in a different *we* than that offered by the army, in the middle of a jungle which was also their land, but from which they had always been, and would keep being, dispossessed.

## **Protofascism**

Commentators of recent far-right cultures focus their analysis on the architecture of digital platforms and their biased algorithms (such as 4chan's infamous "bump" and YouTube's "suggestions"<sup>11</sup>) as a major factor fuelling the contemporary spread of fascism. This trope has perhaps most famously been introduced to non-specialists by the 2016 lecture on the alt-right by media scholar Florian Cramer, which has since gone viral.<sup>12</sup> In his talk, Cramer mapped the formation of the alt-right, a segment of rightwing ideologies originally presenting themselves as a more radical alternative to mainstream conservatism in the US. Across multiple axes of analysis, he meticulously traced the connections between Trump, Breitbart, the /pol/ section of the 4chan imageboard, nazi movements, neo-reactionaries, white supremacist, vaporwave and "fashy" (fashionably fascist) aesthetics and the proliferation of rightwing memes (such as Pepe the Frog or Social Justice Warrior) among online subcultures.

In the context of discussions on the rise of the alt-right online, one ongoing debate pertains to the critical understanding of certain platforms, such as 4chan, 8chan and some specific Reddit channels, that over time became crucial nodes of the new rightwing formations. While Cramer argues that these online environments and the subcultures they (re)produce should, since their very inception, be understood as fascist, others (such as Gabriella Coleman<sup>13</sup>) argue against this view, putting forward the idea that in the early days these new online spaces of aggregation, predominantly appealing for a kind of geek-masculinity, should be seen as having concomitant and diverse political potentials; they are seen as being, in other words, *protofascist* spaces of sociality.<sup>14</sup>

11 On the functionality of 4chan's "bump," see: Hine, Gabriel, et al. "Kek, cucks, and god emperor trump: A measurement study of 4chan's politically incorrect forum and its effects on the web." *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*. Vol. 11. No. 1. 2017. On the biases of YouTube's recommendation algorithms, see: Ribeiro, Manoel Horta, et al. "Auditing radicalization pathways on YouTube." *Proceedings of the 2020 conference on fairness, accountability, and transparency*, 2020.

12 Florian Cramer, "Alt-Right," lecture, 18 November 2016, Rotterdam, Piet Zwart Institute & Creating 010. Another version of this lecture was delivered with the title "Meme Wars: Internet Culture and the 'Alt Right'" at FACTLiverpool on March 7, 2017. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiNYuhLKzi8> (accessed 2 February 2023).

13 Gabriella E. Coleman, "Phreaks, Hackers and Trolls." *The Social Media Reader* (2012): 99–119.

14 The debate on how to properly name the contemporary far right is ongoing and broadly divided in two camps, some highlighting the continuities with historical nazi-fascism, others stressing the elements of novelty or discontinuity. Theorists such as Wendy Brown, Nancy Fraser, Chantal Mouffe, Robert Paxton, and Slavoj Žižek, to name a few, insist on the differences, preferring to name the contemporary condition as one of "new authoritarianism," "libertarian authoritarianism," "reactionary neoliberalism," "rightwing populism," "the populist radical right." Others, including Noam Chomski and Henry Giroux, urge to understand the new right as a properly fascist formation.

This peculiar performative function of the suffix *proto-* when discussing fascism is worth unpacking here. Protofascism can be understood both *temporally*, as describing cultural beliefs and practices that somehow precede fascism proper, hence leading to it; or, it can be understood *spatially*, as referring to those cultural forms that are adjacent to fascism, those that, while sharing some traits in common with fascism, remain however distinctively positioned (and could be also described as para-fascist). When addressing a subculture, an ideology or a practice as protofascist then, we can engage in the production of different political subjectivations. Because while adding *proto-* to fascism invites to pay attention to the differences between a given subculture/practice/ideology and fascism proper, the focus on the differences can be utilised to either forge new allegiances and tactics, in order to respond to what is unique in any given configuration; or, vice versa, to minimise the political urgency or gravity of the situation, to keep at bay feelings of fear, despair, shame or guilt.

In this sense, Felix Guattari's understanding of fascism as a "kind of libidinal disposition that exists in the broadest social field"<sup>15</sup> and yet constantly generates its own crystallisations is a useful insight. If we take protofascism to describe a set of conditions of reproduction and production in which the only thing *we* can share is misery, resentment, existential and political scarcity, then defascistisation will correspond to gestures of invitations to partake in a different *we*. Perhaps, a *we* in the plural.

Protofascist formations, moments, tendencies are everywhere, from the rampant militarism embedded in State mechanisms to contemporary bourgeois life-styles (especially in the gentrifying version that Tom Whyman calls "cupcake fascism:"<sup>16</sup> there is much misery in a continued enforced performance of infantile cheerfulness). Protofascism seeps through the systems of exclusion of corporate academia and into the domestic violences of familial heteronormativity. On a macro scale, its intensity is felt most acutely in the genocidal border politics of the "white worlds" and at a more micro, intimate level, we find it again in the ubiquitous spread of psychopathologies. While protofascist formations are creeping in everywhere, they

<sup>15</sup> Felix Guattari, "Everybody Wants to Be a Fascist," in: *Chaosology. Texts and Interviews 1972–1977* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 156.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Whyman, "Cupcake Fascism: Gentrification, Infantilisation and Cake," *Critical Legal Thinking* (CLT), 4 April 2014. <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2014/04/04/cupcake-fascism-gentrification-infantilisation-cake/> (accessed 4 February 2023).

are already implicating us in the conditions that might spawn fascism in the future. Thus political postures of individual ethical purity—predicated on a fundamental shaming of the “fascist other”—will most probably fail *us*, as they are predicated upon a distance from the violence of the fascist problem that is impossible to maintain. Rather than starting with a quest for antifascist identities, then, we would rather engage in processes of detoxification from its creeping tenets that already implicate us.

Moreover, when we take to be protofascist all that nourishes (and prepares the terrain for) fascist power to crystalise within given institutions and practices, then we can better delineate the territory of intervention for performance and theatre production, understood technologies of affect, in Suely Rolnik’s terms, making the body reverberate with either vital, germinating forces, or abusive, toxic forms of domination, making space for what is common “through resonance between embryos of worlds.”<sup>17</sup>

## **Gestures of Defascistisation—2**

### **Contrapoints—How do we unmake a fascist?**

Contrapoints is a self-described “entertainer”<sup>18</sup> and one of the first and most iconic Youtubers belonging to the LeftTube constellation of content creators. Following her enduring success, she has been regarded as the proof that, alas, the Left can indeed meme,<sup>19</sup> quenching a widespread anxiety generated by the aforementioned rise of the alt-right online in the last two decades. But while her work has attracted much attention in discussions focused on digital cultures, her performance—primarily an antifascist theatrical production—has received less critical engagement on its own terms. Here, we want to follow this path as we zoom into one of her most memorable performances, a video focused on the online subculture of incels—or

17 Suely Rolnik, “The Spheres of Insurrection: Suggestions for Combating the Pimping of Life,” *e-flux*, Issue 86, 2017, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/86/163107/the-spheres-of-insurrection-suggestions-for-combating-the-pimping-of-life/> (accessed 20 February 2023).

18 Kae Goode interview with Natalie Wynn, “Contrapoints Fights Fascism With Facts, Humor—and an Impressive Costume Closet,” *Salty*. 18 September 2019. <https://www.saltyworld.net/contrapoints/> (accessed 4 February 2023).

19 This is a reference to the expression “the Left can’t meme,” typically used to mock left-oriented online content as being embarrassingly bad and not able to be funny. The website *Know Your Meme* attributes its first appearance to an anonymous post on the /pol/ (Politically Incorrect) board on 4chan in 2016, during the US presidential election. The sentence keeps circulating as a pointer to the debate we also refer to in the text.

involuntary celibates—where Natalie Wynns (real name of Contrapoints)—a trans woman—publicly admits that she not only empathises, but identifies with the libidinal drive of millions of socially resentful teenage boys. She did so in front of 5.4 million of viewers (at the time of writing), in a performative speech delivered in her usual style, with impeccable rhetoric and lavish make-up, surrounded by baroque props.

We can only speculate how she must have felt, of course, in scripting, delivering and then uploading the performance. We can imagine that staging a parallel between the sociality of incels and that of people during gender-transition, in that they all posted their images onto a forum in order to get “honest” feedback on their looks, was no easy task. It must have raised fears of ending up attacked, not so much by alt-right haters, but by others on the left. Online, protected by anonymity, friendly fire can get fierce and unforgiving. Contrapoints staged an act of transgression that could potentially piss off many on both sides of the political divide: re-humanising the fascist creep by inviting him to consider how similar his pain is to that of trans people. Incels and trans people go online to visit channels where they get crude commentaries on their appearances, according to Contrapoints, share the desire to confront their pain. Except that after a while, it might happen that the pain of self-loathing, now refracted through “objective” evaluations offered by strangers, is the only feeling that feels real, she warns in her speech. The pain of shame becomes, paradoxically, the point of access to sociality, to a *we* shared with others in a similar predicament: to a *we* in the plural.

Through her performance, Contrapoint draws us—progressive, left-leaning viewers of her video and incels (several declared to have been changed as a consequence<sup>20</sup>)—into a communal affective world. For a moment, through her performance, she is able to suspend our common judgement and mutual repulsion to invite us into a *we* that is capacious and, dare we say it, communal. Perhaps it is worth remarking here that the world of incel culture is a circus of cruelties, where alpha males and chads, those who are fuck-worthy, are hunted down by “females” who are described as desirable as they are manipulative. According to incel culture, society is a pyramid,

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Marantz, “The Stylish Socialist Who Is Trying to Save YouTube from Alt-Right Domination,” *The New Yorker*, 19 November 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-stylish-socialist-who-is-trying-to-save-youtube-from-alt-right-domination> (accessed 6 February 2023).



and incels are at the bottom of it. Yet Contrapoints invites the viewers into a strange closeness with this set of repulsive beliefs and feelings, making them familiar (a reverse Brecht?). And only when this possibility of coexistence between the suffering of an incel and the suffering of a trans woman has been established, only then, she takes responsibility for operating a clear cut as to where our empathy must, politically at least, end: this is the point when incels cannot bring themselves to extend the self-pity they experience to others, specifically, to those females (to employ their own language) they can only conceive as not fully human. This is the point in which incel culture must be revealed as the dangerous misogynistic, protofascist scene that it is, an online milieu that has produced the most teenage school shooters in recent years.<sup>21</sup>

Contrapoints' performances are thought for and function within internet spaces of fruition, and as such, they exist in an environment that is primed to promote fascist content and protofascist behaviours.<sup>22</sup> In the 2010s, many content producers on the rightwing spectrum were quick to embrace the possibilities offered by the newly formed social media sphere, taking advantage of its algorithmic biases. With a sense of dismay, many on the Left experienced a sense of impotence in witnessing how rightwing subcultures seemed better equipped to embrace pop formats that could quickly spread their venomous messages. The production quality of much of this content was far from polished. To the contrary: memes were often low-quality, with obvious cut & paste montages of images and hand drawings; video would be amateurly shot, with improvised speeches and plenty of messy moments. The alt-right aesthetic in this sense emerged from, and put a spin on, the staged amateurism that is dominating mainstream social media content, where one of the keywords for going (and staying) viral is to be "relatable." The difference introduced in fascist

21 The number of perpetrators of mass shootings that self-identify as incels has been steadily increasing since the mid-2010s, to the extent that the movement is now considered a terrorist threat. Notable cases include: Elliot Rodger (perpetrator of the 2014 Isla Vista killings), Chris Harper-Mercer (perpetrator of the 2015 Umpqua Community shooting), Alek Minassian (perpetrator of the 2018 Toronto van attack), Nikolas Cruz (perpetrator of the 2018 shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School), Scott Beierle (perpetrator of the 2018 killings at Hot Yoga Tallahassee studio), Armando Hernandez Jr. (perpetrator of the 2020 shooting at Westgate Entertainment District, Glendale, Arizona).

22 Angela Nagle. *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (London: John Hunt Publishing, 2017); Munn, Luke. "Alt-Right Pipeline: Individual Journeys to Extremism Online." *First Monday*, 2019; Roose, Kevin. "The Making of a YouTube Radical." *New York Times*, 8 June 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/08/technology/youtube-radical.html> (accessed 6 February 2023).

subcultures online was the choice of a number of targets for jokes not perceived as being permissible in mainstream “politically correct” conversations. With a typical move (typical at least since the time of racism-infused American variety shows, or 1930s cabaret) the butts of these jokes are the most stigmatised and powerless members of society; yet, the act of joking about these constituencies would be framed as an act of liberation from oppression: we can finally say what we think.

The irony is that this fascist content explosion and fruition found many on the Left largely unprepared and mostly puzzled. One of the points of discussion thus became how fascist content largely remains unscathed by counter-arguments, even when backed up with evidence and sound logical argumentations. The libidinal force of fascist content does not derive from rational reasoning, but erupts from its affective and performative qualities (as per Guattari). How to respond to this, asked the Left (if there was ever a fictional figurative “we” that we are allowed to invoke, please let “the Left” be the one). The problem was and largely continues to be, can we, as the left, meme? Meaning: can we produce content that is equally viral, that can gain as many followers, that can be consumed as casually in this economy of attention? Can we retaliate against those who bully us by making fun of us? Can we make fun of them, without becoming them? The problem is not as banal as it might seem at first glance. Because this is not simply a problem of style of communication, but one of conditions of production and social reproduction of the militant antifascist Left, where many who would indeed possess the necessary skills to produce meme-able and affectively-charged content are in fact trained into different sets of tastes and values, and are invested into producing culture in different styles (this is true of written text, as well as performing arts and visual aesthetics).

In this context and in this moment, there she enters: Contrapoints. Someone stereotypically Left, a queer trans woman living in NYC, a philosophy-major dropout from a prestigious North American programme, surviving precariously in the gig economy of the cultural sector. And yet not only can she “meme,” that is, engage with current populist/popular topics of interest in online spaces, but she is also able to recombine different elements into her own distinctive performance style. While she does mock a number of rightwing ideas and personalities (most famously Jordan Peterson), she succeeds in not becoming one of them because in her videos she also finds ways to make fun of *us*. Of the microfascisms and rigidities,

contradictions and postures that characterise people on the Left. For example, among the various dispositives Contrapoints uses to achieve this effect, there are the debates staged between her multiple persona, each representing a specific political positionality.

In her performative practice, Contrapoints seemingly goes against most of the rules for viral content production. The aesthetic of her videos is anything but “girl next door accidentally shooting a selfie,” but a phantasmagoria of costumes, wigs and make-up, poses and props, in the best of camp traditions. She quotes books and philosophers at length, never giving in to the simplification of complex answers, taking her time (her videos are often over 40 minutes long) to deliver rigorous argumentations, interspersed with witty remarks and theatrical cocktail-making intermezzos. In doing so, she also renders explicit the labour that underpins both her looks and fictional ambiances, and the acumen of her discourse, for which she had to prepare and study, going against the feigned spontaneism dominating social media.

Perhaps the speeches of Contrapoints will be remembered in the future as already belonging to an institution yet to be named, a layer institution, one made of contact zones, where commentary and debates are the currency. Yet it is not an agora nor a theatre proper nor a voting chamber, but a place from where it might become possible to think and disagree publicly based on a notion of “public sphere” that is very different from the one through which Eurocentric modernity thought the world during the last centuries, and in which theatre, somehow, at least since Athens, ended up becoming the emblematic space of political representation.

### **Gestures of Defascistisation—3**

#### **Catarina and her beauties**

We are sitting in a theatre called Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, in Paris, in October 2022. We are surrounded by strangers: theatre-goers attending a show in the Festival d’Automne: a piece called *Catarina e a Beleza de Matar Fascistas* (*Catarina and the Beauty of Killing Fascists*), written and directed by Tiago Rodrigues, at the time freshly nominated director of the Festival d’Avignon, and previously, (at the time this show premiered in Lisbon) director of the National Theatre in Portugal. The first

thing we are confronted with, sitting in the uncountable theatre seats for the long duration of the show, is beauty: beauty features within the very title of the show, nesting on the dark walls of that theatre, an historical monument, both in terms of architecture and in terms of theatre history; beauty characterises the striking splendour of the stage set in front of us. The show, we notice, from the start convokes on stage the ghosts of that particular idiom which is theatre, or rather relies upon them to construct a certain theatrical intelligibility: the show, somehow, keeps together both Chekhov and Brecht, winking at a possibility of recognition that here and there lurks onto the scene. Chekhov shapes in our memories particular associations surrounding the circumstance of a big family gathered in a country house, portrayed on a stage, Brecht leads our gaze onto bodies and speeches often separated from each other, onto the headphones that a few of the actors wear, onto points of views multiplied, onto characters being characters only to then reveal themselves as “not characters,” after all. Indeed, everyone in this “play” is called and dressed in the same way: as Catarina. The latter is, in fact, the main ghost haunting this particular stage, so much so that one would be tempted to think of her as Hamlet’s father, in the narrative logic of the show: the absent one, who is structurally the motor of any action.

Except, Catarina is not a character, but an actual historical figure, who Portuguese spectators would surely recognise: Catarina Efigénia Sabino Eufémia was an antifascist woman, an agricultural worker, who was killed during a workers’ strike in May 1954 in Portugal, by a lieutenant of the Guarda Nacional Republicana, and later became an icon of Portuguese antifascism. In the show, Catarina was the best friend of the great-grandmother, founding figure of the family, who vindicated the murder of Catarina, her comrade, by killing the man who was responsible for it: her husband, who witnessed that murder and did not prevent it. That first act of killing was to become the legacy the great-grandmother would leave to her family: as the letter she dictated to her daughter on the day of the killing, ritually re-read by the family honouring every anniversary of that landmark act, made clear, the murder marked the gestation of a specific form of antifascism, which all her descendants were invited to embrace:

*I promise: every year, even if for a day, I will rebel in her name. I promise: as long as I live, on the day my Catarina was killed, a fascist who had done nothing at the fall of a woman will collapse.*<sup>23</sup>

All her descendants, she continued, were to keep Catarina's memory alive by performing an act of revolt against the very system that assassinated her, a system which pre-existed and surely would survive that moment: fascism. Somehow contrary to the individual, father-to-son relation instituted by the presence of Hamlet's father in our theatrical memory, Catarina's ghost, mediated through the ghost of the great-grandmother, is the bearer of a message that is immediately collective: it is not a matter of individual revenge, the blood of the dead person will never be fully redeemed, it will not take the form of an heroic act. It will be the steady, long-term commitment to a state of alert against fascism, to the re-enactment of a mission that is never the same, and yet always is: preventing fascism to continue abusing our lives, and making our bodies disappear. In accordance with this powerful matrilinear legacy, the offspring of the family kept alive the tradition: taking on her name and dressing in traditional harvester costume, every year on the anniversary of Catarina's murder, a fascist—and more specifically, a fascist who can be considered directly responsible for harming women, through direct actions or political decisions—was to be kidnapped, brought to the countryside and ritually murdered. The body would be later buried in the soil where allegedly the great-grandmother had planted, with her husband's corpse, the first seed of antifascist resistance.

The show sets the scene on the night of one such anniversary, in the far-away-yet-so-close year 2028, when the great-granddaughter, the newly initiated Catarina, is about to commit the murder of a deputy of a fascist party, whom she has previously kidnapped following all usual family instructions. While the family prepares to celebrate the ritual cheerfully, with wine and good food, the new Catarina slowly starts to question the ritual of justice she has inherited and is about to implement. To the consternation and rage of her own mother, to the encouragement of her relatives, she can only respond with an argument: her own way to honour her great-grandmother's legacy is to act against injustice, but she will not kill. Slowly, she begins to question the use of violence as a viable mode to fight fascism, and steadily

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Ana Pais, "To Kill or Die For," *Performance Research*, 27:2, 2022, 84.

takes herself out of the capacious I, of the enduring we instituted by the great-grandmother, which every year was ritually re-lived in the bodies of her descendants. The new Caterina's dilemma grows throughout the piece, until the inevitable climax. When the moment of killing arrives, and the deputy is tied on an altar-like stage set, the new Catarina refuses to do it, hence deserting the family's legacy. Her younger sister (not yet come of age to become a Catarina, but raised in the same family) steps onto the scene and takes the gun from her sister's hands. At that point, the latter steps up, offering her body to protect the body of the fascist, to be killed in his stead. In a very fast turn of events, punctuated by gun shots, all members of the family (except one, performing the function of the narrator) are killed on stage. Shortly after, the fascist deputy liberates himself from his captivity, and walks to the front of the stage. There, he delivers a very long political speech. It is now the moment after elections, and he is speaking as an elected politician. His party has won, and he can finally thank his voters for having endorsed his party's uncompromised political programme: a nationalist, racist, xenophobic programme which—although never employing the descriptor fascism—is clearly not dissimilar to the fascism in power during Portugal's dictatorship. Moreover, it is a speech that also resembles almost verbatim the words uttered in recent years by contemporary rightwing politicians. Suddenly, the utter symbolic language, the dystopian phantasmagoria of antifascism portrayed in the Chekhovian scenario framing the show, leaves no room for fiction: these words are all too realistic, all too close, all too possible. As Ana Pais has pointed out, the speech is a "populist medley". Not unlike many speeches of Bolsonaro, or Trump, the fascist deputy speaks on the stage-become-podium invoking "freedom," and addressing those who suffer, the disenfranchised, the dispossessed, the working class.<sup>24</sup> His political agenda pivots on fear and resentment, on misogyny and militarism, dragging in the sympathy of his supporters by offering them in sacrifice the ghostly presence of all those who do not belong, and who will be treated as the scapegoat of any crisis. It offers in sacrifice, one may suggest, all the Catarinas out there, who will slowly cease not only to exist, but even to be remembered.

Pais describes the audience's reaction to the fascist monologue, in the presentations of the play in Portugal, in 2021, as visceral and powerful: spectators started to speak back, to boo, to insult the fascist deputy, to leave the theatre. Shouts such as "*fascismo*

<sup>24</sup> Pais, *ibid.*, 86.

*nunca mais!*” suffocated the end of the speech, so much so that the actor had to abandon the performance style he had previously adopted—a toned-down realism—to adopt an excessive, Mussolini-style theatricality:<sup>25</sup> almost to put fascism into a recognisable historical drag, and further mark the distance between himself and the character, as though to reassert that they were still, after all, in a theatre.

In Paris, in October 2022, the reaction was different: the monologue lasted a good half an hour, a painstaking duration which seemed unnecessary, in theatrical terms, and therefore all too necessary to endure, in political terms. It was followed—at the end of the piece—by a standing ovation. Obviously, the audience’s praise was not addressed to the speech, but rather to the play we had just witnessed, nodding to its sophisticated political message. We all applauded, and exited the theatre with a sense of relief, almost, to be in the fresh air and at a distance from that speech, to remind ourselves that we were in the reassuring fiction of a theatre. Except, perhaps because we witnessed the piece only a few weeks after Meloni’s government had installed itself in Italy, perhaps because this was the time of the complicated course of the last Brazilian elections (in which Lula succeeded to win against Bolsonaro by frighteningly short margins), there was little solace we could find in theatrical fiction, and even less in the performative potential of a “we” that a sympathising, like-minded audience would possibly offer, through any form of collective reaction such as interrupting the speech itself, or singing antifascist songs. We felt a resistance to join that performative we, almost embarrassed by a certain faith in the political potential of that theatricality.

No one in Paris interrupted the speech, but this is not the point: we found ourselves wondering whether they, whether we, would have indeed taken the gun and killed the deputy, in order to prevent the speech itself from taking place. The play did not resolve this question, but powerfully posed it, putting everyone in the uncomfortable, unfamiliar position of having to answer it, at least within oneself. The paper planes that arrived to spectators, in that circumstance, were to be deciphered: how are we, the spectators, addressed in the play? What to make of it if we refuse to performatively enact the available roles of an infuriated audience (who do not tolerate listening to fascist words in a theatre) or to give ourselves over to the post-show relief, as citizens who do, as a matter of fact, tolerate fascism in the

<sup>25</sup> Pais, *ibid.*, 87.

parliament? Are we the antifascists witnessing our own historical defeat? Are we the ones who have unlearned how to kill a fascist? Are we the people who sit at a table and try to discuss, with always more fragile arguments, against those deputies who are smiling and bringing fascism back into power?

What to make of the ghost of Catarina, what to make of the ghost of our great-grandmothers, what to make of the ghosts of those who did embrace the guns to kill fascists?

### **The Defascistisation of Everyday Life**

In the essay "Everybody Wants to Be a Fascist," Félix Guattari articulates the idea of fascism as a certain union of love and death drives (Eros and Thanatos),<sup>26</sup> that is: in order to access love (for oneself, for others), one must embrace the idea that it will be necessary to eliminate, violently if necessary, all those who we cannot bring ourselves to love. As a psychoanalyst, activist and philosopher, he approached the question of how to fight fascism, rejecting the distinctions between macro and micro political aspects. It is worth dwelling on two passages from his dense text here:

*Alongside the fascism of the concentration camps, which continue to exist in numerous countries, new forms of molecular fascism are developing: a slow burning fascism in familialism, in school, in racism, in every kind of ghetto, which advantageously makes up for the crematory ovens. Everywhere the totalitarian machine is in search of proper structures, which is to say, structures capable of adapting desire to the profit economy. We must abandon, once and for all, the quick and easy formula: "Fascism will not make it again." Fascism has already "made it," and it continues to "make it." It passes through the tightest mesh; it is in constant evolution, to the extent that it shares in a micropolitical economy of desire itself inseparable from the evolution of the productive forces. Fascism seems to come from the outside, but it finds its energy right at the heart of everyone's desire.<sup>27</sup>*

26 Felix Guattari, "Everybody Wants to Be a Fascist," in *Chaosophy. Texts and Interviews 1972–1977* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 169.

27 Guattari, *ibid.*, 171.



Later, as part of his responses in the after-talk discussion, Guattari adopts a tone that is only half-joking (“*era serio e rideva*”), and offers the sketch of an antifascist intervention:

*I think that it was Bassi who proposed—if I have understood it correctly—a program inspired by David Cooper which consists of making love everywhere, as an alternative to getting mired in discourse. Of course, I’m in agreement with this! But perhaps it is necessary to clarify that “making love” is not restricted to interpersonal relations. There are all kinds of ways to make love: one can make it with flowers, with science, with art, with machines, with social groups...*<sup>28</sup>

The performative gestures we have discussed in this text are, in a way, peculiar examples of performance as a radical technology of love-making, not at all in a sentimental way but, rather, in a thoroughly political one. It is so because in all these three cases—the EZLN paper planes sent to the soldiers, Contrapoints’ reaching out to incels, and Rodrigues’ staged extreme rightwing address, alongside the ghosts of our Catarinas, that dissolves the illusion of being confronted with fiction—an invitation is launched into the air, or literally broadcasted on air: an invitation to the addressees to “perform” in a role that was unknown to them, unfamiliar, undesirable until the performance itself. The addressees (spectators? viewers? passersby?) are invited not to crash a party, but somehow to be the guests of honour: profascists, the military or else all of those who never had to pick up a weapon to kill a fascist, are invited to somehow “relate”—and in so doing, to become protagonists of a different story. The content of these addresses is, indeed, “relatable.” What changes is that the relation we are invited to wave is no longer connecting us through the status quo and reciprocally accepted, stereotyped roles, but it is an opening to a poetics of affinities that is able to stop—or at least to hamper—fascist violence in its tracks, to literally drag it off-track.

The Zapatista invitation to the soldiers was to engage with the content of the paper planes, a revolutionary call. Contrapoints’ invitation to incels to put themselves in the high-heeled shoes of a trans woman, sharing an affect with her, being entertained by her sophisticated fun, likewise carried a revolutionary content. While in these two examples the invitation is addressed to specific, designated targets of all

28 Guattari, *ibid.*, 172.

too real fascist threats, in the attempt to hail their current forms of life and transform them, Catarina's ending is an invitation to radicality addressing those in a state of relative ease vis-a-vis the death menace of rising fascism, confronting the easy we of sharing an aesthetic experience with the enduring dilemma of what it means to be an antifascist. The thought of picking up a gun to kill fascists might not be a palatable action for many. Yet the discomfort of this thought does not dispense any of us from having to consider what other available options might be out there that can be up to the radicality in the contemporary juncture, in which fascism is taking power over the imagination as well as in governments.

Finally, the three examples we chose to think through the question of an antifascist performance practice today allow us to think metonymically around sites of production of antifascism, marked by three different registers of performativity as "love-making:" the scenes of direct action emerging from social movements and struggles; the online spaces of sociality and infotainment; and the theatre houses and festivals of capital cities. Each of these spaces is traversed by microfascisms and is enacted in a world where fascism is becoming more entrenched on the macropolitical level too. Each of these sites is also a site of gestation, where we can learn a grammar of gestures towards an antifascist horizon. The space of "love," echoing Guattari's use of the term in that passage, is here the space of a common affect unexpectedly placed in common, making the space of coexistence—the space of the jungle, the online space, the theatre—therefore a temporary common space, an intersection of transmission, if not of communication. The transformation these performances might potentially bring about is forever held in the potential: the possibility of a soldier picking up a paper plane and reading it rather than destroying it, and deciding to join the struggle for emancipation; the possibility that one, or countless, incels could for the first time "relate" with a trans woman, embrace her camp wit, create space for affects other than loath and rage; the possibility that one day, a silent majority, held together by its acquiescent posturing, might instead invent and perform together new gestures of partisan affinity.