

issue #3

UNMASKING the performing arts on cancelling & rest



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How To Read This Zine

This zine is all about un//masking - the artistic practice of expressing our neurodivergent traits. This zine shares research, reflections, tools and open questions around neurodivergence, un//masking and disability justice.

It has been created specifically for and by neurodivergent performers, in order to make these mostly in//visible disabilities more present on stages.

These zines are queer collages of experiences, scores, methodologies, artist examples and tons of citations - presented as bubbly, exciting and confusing as my neurodivergent brain.

A space for open, unanswered questions, daring and funny tryouts and a space for crip failure.

In the spirit of crippling / glitching / neuro-queering and un//masking the system together.

Zine setup: This zine is part of a series. All the base knowledge around un//masking is also extensively discussed in zine #1.

Jump around! There is no need to read the zine in series or each zine issue from a-z, please give yourself permission to read this zine in whatever way suits you. To make jumping around easier, some theories or thoughts might be partially repeated.

Glossary Attempt: To contextualize how I understand the terms I use in the zines, and how they stand in reference to each other, I made a printable glossary-attempt-mind- map for download.

Un//masking is a practice and a methodology specifically created for neurodivergent performers, supporting them in making more neurodivergent-friendly choices. The whole zine series is based on researching un//masking for performers and what that could look like on and off stage for different individuals.

Toolbox: The zines are set up as a toolbox to collaboratively un//learn different ways of un//masking. The goal is to find ways of integrating them into our stage performances - or discover ways in which we might have already integrated them.

Transdisciplinary: Each zine is a toolbox, with practical examples, which are gathered across the performing arts such as theatre, music, art performances, drag performances, comedy shows or literature readings. Each field has different conditions (e.g. performance length, kind of audience, funding structures, scene standards). Not all the tools proposed might fit to your practice, so just take what speaks to you <3

Who is I? For most of the texts, I is Lovis, a white, neuroqueer, nonbinary performer, drag artist & DJ from Zurich. A few years ago they started their own un//masking practice: Lovis regularly facilitates un//masking workshops and organised the un//masking research LAB with 10 other neuroqueer performers, which is often cited in these zines. Lovis is a late-diagnosed neurodivergent person, working with a neurodiversity-affirming approach which is an extension of the social model of disabilities. Sometimes I are other people, but in that case you will always find their name cited.

Un//masking my writing: In the spirit of un//masking my own writing and challenging my perfectionism, there might be typos or things I misunderstood at the time of writing, While I am happy about feedback, I hope you are as generous with me, as I am trying to be gentle with myself.

Bibliography: All the bibliography and some further resources from zines #1 - #4 can be found at the very end of zine #1. While most pictures are sourced, the collages contain original pictures gathered from many different magazines and flyers, which are - as it often is the case in collaging - not sourced.

sCRIPts: Are little scores / instructions written by different neurodivergent artists to inspire other neurodivergent artists to un//mask their own work. You will find them scattered across all zines, and zine #4 is fully dedicated to sCRIPts.

Reworking: Feel free to further reuse all the ideas of this zine! If you use sCRIPts, methodologies, text passages or full images, we would love to be referenced.

Glossary Attempt A Poster

I really struggled writing a glossary, I felt constricted by the format and nervous to do it wrong. Given that activist language is always in discussion and changes very quickly - as it should - it seems important to explain some terms and contextualise how I understand them.

In order to give my mind-mappy brain an adequate form of expression, please look at the A2 Poster I have created. It will show how the concepts relate to each other.

Words in the glossary attempt:

Ableism
Access
Aesthetics of Access
Bodymind
Crip
Crip Theory
Crip Spacetime
Disability Justice
Internalized Ableism
Intersectionality

Masking
Neurodivergent
Neurodiverse
Neurodiversity Movement
Neurodiversity Paradigm
Neuroqueer
Pathology Paradigm
sCRIPt
Social Model Of Disability
Unmasking
un//masking

Zine Overview

Masking describes the coping strategy of hiding neurodivergent traits to conform to societal norms, which consumes a lot of energy. Unmasking is the empowering but vulnerable process of shedding those different masks.

Building on these concepts, I propose un//masking as a neuro-queering practice - specifically created to question the tensions and practices of un//masking in the performing arts. The // represents the constant fluidity and tension between the nonbinary concepts of masking and unmasking¹.

In This Zine I first talk about the experiences of the un//masking LAB, a 7 day research I organised with 8 neuroqueer performers to talk about un//masking. I talk about designing spaces for neurodivergent people how many people had to cancel attending for a variety of reasons, bringing up the topic of cancelling as a form of un//masking.

- The next part is about inviting more rest into our lives by questioning the societal idea of the “passionate artist”, talking about ADHD & autistic burnout, and challenging my own perfectionism.
- I then move onto talking about rest as a form of resistance against the neoliberal and ableist system, introducing different forms of rest.
- The zine then explores the challenges of cancelling (e.g. financial pressure and “letting people down”) through the experiences of the people who participated in the LAB.
- We then propose a collective reframing of rest, a cancel culture, shifting away from cancelling as something negative, and reimagining presence and attendance in the performance space.

¹ You can find more on the basis of un//masking in the glossary and issue #1.

- The zine then shows examples of how artists already practice participation through cancellation.
- In the last part, there is a call for institutional change, providing cancellation negotiation tips.
- Finally, we share a manifesto which you can use as foundation to kick off a discourse on cancelling with your local institutions, funders and venues.

The Becoming of Un//masking

Just like Judith Butler I believe that everything is a performance. As a late-diagnosed person with ADHD I have been masking my entire life - as well as performing cis-womanhood for a long time. After feeling shy to claim the terms neurodivergent and crip for myself at first, I started to identify with disability discourses and crip theory a few years ago around the early 2020's. The term “unmasking” had just started floating around more visibly in Switzerland (with still all the sources in English).

During my transdisciplinary master studies at the Zurich University of the Arts I started a more practical research about un//masking. I increasingly explored my own un//masking and started bringing a carpet to class to avoid chairs and was shocked about how much more I could concentrate on the content of the lessons.

I started thinking about un//masking as a practice and how to talk about it, and then slowly to regularly facilitate un//masking workshops. For my master thesis in transdisciplinarity in the arts at ZHdK I researched in depth about disability justice, neuroqueering, disability as method and un//masking. Not only in books, research papers and magazines, but also in zines, on instagram and amongst artists with what I considered un//masking practices.

In 2025 I received some funding and support to organise an un//masking LAB at the Theatre Gessnerallee Zürich to invite 8 neuroqueer performers to gather what un//masking in the performing arts can look like - on stage and in the creation and promotion process, in collective settings, institutional settings and as a solo performer.

My goal was to gather all these ideas and existing practices and - together with my extensive research - create an un//masking zine to share the existing knowledge with other neurodivergent performers. Many of the findings here are based on these exchanges in the LAB and I am excited to see how they are gonna spread further.

A Personal Experience To Start With

I was ready for the un//masking LAB. I took a lot of time and care to curate a room. Greatly inspired by a Relaxed Performance Lab² I attended in the same room at Gessnerallee Zürich, I took my time to make sure we had daylight in this theatre room. I tried to take measures to get rid of the echo, made sure we had alternative seating arrangements with beanbags, and decorated the room with flowers.

Claire Cunningham, a disabled performer using crutches once said in a crip lab³ I was invited to:

“I am an expert of the ground. I look at it often, I study it, I know when it’s slippery and how it is inclined.”

² Credits to Noa Winter, Lea Gockel and Ramona Unterberg.
³ Credits to Nina Mühlemann & Edwin Ramirez, aka Criptonite.

I left that Lab with a new understanding of myself as an expert of space. I am sensitive to light, sound, echo, and the overall feels of spaces. While this sensitivity is part of my disability, it is also making me a great creator of spaces. I often intuitively know what spaces need to feel cozy, restful and inviting to neurodivergent and neurotypical people. In hindsight, my love for cozy spaces to linger in is probably the reason I studied hotel management.

While we were setting up, I kept getting messages from the attendees, reporting that their chronic pains were flaring up, they caught the flu, had unexpected care duties or their mental health wasn’t good enough to leave the house.

One participant currently writing their PHD told me:

“I would love to be there, but I can’t. I have so much work and I myself need lots of help to even exist. At this moment it just seems crazy to mask myself to come into a LAB of un//masking. If you are really talking about un//masking, then the fact that I just managed to finally cancel and actually not mask to be there and attend, I think is a matter of un//masking.”

What if we see cancelling, with all that comes with it, as equally important as an effort as showing up?

As people kept cancelling, I started to consider a hybrid format for the LAB. I caught myself: when I created a space that works in person, I created it for me and my own access needs. I fell into the trap of thinking too much about the space, and not enough about different ways of attendance.

As Margaret Price wrote about Crip Spacetime in 2016⁴:

⁴ Margaret Price first wrote about “crip spacetime” in the Canadian Journal of Disability Studies in 2016, within the article “Stories of Methodology: Interviewing Sideways, Crooked, and Crip”. She developed the theory further and wrote the book Crip Spacetime: Access, Failure, and Accountability in Academic Life (2024).

“We are used to thinking of disability as something that can be accommodated through a series of predictable moves: Design the doorways like this, the walls like that, the lights like this. But instead, disability often must be accommodated as it unfolds through interactive spaces (...) Disability as a critical analytic is compelling in part because it manifests in human unpredictability.”

After two LAB days I had gathered further information:

- People would have loved to attend, but couldn't for different reasons. They did however watch recordings of the talks later on.
- People who couldn't be physically in the space could sometimes attend online. Setting up a hybrid format of attendance is necessary to provide access. But it must be kept in mind that it's also more resource heavy for the facilitator, and not accessible for all neurodivergent people⁵.
- Ways to document the LAB for people who couldn't attend it at all are an important part of inclusion, but also a lot of work.
- Even though I created crip time buffers for arrival, as well as lots of breaks, the option to join later in the day or leave early was extremely important - and at the same time a bit disruptive to the group process.
- With people attending and leaving, the group feeling is less active and more outsourced to the organiser / facilitator, in this case me. Decisions that were supposed to be collective end up being taken more often by the facilitator(s).
- Creating spaces to meet, and having analogue forms of documentation might have made things more accessible for me, but it parallelly excludes a lot of people.

⁵ Hybrid events that have a group of people in the space and some people online are very tiring to participate in. Trying to organise (parallel) events that are fully catered to online if you have the resources to do so.

Crip Spacetime means dynamically making things accessible over space and time.

Halfway through the LAB I had an afternoon alone in the room we held the LAB in. While I already knew most people wouldn't be able to attend, one participant went off to look after their child, while another was - inspired by the morning's LAB input - in hyperfocus mode, a neurodivergent trait which I really wanted to encourage. So there I was alone in the space I created for the community.

Sadness overcame me and as the stress of the preparation phase wore off, I felt tired, disappointed and drained.

So I decided to take a nap⁶.

Waking up I spent the rest of the afternoon swimming in a sea of self-pity. Rejection sensitivity - a common trait for many neurodivergent people - hit me hard.

“In such situations, my capacity to sit confidently, easily and in control of my emotions, behaviour and thinking decreases. The fear of potential failure both freezes me and fires me – a white-hot burning up that pushes me to expend more of myself, in panic and in pursuit of control. Instead of steering the situation securely from within, it washes over me, and I am submitted to it; frenetic. Compelled by fears and thoughts, I become unable to care for myself. I push myself hard, beyond limits and towards goals - success is the most important thing.”

- Aby Watson, Disordering Dance

⁶ For Tricia Hersey, sleep is also about radical possibility and creating space for transformation and healing. That's how it felt in that moment.

Over the course of the LAB, I kept encouraging different forms of attendance and cancellation to foster ways of working which are functioning outside of neuronormative, ableist and capitalist structures - so people un//masking by not showing up or working on their own clock is actually “successful”. As much as crippling the LAB worked, it worked in ways which I did not expect. And as much as I keep training my brain to stay open to change, I struggle with unexpected outcomes. “Successful non-attendance” worked, but it worked at the cost of my personal wellbeing. A real disability conundrum. One that we often face when talking about un//masking. It made me feel sad, lonely and rejected, and nothing like the collective neuroqueer joy I was hoping to gain from the week.

“Anyone who cancels probably cancels in the same way thinking, oh shit I wish I could be there but I can’t. I understand you are emotional now, that you are disappointed with the people saying they come and then they cancel, but it has nothing to do with you personally. This is a fact.”

- Kamran Behrouz

That night I restructured my thoughts, my expectations and the LAB itself. Maybe flexibility and fluidity doesn’t mean we can ease through changes without feeling emotional, but rather that we gently caress and hold the feelings, and then slowly and gently invite ourselves to reconsider and remodel. Thanks to the help of my partner, I was able to reframe my viewpoint: people cancelling means that they feel safe to un//mask around me.

Cancelling seemed to be a topic that is inherently linked to un//masking, so let’s explore it.

I changed practical things: I modelled the LAB to work in a more hybrid way and decided to move the documentation into the digital space (through a miro board and a shared google drive folder) rather than working with paper. I also communicated my hope for active and collective exchange to the group more clearly again, while ensuring that this could happen in different ways. And I incorporated the planned, but often forgotten check-ins and check-outs⁷ more actively again, in order to receive the immediate feedback I needed. As with all disability conundrums, it’s important to find time to adapt and negotiate the different needs.

As I was able to let go of certain expectations I had built up, and manifest certain structures that would support me, I eased into the mode of “accommodate as it unfolds”, as Margaret Price said. I just needed a reminder to keep things fluid.

When I shared the challenges with my rejection sensitivity my good friend Eva jokingly said

“Isn’t this what queer people are so known for? Their cancel culture? Maybe we should use this to our advantage.”

And so we did.

In the following LAB - as people continued to cancel, while others showed up - we had a lot of talks in different constellations about cancelling. The topic has resonated with many of the participants and its inherent contradictions and challenges took up a good chunk of our time. This is why I decided to dedicate a whole zine to resting and cancelling.

⁷ A practice to start and end the day with a short round on each participants’ feelings, feedbacks and access needs.

The Show Must Go On...?

"The show must go on
inside my heart is breaking
My make-up may be flaking
But my smile still stays on"

- Queen

"When thinking about resting and cancelling, there is an immediate choir of voices in my head speaking against it. Resting more would mean producing less. "But how?" they howl, "professionalism!" they shout, "money!" they scream, "spoiled!" they whisper."

- Lovis Heuss

When thinking about resting and cancelling, there is an immediate choir of voices in my head speaking against it. Resting more would mean producing less. "But how?" they howl, "professionalism!" they shout, "money!" they scream, "spoiled!" they whisper.

On exchanging on resting and cancelling in the LAB, we established that "not cancelling" is still somehow tied to "success" for many of us, even if we barely make it through or can't really be present. It means we have completed the task at hand, have let nobody down, hence we still have a "function" and a "worth". All those thoughts are inherently rooted in ableist ways of thinking. For many disabled and chronically ill people, resting and cancelling is a huge part of their life - it's not optional, or a luxury. So let's remember that being able to choose when to think about resting and cancelling is a privilege. For many this is part of a constant negotiation, a practiced form of wisdom - one which we can all learn from. Learn to challenge our internalised ableism and our internalized neurotypicality by practicing resting and cancelling as a practice. A practice of un//masking.

"For me, resting and stopping belong together. Resting plays a key role in the question of how I can work while ill and stay healthy. Firstly, resting is not that easy, and secondly, it is a physical practice..."

- Angela Alves, An Interview with Katrin Brehm for Brut Wien

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of warfare."

- Audre Lorde, Cancer Journals

Autistic And ADHD Burnout

Research has extensive and long-term masking can often lead to depression, or what is called "autistic burnout". While the effects of exhaustion are often comparable to a work burnout, autistic burnout often happens as a result of juggling everyday life - mainly induced through having to mask and overcompensate every day. It often happens to late-diagnosed people around the ages of 30 - 60, when masking every day has taken a long-term effect. Nowadays, the term "autistic burnout" has been extended to "autistic and ADHD burnout". And I believe it can be extended to other forms of neurodivergence, as the main factor which creates this kind of burnout is long-term masking. Hence, saying no, resting and cancelling might not only be immediate measures when you are overwhelmed, but also long-term preventive strategies.

"When a person juggles dozens and dozens of responsibilities, we laud them for "having it all", but what happens if they decide they don't want it all, or that the constant juggling isn't worth it? Can we actually respect a person who revokes their consent? Can we see a person as impressive for admitting that they no longer want to carry something they've been shouldering for too long?"

- Devon Price, Laziness Does Not Exist

Autistic and ADHD Burnout

QUICK GUIDE

Causes of Autistic and ADHD Burnout:

sensory overload
executive functioning overload
intense levels of stress
barriers to support/lack of accommodations
increase in demands
sudden or significant changes
suppression of Autistic traits



burnout is often
a result of a
combination of
causes and factors,
not a single event

Signs of Autistic and ADHD Burnout:

inability to regulate	reduced executive functioning
exhaustion & fatigue	more frequent meltdowns
changes in sensory sensitivity	self-care tasks are harder
difficulty with communication	increase in demand avoidance

there is no **standard** timeline for burnout or recovery from burnout

Things to do in **advance**

figuring out your sensory profile
make a burnout recovery plan
stock up on safe/same foods
set up a sensory toolbox
communicate with friends, loved ones, family or support people

Supporting yourself **during**

rest, rest and more rest
reduce as many demands as possible
spend time with your special interests
set up reminders for water and food
support your sensory needs
take a break from social interactions

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Crip Failure & Cripistemology

“Failure - crip failure - might serve the purposes of antiproductivity and rest”

- Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez, Crip Authorship

Let's not forget that, according to the Cambridge dictionary website, performance means: “how well a person, machine, etc. does a piece of work or an activity.” While there are of course uncountable definitions of performance art, I am sure this idea of productivity keeps influencing our idea of performance art in late-stage capitalism.

If we think of un//masking as a way to “fail” neuronormativity, I would like to think of failing as an active practice we do to disrupt a power system. I really enjoyed learning about Cripistemology, Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer's term for “disabled ways of thinking, knowing, and telling.” Which can also be extended to resting and cancelling:

“Cripistemology “extends beyond disability” and makes room for “negativity, failure, hopelessness, and passivity. It is not always about making it. Crippling is not a technical protocol and it does not always “work.”

- Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez, Crip Authorship

“Errors, ever unpredictable, surface the unnameable, point toward a wild unknown. To become an error is to surrender to becoming unknown, unrecognizable, unnamed.”

- Legacy Russel, Glitch Feminism

Perfectionism - The 70% Rule

As a neurodivergent perfectionist, I am scared of failing, because it happens to me constantly with things that other people perceive as “simple”. I know that failing to perform neurotypicality is closely linked to being cast out of neurotypical social settings. So I became very rigid and perfectionist about the things I could control. I guess you could call it an overcompensation.

failure to do everything right
failure to please
failure to complete
failure to perfectionize

Being able to hyperfocus and getting lost in details doesn’t make it any easier for me to soften my perfectionism. A few years ago my good friend Eva tried to unlearn the hustle culture they were exposed to in academia and established the 70% rule in exchange with their therapist.

Through conversations with them, I started to understand that most people didn’t constantly go “all the way”. And that maybe I had a constant need to “prove” others and myself that I am “good enough”.

I generally got very good feedback even if I didn’t meet my set of own standards, so why did I keep wanting to exceed? My therapist and I created this mantra for me to remember when I planned my projects.

I have the tendency to expect 120% out of my projects. It seems silly now that I wouldn’t even stop at 100%. After a few years of training have passed, I can now live with a project that is approximately 80% done. 70% still seems scary to me. So I keep reminding myself when I am still working on details late at night: “70% - remember!?”⁸

⁸ 70% was a good indicator for me, but this number may vary depending on your spoons.

As I went on I kept telling other neurodivergent artists about it, and it has helped a lot of my peers to be easier on themselves. I see this as a form of un//masking, because it allows us to not chase for perfection beyond our energy limits. Getting out of overcompensating mode, I still sometimes go into absolute perfectionism over a detail - a form of un//masking in itself. I do it with more bandwidth though, because I allow myself to “give less” in other situations. A good reminder that un//masking is not about never masking, it’s about knowing your tools at hand, and about choosing them according to your needs and about what brings you joy at any given moment.

Rest Is Resistance

“We can start by collectively asking ourselves why people who plan a little more time for self-care and a little less time for work have such a hard time in our society. And we can think about what it would look like if we all stopped tomorrow. If we stopped ignoring our limits and instead made room for caring and editing.”

- Angela Alves, An Interview with Katrin Brehm for Brut Wien

“Rest is radical because it disrupts the lie that we are not doing enough. It shouts: “No, that is a lie. I am enough. I am worthy now and always because I am here.”

- Tricia Hersey, Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto

“We do not rest to be productive, we rest because it’s a human right to do so.”

- From the participants of the un//masking LAB

“I think that our bodies don’t rest because we don’t allow them to. Resting simply feels very uncomfortable for many people. There are certainly many different reasons for this.

The most important reason seems to me to be this: human bodies internalise the order of their environment. And simply resting has no place in this order, because it does not serve a market and does not generate economic growth. In the logic of the late capitalist order, resting is only useful if it serves to optimise our productivity - in other words, if resting enables us to work even harder, even longer and even more efficiently afterwards.

This unhealthy dynamic inscribes itself into our bodies. Physically, mentally and emotionally. The neoliberal narrative of fairness through performance is, so to speak, embedded in our nervous system.

Many feel lazy, worthless and guilty as soon as they have nothing to do. Resting can also be quite exhausting, because it is not calm at all when you listen to yourself. There is often a whole zoo of unfinished tasks, worries and fears waiting to be endured before things finally calm down.

People often do everything they can to avoid this state. Most even skilfully avoid every second in which they could be alone with themselves. The biggest rest killer is definitely the smartphone. It allows us to escape even the smallest moments of rest that organically arise from everyday life. The nervous system is permanently on fire...”

- Angela Alves, An Interview with Katrin Brehm for Brut Wien

Forms Of Rest

- Sensory rest: Silent walks, soothing scents, loose clothes, cosy socks, deep pleasure.
- Spiritual rest: Meditation, diary writing, prayer, energy healing, full moon rituals.
- Creative rest: Drawing, pompom making, pottery, knitting, cake decorating, reading fantasy novels, trying a new recipe.
- Playful rest: Anything fun and unproductive. Watching a rom-com, playing a board game, doing a puzzle, building a fort.
- A fidgety rest: a slow yet restless shape-shifting - a restless search that is also a calm and continuous becoming⁹.

“This must be flexible so please also resist the desire to become rigid. I have gone months consistently experimenting with a rest practice daily or weekly. The next week I am caught up in an all-nighter to finish a deadline. We are moving in and out of worlds all the time so give beautiful grace to yourself. Start again.”

- Tricia Hersey, Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto

⁹ Xan Dye, I AM ROOTED BUT I FLOW.

The Importance Of Keeping Hobbies

As an artist, I have the tendency to make each creative exploration a part of my art. While it's fulfilling to see the outputs, I believe it makes me be in a constant search for “output”. Being creative no longer feels like rest. I have transformed it into work.

“Along with stealing your imagination and time, grind culture has stolen the ability for pleasure, hobbies, leisure, and experimentation. We are caught up in a never-ending cycle of going and doing.”

- Tricia Hersey, Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto

The Nap Ministry has long written “Rest is Resistance”, and it's time to include this into our practice. But how can rest be centered in a piece of work?

The Resting Artist

I freely summarized and translated a transcript from the performance “Sick Times: Ausruhen und Aufhören als widerständige Praxis”, which the chronically ill German artist Angela Alves sent me in an email exchange:

“Artists are portrayed by society as people who have a very strong inner drive to live out their art. This widespread image portrays artists as people for whom expression through painting, writing or dancing is so essential that they are prepared to make various sacrifices in order to realise this passion. This complete dedication is practically part of the nature of the artist’s personality. As a form of self-realization, an extra, a luxury. Anyone who does not recognise themselves in this professional ethos is not an artist. This narrative glorifies a form of self-exploitation. And that is poison from the perspective of chronic illness.

“You could say that in resting, I reassure myself as a person who does not sacrifice and does not fight to be heard.”

Defying Urgency

“I used to always think if I don’t do this thing or that performance, I will never have another opportunity again. But I’ve realized that that’s not true”

- a participant of the LAB said.

I recently read somewhere that “urgency culture greatly privileges able-bodied, neurotypical, people who fit in or can more readily assimilate to colonial ways of working¹⁰.”

The Cambridge Dictionary says urgency is “the quality of being very important and needing attention immediately”. I believe I often attach more urgency to things than they actually have. In the last years when my mum was increasingly sick with a terminal illness, urgency started to shift. I often asked myself: can I really not do this tomorrow, next week? Maybe I will just do these things in a year or two? Or if I drop this completely? And while I did struggle a lot financially in that time, and still grieve some of the artistic experiences I missed, I also gained a lot of overall trust. Interestingly, most opportunities actually came back at a later date. And often they didn’t even seem so interesting anymore. Whatever felt urgent at the time maybe wasn’t. May this be our call to question the urgencies in the arts a bit more.

¹⁰ Lydia Phillip, Impact Organisations of Nova Scotia.

Planning The Quit - A sCRIPt

At what moment do you want to stop?

Make this question the starting point for any work you begin. Take your situated physical, emotional and mental availability as a baseline and define a moment in time, a moment in space or a moment that you agree with yourself.

Be clear and concrete with your answer(s).

Come back to this question shortly after you've started the work in case you want to make changes or add something in your quitting plans.

- by Angela Alves

The Politics Of The Performing Arts

When talking about cancelling and doing less in the LAB, we circled back to the challenges faced in these situations.

On an emotional level, many of us mentioned that they don't want to disappoint anyone - may be it the team, the audience, the venue, or themselves. It's often directly connected to "success" if people do not cancel and hence do not let anyone down. There's a fear of not being seen as a "good team player," or of garnering a negative reputation.

A participant mentioned that cancelling also somehow feels like "losing one's function".. And many struggle with having FOMO¹¹ over not being able to be present. One person mentioned that they sometimes go through with plans as they cannot handle the changes it would implicate if they cancel.

Overbooking guilt was also a big factor for many. Somehow many neurodivergent people think we have to see things through because we made a mistake in our calendars or estimated our capacities wrongly - and that we have to take the consequences for that now. As if overbooking wasn't part of our disability...

¹¹ Fear Of Missing Out: a common feeling of anxiety or apprehension about missing out on exciting or important events, experiences, or information that others are experiencing.

On a more practical level, many people struggle with cancelling because it's a loss of income that they cannot afford losing.

This seems to be a main driver for many and reminds us of the precarities of being an artist. Financial reasons were closely followed by the fear of losing future opportunities (with the person you cancelled with and with potential people who would have seen you perform).

There is a common fear of not getting booked again, and having a "bad" reputation within the scene. While we don't have solutions for all these worries, issues and challenges, it raises some very big questions:

- Who "gets to be sick"?
- Which reasons for cancelling are deemed "good enough"?
- Who "pays the price" in case of cancellations?
- Who doesn't get paid?
- Who can afford to not show up?

The Other Side Of The Sword: Receiving Cancellation

"Yay to them for emancipating themselves through cancelling, but ouchy to me..."

I thought when another person cancelled the LAB. I know how hard it is for them to cancel, and that they were sad about it.

**"Do I contradict myself?
Very well, then I contradict myself.
(I am large, I contain multitudes)."**

- Legacy Russel, Glitch Feminism

There is a proper disability conundrum¹² in cancelling - while it's something I fully encourage, I also really struggle with it. I am glad that the people who cancelled were able to reconfirm to me that they still liked me, that they found the project interesting and that they would have liked to join. It sounds basic (and sometimes hard to do when you are the one who is cancelling), but that really made a difference for me. For the person cancelling, the complex feelings of "letting someone down", "fear of disappointing", fear of not having a "reason enough" to cancel are all mixing into the dynamics. One of the people who cancelled was the neurodivergent musician, composer and producer Ramón Oliveras - who is part of the queer trio cutecumber (fka Dalai Puma) as well as the jazz quintet Ikarus. After he had to cancel the LAB on short notice, I asked him if he would be open to meeting me for a coffee a week later to exchange on the topic of cancelling a bit more.

¹² The world will never be fully accessible to everyone at the same time, because some access needs stand in direct contrast to each other.

A Talk About Cancelling With Ramón Oliveiras, May 2025

Here's a talk with him:

Ramón (R): I got more used to cancelling, and that it has certain financial consequences. But I still find it hard to find out if its ok to cancel, is it "reason enough"?

Lovis (L): yeah we talked about that a lot: like when am I "sick enough" to cancel? When is it "bad enough"?

R: yes or sometimes I wonder what the occasion is. When do I leave someone hanging and it would still be kind of okay for my energy level. ... I am worried that I will get used to it like "ah the easy way is to cancel".

L: You are worried that it gets too "normal" for you to cancel?

R: yeah... That there will be a shift in values "that's more comfy because I can stay at home". Cancelling isn't just about the professional side when money is involved, but also on the level of friends, care etc... I sometimes wish there was a flow diagram supporting the decision making process.

Am I super sick? Am I a little sick? How much energy do I have left? Is money involved?

L: And what's the decisive factor? Because I think that's the hardest part for me. Does it have more weight if money is involved? Or if someone is gonna be more or less disappointed...?

R: I think you would have to ask the right question: If money is involved, how important is it for you financially to receive it? There the flow diagram would split into different options.

L: ...uuuh I would love for such a diagram to be developed...

R:... and then you would get some kind of confirmation - other people would see this similarly.

We also talked about debriefing cancellations a few days or weeks after they happened, and about how for Ramón, cancelling a gig used to feel like a huge missed opportunity, and now has somehow lost a bit of it's urgency.

Being able to talk about the situation with a bit more distance was very valuable for me. I could see both our situations and the emotional impact it had on each of us. This doesn't solve the disability conundrum, but it surely makes the emotional complexity of cancelling less something you carry alone, but something you can carry together.

In the LAB, one participant mentioned that they cancel often and welcome others to cancel often, which then also leads to them being cancelled on regularly.

They noted that people sometimes seem to cancel on them, while still participating in another thing. We established that inviting a "cancel culture" also means people will make use of cancelling the things that come with less "consequences".

It makes me sad to know that people are overextending their energies. I believe many people would cancel more often if they felt safe to do so. So let's develop a "cancel culture" which can be slowly established and practiced in safe(r) environments which welcome cancelling. And let's make sure the practice expands beyond the cripp community over time, to people and places which are not yet as used to the concepts of cancelling.

Developing A Cancel Culture

Here a little text which we created in the un//masking LAB, parallel to the cancelling manifesto as we realized we needed to remind ourselves to embrace cancel culture:

For Us

We are neuroqueer, crip and chronically ill artists and performers. We are learning to become experts in the practices of resting and quitting.

We are training ourselves to resist the internalised idea that resting and cancelling are deficits. We reject the framing of quitting as failure, reframing it as self-preservation and care.

We reject the binary of “sick” vs “well,” along with the concept of “sick enough to cancel”. We destigmatize “flaking” or “dropping out”. We are challenging our internalised ableism.

We see attendance as something dynamic, which can happen in different ways. We are unlearning society’s shame and will not allow ourselves to be driven by guilt, FOMO, or disappointment. We are resisting overbooking guilt. We understand our reasons for cancelling to be inherently valid.

un//masking LAB 2025

A Few Best Negotiation Practices For Artists:

- Try to negotiate 100% payment in case of cancellation. As this is often not possible, secure some of the payment you have already worked for. The German organisation “making a difference” has started to split contracts during covid: fees 50% for preparation and for implementation.
- Address cancellation options in your contracts. The band ENL has started to use “tentative confirmations” for gigs, including cancellation deadlines in agreement with the venue (e.g. cancellable until 2 weeks before the show).
- Include the offer of alternative artworks in case of cancellation for the live show as part of the contract.
- For labs, panel talks etc: negotiate the possibility of online attendance
- Use access riders¹³ with travel conditions (e.g. might need a taxi to and from the venue) as part of the contract.

¹³ See Zine Issue #4 for more information on access riders.

Attendance Through Cancellation

engaging in absence
making the “missing” visible
attendance through cancellation

Cancelling is an interruption of something we pursued, a goal we followed. This disruption offers potential for new things to happen. Like a glitch in the system - bringing out new aesthetics. So let's explore cancelling as an aesthetics of access. What forms of attendance and presence can be formed through cancelling? What alternative ways of “showing up” exist already amongst crip artists?

“... we can also arrive at an understanding of glitch as a nonperformance: the “failure to perform”, an outright refusal, a “nope; in its own right...”

- Legacy Russel, Glitch Feminism

When the performer Angela Alves couldn't come to her own shows due to her chronic illness, she sent her installation “REST” on tour instead. “REST” is essentially her bed with integrated audio speakers. Visitors are invited to lie down and listen to Angela's interviews with three different women speaking about rest. It's a great example of a way to “attend through cancellation”, by being present differently, and bringing the discourse of cancelling and resting into the performance space. The Tate Modern describes performance art not only by its “live-ness”; nowadays it can also be “film, video, photographic and installation-based artworks through which the actions of artists, performers or the audience are conveyed.” Technological possibilities have increased the scope of creativity in finding alternative ways of being present.

Resting On Stage

The Scottish performer Claire Cunningham takes rest by taking an active break in the middle of her dance piece “Songs of the Wayfarer”. The solo of the choreographer and dancer with physical disabilities is about wandering, crip navigation and what can be learned from being “a 4-legged creature who reaches the ground through crutches”. The piece asks questions of scale and time and energy. It asks what it means to keep going and, importantly, the wisdom to know when to turn back. I got to see the piece in Berlin at the 2024 NO LIMITS festival.

After about one third of the piece, Claire sits down, taking out a snack and a coffee, and unhurriedly starts to eat and drink. Some audience members take out a little snack as well. After a good while, she builds a tent with her crutches and hangs her jacket over it, lying in it to rest. The audience is reminded to rest as well. The energy in the room is changing, people wiggle in their seat to be more comfortable. After resting, Claire gets up just like people do after a little break, and picks up where she left off. Another break follows about two third into the piece. The breaks are of value for artist and audience alike and are a perfect example of implementing aesthetics of access.

Artist Example: Kamran Behrouz

Another example of attendance through cancellation is neurodivergent artist Kamran Behrouz (1984) who is a visual artist born and raised in Tehran, currently working and living in Zurich. As a person who is most creative at home, Kamran often performs virtually through avatars, motion capture and animation. Thinking about avatars as attendance through cancellation allows us to further crip what performance looks like and how we can be present as artists. With the creative freedom of building your own avatars and personas, who would you send out to represent you if you could not go by yourself? How can these characters be un//masked?

A Dynamic System Of Fluidity And Instability

“We just need to stop assuming a stable system of healthy people”, said one of the participants when we talked more about cancelling.

“Sickness” as we speak of it today is a capitalist construct, as is its perceived binary opposite, “wellness”. The “well” person is the person well enough to go to work. The “sick” person is the one who can’t. What is so destructive about conceiving of wellness as the default, as the standard mode of existence, is that it invites illness as temporary.”

- Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice

Disability challenges our idea of “getting well soon”. As I learned about dynamic disabilities¹⁴ - after having one due to an accident for many years, without having a name for it - I once again got reminded that disability often isn’t temporary. But in many cases of dynamic disabilities, it is also nothing fixed, foreseeable, or plannable and is always in negotiation. My own neurodivergence actually seems very dynamic to me - something I have to learn to accommodate.

¹⁴ “Dynamic disability is a relatively new concept that means that a disability oscillates in severity (normally tied to what is called a “flare”), where all or one of the symptoms of a chronic illness are more active or worsen for a period of time, whether it’s for a matter of weeks or months.” - Inês Mália Sarmento, *disartnow*.

It’s time for a queercrip lens - more fluidity is needed. In the light of including disabled people, and seeing disability as something dynamic and oscillating, we need a system that welcomes exactly that. While artists can think of ways to cancel or show up differently, the responsibility cannot solely be individualized and given to crip artists. We need institutions, festivals, event organizers and funders to expect and accept cancellations and write-offs, as well as deferrals and changes.

Having been an event organizer in Covid times, I know how hard and exhausting it is to work with something that is unpredictable. In order to change something as stagnant as institutions, this practice has to start beyond the example of real-life cancellations by thinking about cancelling on a more structural level.

We need funding systems that include sickness support, we need festivals to already have backup acts booked and ready, we need unpredictability as a status quo worked into the institutions’ foundation.

Therefore, the participants of the LAB started to write a manifesto to ask for a different paradigm in organising culture: one that includes cancelling into its realm of possibility.

Cancel Culture: A Manifesto

On Manifesto Writing

After our little group decided to write a manifesto directed at institutions, venues and funders, on the second last day of the un//masking LAB, we suddenly all got a little insecure. We didn't really know how to write a manifesto. I luckily remembered the text "Manifesting Manifestos" by Alison Kaefer, which gave us a lot of great insights in crip manifesto writing. I unfortunately didn't have time to summarize it here as planned, but I highly recommend reading it.

The CCCC - Code Of Creating Cancel(ling) Cultures, A Manifesto

We are a group of neuroqueer performers, who wrote this manifesto as part of an un//masking LAB happening at Gessnerallee Zürich in April of 2025. In the spirit of crip failure we decided to note down whatever the time allowed. Please reuse and rework this manifesto as a basis for your own manifesto, which you can then send to local institutions, funders, venues to start a conversation on cancelling.

C is for code:

- Finding code words
- Finding reasons
- Finding ways
- Finding language

C is for creating:

- Creating practices
- Creating guidelines
- Creating ways of relating to each other
- Creating changes

C is for cancelling:

- Saying stop
- Saying no further
- Saying not now
- Saying no

C is for cultures:

- Cultivating how to end things
- Cultivating different timelines
- Cultivating alternatives ways of being present
- Cultivating different ways of creating community

A Paradigm Shift

Value the no

How can we value cancelling just as much as showing up? We want a system that values that cancelling happens for the benefit of the individual's health and wellbeing and that of the collective/ community. Cancelling is care. Cancelling enacts sustainability.

Society accepts that a person can say no/cancel if their physical health (especially as a severe and unexpected health event) prevents them from saying yes/carrying through. It's accepted because we generally acknowledge that a person's physical health is widely "outside of their control", and therefore the no/ cancellation is "not their fault." If it were their fault, i.e. if we felt they had control and still said no/cancelled anyway, some people might feel justified to take punitive measures - for example, by withdrawing funding or future opportunities, berating the person, branding them as uniquely unpredictable or untrustworthy, or imposing social consequences.

Instead of this clear differentiation between acceptable vs non-acceptable no's, we want to challenge our assumption that all yeses are the same. We must understand that another person's initial "yes" could have a variety of factors.

A person may say yes to participating in an event because they freely wish to do so, because they are empowered to do so, because they are unhindered to do so and expect to remain unhindered up until and during the event. But they might also say yes because they feel disempowered to say no. They might say yes under economic pressure, or social pressure, they might have been actively coerced to say yes.

They might have said yes despite knowing that participating could negatively impact their health. They might have said yes despite conflicting commitments because their neurology perceives time differently, because it is geared towards yeses by default, or because it is in a heightened emotional state when asked. How empowered are these yeses? How empowered are the no's that may follow them? The social model of disability¹⁵ is thinking: what does it look like to shift away from attributing the problem to the individual and instead think about how the systems and structures we navigate could change to accommodate people needing to cancel/ show up differently - to make this not a problem?

Unpredictability As A Status Quo

We demand that institutions, funders and venues normalize the unpredictability of dynamic disabilities and fluctuating capacity. A structure that does not leave room for changes is not a structure designed for humans. By challenging the binary thinking of sick/well, abled/disabled, productive/unproductive, we want it to be acknowledged that "being well" is not the default or goal.

It's clear that disabled, neurodivergent and chronically ill people (as well as other marginalized people) have to cancel more often. Not only because of fatigue, burnout, pain flares or overwhelm, sometimes also because an event is not accessible to them. Which leads to further discrimination through cancelling, as its often stigmatized as "being flaky" or "unprofessional". We demand that institutions and funders actively work on their prejudice. By understanding cancellations as an empowered choice, a cancellation can be seen and communicated as an active form of participation. Cancel culture is a mode of showing up. We demand a system that values that cancelling happens for the benefit of the individual's health and wellbeing and that of the collective/ community. Cancelling is care. Cancelling enacts sustainability.

¹⁵ It is also worth pointing out that the social model of disability isn't perfect -it can help in dismantling the binary of able/disabled and to shift focus away from the individual -to structure/ societal/ cultural accountability. However, for some it doesn't represent their experience of pain/ impairment.

Structural Demands

- Plan for unpredictability. Structures should assume change and accommodate it. Become fluent in alternative modes of timekeeping, planning, and participation.
- Venues and festivals can actively plan and budget backup programming solutions (e.g. prerecorded work, alternative formats, subs, backup programme).
- Funders and institutions must support financial coverage for cancelled work, including fees for planning and projected income loss.
- Disentangle cancellation from financial punishment. Artists must not be penalized for needing to cancel.
- Create and offer artist residencies specifically for developing “cancel alternatives” (e.g., installation, recorded work).
- Include and normalize different modes of participation in programming and payment structures. Alternative forms of presence must be respected, seen as an equal form of participation and actively supported by venues:
 - * Sending pre-recorded work or installations
 - * Online participation
 - * Sending written statements, audios or videos
 - * Invite/ fund people who cancelled again!

Contracts

- Go over your cancellation policies and contracts and scan them for ableist and punitive measures. Soften contracts to acknowledge dynamic health and needs.
- Don’t let your contracts assume a fixed, stable, able, “productive” bodymind. Build in the possibility of flexibility.
- Include cancellation clauses, stating clear, processes and deadlines for cancelling or altering participation in contracts.
- Cover 100% in case of cancellation if possible. Create and demand funding schemes that pay artists even in cancellation scenarios.
- Separate artist fees & fundings into preparation time and labor - e.g. 50% for planning, 50% for presentation.
- Offer compensation for recovery time, not just delivery time. Include rest and recovery time in artist fees - it’s part of the labor.

This is it for now...

Thank you for reading!

The next issue “un//masking the performing arts - collected sCRIPts” will include a collection of scores including the following topics (and many others):

- introduction rounds
- stimming on stage
- crip-hacking costumes
- asking more questions
- swearing
- creating access riders

If you are interested in providing a sCRIPt, collaborating on a zine or project, or organising an un//masking workshop or LAB in your city, or any other wild ideas, please get in touch under:

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