

The Virtual Artaud: Computer Virus as Performance Art

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The computer virus is often termed a malicious threat to personal privacy, security, and system integrity by companies such as McAfee, Symantec, and Norton; yet, how would we categorize such a virus if it were scripted as a performance-art piece? In June of 2001, two performance art groups collaborated to script a computer virus-as-performance-art and launched it at the 49th Venice Biennale. The performancevirus, named Biennale.py, was launched from the Slovenian Pavilion on the opening day of the exhibition. The groups responsible, WWW.0100101110101101.ORG (roughly translated as the binary code for the letter "K") and epidemiC¹, who are known for their extreme performance art pieces which often push the boundaries of legality, saw the virus as a means to disrupt the static nature of the way the term "virus" is signified. They sought to locate their performance in the context of spreading biological infections, globalization, and Internet surveillance. As Gabriella Giannachi says, the group's aim was to "destabilize the Web as a 'safe' environment and expose capitalistic and global control methods operating in both the real and the virtual."² My analysis of this performance piece seeks to posit a relationship between the simultaneous emergence of HIV/AIDS and computer viruses, as well as the modes of signification surrounding both in an era of fluid global borders, increased surveillance, and the "posthuman" body.

I wish to lay the framework of this study on the theories of Antonin Artaud in his seminal book *The Theater and its Double*. Artaud theorized that the theater was like the plague due to the similarities of spectacle and the effect of each on a population and the bodies of individuals. The plague and theater, both read as an "absolute action of a spectacle,"³ incite a "battle of symbols" in which the plague "takes images that are dormant … and suddenly extends them into the most extreme gestures" while the theater "also takes gestures and pushes them as far as they will go: like the plague it reforges the chain between what is and what is not, between virtuality of the possible and what already exists in materialized nature."⁴ Ultimately, the theater, like the plague, "releases conflicts, disengages powers, [and] liberates possibilities."⁵

The biennale virus operates within Artaud's theories: it seeks to engage in the battle of symbols, the signification of both the ontology of the virus and the status of the body in the digital age. A performative scripting the virus *as a performance* allows it to enter into the discourses of bodies and viruses and the ways such notions are signified. Being a "performance" immediately begs the question of who is the audience of such a piece – for whom is the performance taking place? The obvious audience consists of the Venice Biennale attendees. Simultaneously, the piece was experienced and viewed by

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computer users around the world. Perhaps the ultimate audience for the performance virus is the computer itself – the actual code only being truly "read" by the machine.⁶ However, before the performance virus was even launched from the Slovenian Pavilion, the two performance groups informed the major anti-virus companies of their intent to spread the virus, with specifications on its content and removal. After the launch of the performance virus, the major anti-virus companies began tracking the virus globally, representing its worldwide spread on their virus maps. Eva Mattes, 0100101110101101.ORG's spokesperson, says, "As soon as the virus is detected it officially turns wanted, every PC becomes a checkpoint that the virus needs to cross." She goes on to say:

"Once you set a virus free you loose control over it, you decide on when and where the performance begins, but you'll never know when and where it'll lead. It'll spread out of control, it'll make a round-the-world trip over two minutes, it'll go where you'll never go over your entire life, chased by anti-virus cops trying to regain control over it. In this very moment it's wandering around at the speed of byte. It's an art form that finds you, you don't have to go to museums to see it, the work itself will reach you inside your house."⁷

Thus, with the global spread and tracking of the virus, the performance paves the way for a new critique of theories of globalization and the consequences of Marshall McLuhan's "Global Village." The performance virus becomes a performance of globalization and the illusion of a borderless world. Though the anti-virus companies represent the spread of the virus on a map of the world, this map (with its delineation between countries and regions) no longer applies in many theories of globalization. Such theories tend to read our current digital world as one in which borders are fluid and fall under erasure. The audience of the performance-art virus, for example, is not limited to a regional locale but is dispersed and multiple.

Though I will argue that the borderless world of the "Global Village" is an illusion, certain borders do indeed fall under erasure in this performance, namely, the borders between the public and the private as well as the inside of the system and its connection to the outside world. Computer viruses and malware often invade the system and gain access to "private" files and information. At the same time, anti-virus companies are permitted to survey users' private files in order to maintain the integrity of those files. The global surveillance of the virus by the anti-virus companies is mirrored by their surveillance of the individual system.

Surveillance and viruses have gone hand in hand in most writings on viruses and epidemics. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault discusses the role of surveillance in a town that was stricken by the plague. Similar to the biblical narrative of the final plague on Egypt, on the chosen day, everyone was ordered to remain indoors. During this quarantine, the civil magistrate would go from house to house, calling each of its members to come to the window one at a time. As Foucault says, "He calls each of them by name; informs himself as to the state of each and everyone one of them ... if someone does not appear at the window, the syndic must ask why: 'In this way he will find out easily enough whether the dead or sick are being concealed.' Everyone locked up in his cage, everyone at his window, answering to his name and showing himself when asked—it is the great review of the living and the dead."⁸ Thus, surveillance is employed as a tool to quell the movement of the plague. Plagues, and the surveillance that attends them, blur the distinction between the public and the private. The status of the internal body—often considered the ultimate "private" space—is made public, turned inside out through the employment of surveillance systems during a time of an epidemic.

In its very name and the way it is perceived in the cultural imaginary, the computer virus is often read as related to the ways the material body is infected. In Andrew Ross's detailed and convincing work on computer viruses and hacker subculture, he says, "In line with the new imperative for everything from 'vaccinated' workstations to 'sterilized' networks, it [the desire for computer security] has created a brand new market of viral vaccine vendors who will sell you the virus (a one-time only immunization shot) along with its antidote – with names like Flu Shot +, ViruSafe, Vaccinate,...[and] Antidote."9 From the outset, the modes of discourse surrounding the computer virus have imbued the computer system with bodily significance. The term "computer virus" was first employed in academic writing by Fred Cohen in his 1984 article "Experiments with Computer Viruses," in which he credits Leonard Adleman as initially coining the term. However, earlier uses of the term can be traced back to science fiction literature, namely the 1975 work by David Gerrold, When H.A.R.L.I.E. was *One,* in which there is a computer program named VIRUS that operates similarly to modern-day computer viruses. This computer program was counteracted by another computer program aptly named ANTIBODY. The first actual computer viruses would not appear on the scene until 1981 with the spread of the Elk Cloner virus on Apple II systems. In June of this same year, the Center for Disease Control has its first reports of the AIDS virus in the United States. With the rise and spread of HIV/AIDS and the simultaneous emergence of computer viruses, the two categories of epidemics have had many similarities in the way they are perceived in the cultural imaginary.

The biennale performance-art virus is a performance of the ways we signify the virus, both on the computer and in the body. As Paula Treichler astutely notes in her seminal work on AIDS and signification, "The AIDS epidemic – with its genuine potential for global devastation – is simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification."¹⁰ Though some, like Andrew Ross and Judith Williamson, may contend that the actual virus of HIV has "a lack of meaning"¹¹ in and of itself, Treichler argues that, though the virus itself is impossible to fully know, we still imbue a multiplicity of meanings into the virus through our linguistic relationship to HIV/AIDS. She argues:

"The very nature of *AIDS* is constructed through language and in particular through the discourses of medicine and science. ... The name *AIDS* in part *constructs* the disease and helps make it intelligible. We cannot therefore look 'through' language to determine what AIDS 'really' is. Rather we must explore

the site where such determinations *really* occur and intervene at the point where meaning is created: in language."¹²

In part, such linguistic constructions of AIDS seek to establish a specific history of the syndrome. Though my comparison of the emergence of the computer virus and AIDS begins its analysis in 1981, this is only one of many narratives around the origins of the viruses. David Román argues in his book *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* that attempting to create an "official history" of AIDS will inevitably obscure other histories that have gone undocumented. These official histories, be they the narratives of the biomedical institutions or the mainstream news media, have the danger of becoming "totalizing narratives" and a "genealogy...[which] overdetermines the arrival of AIDS and obscures the process(es) of AIDS."¹³ Instead of a singular narrative and history of AIDS, there is a multiplicity of histories.

The promulgation of these "official histories" has created a specific cultural imaginary around AIDS, at the foundation of which is the condition of globalization and its inherent conflicts with the desire to locate a "foreign source" for the epidemic. The spread of HIV/AIDS has been read through the lens of globalization from its onset. As Virginia van der Vliet writes in her book *The Politics of AIDS*,

"HIV has gone on the rampage in a world peculiarly suited to its special needs. The late twentieth century is, as was the fourteenth century in Europe, a time of increasing human interaction, of permeable borders and extensive trade and travel. ... The HI virus ... appears to have hitched rides in its human hosts as they jetted between continents, walked from village to village, or rattled back and forth in trucks between city and coast all over the Third World. Nowhere is the 'global village' metaphor more chillingly illustrated than in the speed with which AIDS encircled the planet."¹⁴

Just as the biennale.py virus was able to "circle the planet in two minutes," HIV/AIDS is able to spread globally at a more rapid pace than any other epidemic in previous times due to the modern condition of compacted social space and diminished regional borders.

However, within this cultural imaginary surrounding both AIDS and computer viruses is the impulse to locate a specific *foreign* source for the infection. It is here that borders remain in tact and starkly present. With AIDS, as Susan Sontag notes in her book *AIDS and its Metaphors*, the infection is read as foreign in several ways. First of all, the infection itself is read as an invading enemy, "an infectious agent that comes from the outside."¹⁵ The descriptions of AIDS fall into the "language of political paranoia" and have the characteristic of a "science-fiction flavor" with descriptions reminiscent of a type of "high-tech warfare for which we are being prepared (and inured)."¹⁶ Secondly, those infected with the disease are typically considered as Other within a moralistic framework. As Sontag notes:

"Getting the disease through a sexual practice thought to be more willful, therefore deserves more blame. Addicts who get the illness by sharing contaminated needles are seen as committing (or completing) a kind of inadvertent suicide. Promiscuous homosexual men practicing their vehement sexual customs under the illusory conviction, fostered by medical ideology with its cure-all antibiotics, of the relative innocuousness of all sexually transmitted diseases, could be viewed as dedicated hedonists — though it's now clear that their behavior was no less suicidal. Those like hemophiliacs and bloodtransfusion recipients, who cannot by any stretch of the blaming faculty be considered responsible for their illness, may be as ruthlessly ostracized by frightened people, and potentially represent a greater threat because, unlike the already stigmatized, they are not easy to identify."¹⁷

This "risk group," as it is commonly termed – a presumed neutral appellation, though falsely so – places the epidemic in the realm of the Other. Treichler quotes from an article in the 1985 general science journal *Discover* titled "AIDS: The Latest Scientific Facts" which has an image with the heading: "Why AIDS is likely to remain largely a gay disease." The article and the image both argue that "the virus enters the bloodstream by way of the 'vulnerable anus' and the 'fragile urethra'; in contrast, the 'rugged vagina' (built to be abused by such blunt instruments as penises and small babies) provides too tough a barrier for the AIDS virus to penetrate." The article goes on to say, "AIDS isn't a threat to the vast majority of heterosexuals. … It is now – and is likely to remain – largely the fatal price one can pay for anal intercourse."¹⁸

These "totalizing narratives," which are disseminated as facts from "the authorities" on the subject, are echoed in the power behind the signification of the origin myths of the epidemic. Such signification functions to position AIDS as a disease of the Other. AIDS, as with other plagues and epidemics, comes "from somewhere else."¹⁹ As Sontag notes, the names given to syphilis as it spread through Europe in the fifteenth century always located it as a foreign disease invading the local citizen. "It was 'French Pox' to the English, *morbus Germanicus* to the Parisians, the Naples sickness to the Florentines, the Chinese disease to the Japanese."²⁰ Similarly, in many Western countries, AIDS is thought to have its origins in Africa. Sontag writes, "Africans who detect racist stereotypes in much of the speculation about the geographical origin of AIDS are not wrong. … The subliminal connection made to notions about a primitive past and the many hypotheses that have been fielded about possible transmission from animals … cannot help but activate a familiar set of stereotypes about animality, sexual license, and blacks."²¹ In certain African countries, AIDS is also read as foreign, hypothesized as a virus created in a CIA laboratory in Maryland and sent to Africa.

Such signification places HIV/AIDS in a similar imaginary as that of the computer virus as seen in the critical performance art of WWW.0100101110101101.ORG and epidemiC and their biennale virus. The biennale virus prompts various questions concerning the source and host file of the virus. As a computer user sees the virus inhabit his or her computer system, the modes of system security and anti-virus technology are immediately questioned and/or implemented. Borders are immediately

inscribed in what was, just moments earlier, considered a borderless world of the Internet. For example, the term "firewall" that is used in anti-virus technology is a metaphor that incites ideas of renewed borders in a borderless system. It demarcates the self from the other, protecting the integrity of the system from and infection from an outside malicious virus. The contained system is seen as safe as long as it is contained and protected through the borders set up by the "firewall." In an enclosed and protected system, the only means of being infected by a virus is by willful engagement with a file or code from an outside source.

Viruses are thus described in terms that compare them to sexually transmitted diseases, or, as in the cultural imaginary of the AIDS virus, relate infection to willful contact with a contaminated source. As Sontag says, "Strictures about contact now have their place in the computer world as well. Computer users are advised to regard each new piece of software as a 'potential carrier' of a virus. 'Never put a disk in your computer without verifying its source.' The so-called vaccine programs being marketed are said to offer some protection; but the only sure way to curb the threat of computer viruses, experts agree, is not to share programs and data."22 Ross echoes Sontag's sentiments when he writes, "The underlying moral imperative being this: You can't trust your best friend's software any more than you can trust his or her bodily fluids safe software or no software at all!" He goes on to quote Dennis Miller's remark on an episode of Saturday Night Live: "Remember, when you connect with another computer, you're connecting to every computer that computer has ever connected to."²³ Such language mirrors the current push for abstinence programs in the United States. This is also particularly applicable in our current age of peer-to-peer networking in which the process of sharing files has taken on a moral stigma, and thus viruses obtained through such means are read as a just effect for culpable behavior. Thus, the "moral law" which dictates sexual behavior is mirrored in the copyright law and the enforcement of these laws in networked communities by such organizations as the RIAA. The comparison is clearly seen in a recent Motion Picture Association of America commercial that says, "You steal a candy bar from the store, or you download a movie off the Internet. I mean, that's wrong."

It is commonly thought that with the right anti-virus software and the proper firewalls installed, the individual's computer system will be safe from outside threats of viral infection. The computer virus, it is often thought, belongs to the unprotected system or only affects Windows-based programs (thus Mac users are immune). In comparison, as Charles E. Rosenberg notes in his article, "The Definition and Control of Disease," prior to the AIDS epidemic, American culture thought itself immune to infectious disease through medical breakthroughs and intervention. He says, "By the end of the 1970s, most Americans had come to regard themselves as no longer at risk; infectious disease was almost by definition amenable to medical intervention. Not since the last severe polio threats more than a quarter century ago has the United States experienced the collective fear of epidemic disease."²⁴ The ideas of viruses as originating from the Other and affecting the Other remain strongly in place in several discourses about HIV/AIDS and the computer virus. The Italian performance groups who spread the biennale virus as a performance did so within a milieu which locates the virus as foreign and elsewhere while reading the self and the system as safe as long as the proper borders and protections are in place. The performance virus sought to destabilize the signification of the virus and the way borders are simultaneously erased and reinscribed. As Artaud writes, "If the essential theater is like the plague, it is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized."²⁵

Though the outcomes and consequences of the HIV/AIDS epidemic are significantly different and more threatening than any computer virus may be, the ways the two "epidemics" are signified in the cultural imaginary, as here argued, are notably similar. The simultaneous emergence of the viruses and the multiplicity of their accompanying significations allow for a comparison of the infection of the physical body to the infection of the computer system. In the posthuman age, in which the body is read as a system of information, the link between the information of the body being infected (i.e. the alteration of DNA) and the coded information on the computer system being infected becomes profoundly similar. Thus, by performing these similarities through a virus-as-performance-art, the performance artists at the Venetian Biennale allow their audience to enter into the discourse around the status of the cultural imaginary that surrounds both the computer virus and the AIDS epidemic.

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¹ See <http://www.0100101110101101.org> and <http://www.epidemic.ws/> for further information on these performance-art groups.

² Gabriela Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge Press, 2004) 23.

³ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1966) 23.

⁴ Artaud, 27.

⁵ Artaud, 31.

⁶ For further discussion of how the computer operates as a "reading machine" see N. Katherine Hayles' book *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

⁷ <http://www.0100101110101101.org/home/biennale_py/story.html>.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 196.

⁹ Andrew Ross, "Hacking Away at the Counterculture" *Postmodern Culture* 1(1): 1990, n.p. http://www.muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v001/1.1ross.html>.

¹⁰ Paula A. Treichler, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," *AIDS: Cultural Analysis Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) 32.

¹¹ Ross, n.p.

¹² Treichler, 31.

¹³ David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) xviii-xix.

¹⁴ Virginia Van der Vliet, *The Politics of AIDS* (London: Bowerdean Publishing Company, 1996) 17.

¹⁵ Susan Sontag, AIDS and its Metaphors (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988) 17.

¹⁶ Sontag, 18.

¹⁷ Sontag, 26-27.

¹⁸ Treichler, 37.

¹⁹ Sontag, 47.

- ²⁰ Sontag, 47-48.
- ²¹ Sontag, 52.
- ²² Sontag, 79.

²³ Ross, n.p.

²⁴ Charles Rosenberg, "The Definition and Control of Disease," *In Time of Plague: The History and Social Consequences of Lethal Epidemic Disease*, ed. Arien Mack (New York: New York UP, 1991) 5.

²⁵ Rosenberg, 30.