

**Language |H|as a Virus:
from figure of thought to experimental laboratory**

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*I have frequently spoken of word and image as viruses or as acting as viruses,
and this is not an allegorical comparison.*

William S. Burroughs

*If the computer virus is a technological phenomenon cloaked in the metaphor of biology,
emerging infectious diseases are a biological phenomenon cloaked in the technological
paradigm. As with computer viruses, emerging infectious diseases constitute an example of a
counterprotocol phenomenon.*

Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit*

*Modernism is a history of infections: by political movements; by mass culture and
consumerism; and now by the Internet, information technology, and interactivity. The openness
to exteriority and its infections is an essential characteristic of the modernist inheritance, and
that inheritance is the will to reveal the Other within oneself, to become Other, to become
infected by Otherness.*

Boris Groys, *In the Flow*

From Linguistic Inflection to Artistic Infection

In *Plague and the Athenian Imagination* (2007), Robin Mitchell-Boyask considers the hypothesis of the Athens Plague being responsible for the ways in which Greek tragedies were to be performed after 430 BCE. According to Mitchell-Boyask, not only the experience of living in a city ravaged by the plague was reflected in its discourse, “the adjacency of the Asklepieion to the Theater of Dionysus was an important part of their performative environment after 420 and the construction of the Asklepieion itself was part of the Athenian reaction to the plague.” (2). In order to sustain his argument, Mitchell-Boyask refers to *History of the Peloponnesian War*, a narrative in which the Greek historian Thucydides gives a very detailed textual account with regard to the effects of the plague in Athens. Far from being easy and full of rhetorical devices, in every known translation of it, the Greek used by Thucydides is subject to new mutations of the original strain. Nonetheless, in its essence, from the description of symptoms and ways of contagion, to the process of creating immunity, through its description, the Plague of Athens seems to hold more or less what characterizes every single pandemic, namely the

ways in which physical malaise quickly begins to be confused with social malaise¹. Being a text known for its blurring of boundaries when it comes to genre categorizations, naturally, language might have something to do with it, for instance, the ways in which words are interpreted as subject to mutations, in fact the very word “pestilence”:

Such then was the calamity that had befallen them by which the Athenians were sore pressed, their people dying within the walls and their land being ravaged without. And in their distress they recalled, as was natural, the following verse which their older men said had long ago been uttered: ‘A Dorian war shall come and *pestilence* with it.’ A dispute arose, however, among the people, some contending that the word used in the verse by the ancients was not λοιμός, ‘pestilence,’ but λιμός, ‘famine,’ and the view prevailed at the time that ‘pestilence’ was the original word; *and quite naturally, for men's recollections conformed to their sufferings.* (355; our emphasis)

From Sophocles’ *King Oedipus* to Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Shakespeare’s *King Lear* or Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*, the experience of different pandemics by these and other authors seems to add other layers of meaning to William Burroughs’ reflections on *language as a virus*, namely in their variations, changes, ambiguities, errors, accidents, and/or mutations. In the 1970s, Burroughs was mainly thinking of the ways in which writing as a technology is an alien virus that goes undetected because it has a perfect symbiosis with its host. (5). If we are to recognize that language and viruses coexist with the experience and repercussion of every single pandemic, to what extent the concept of virality may suffer a new mutation by influence of COVID-19, most particularly one that is specifically connected to digital media and the Internet?

In his 2016 book, *In the Flow*, Boris Groys elaborates on Kazimir Malevich’s idea of “infection” among several art styles such as Cubism and Suprematism. Comparing the straight lines of Suprematism to the rectilinear organic form known as the bacillus of tuberculosis, just as the latter is able to modify its body, Groys tells us how Malevich is able to describe the ways in which “novel visual elements introduced into the world by new technical and social developments modify the sensibility and nervous system of the artist”. However, from the moment he applies the trope of biological evolution to artists and the teaching of arts, Malevich subverts the logic of immunization inherent to the whole metaphor. This way, instead of incorporating “new aesthetic bacilli, to survive them and find a new inner balance, a new definition of health”, artists “should not immunize themselves against these bacilli, but on the contrary accept them and let them to destroy the old, traditional art patterns.” (76-78) Consequently:

The body of the artist may die, but the bacilli survive that death – and begin to infect the bodies of other artists. That is why Malevich actually believes in the transhistorical character of art. Art is material and materialist. And that means that art can always survive the end of all the purely idealist, metaphysical projects – whether Kingdom of God or Communism. (78)

The idea of hijacking the whole logic of the immune system of arts (and artists) is not far from the ways in which computer viruses and digital virality came to be understood. In

¹ The word used by Thucydides is anomía (ἀνομία, -ας, 'absence of law, rule, order or legality': ἀ-, 'deprivation, negation'; νόμος, 'law, rule'), in a description that seems placing phýsis above nómos, the laws of nature, for example, hedonistic pleasure, above other types of laws or conventions (354-5).

Digital Contagion (2007), Jussi Parikka highlights that the notion of viral is infectious to the point of expanding “into various contexts from cybernetics and computing to biology, literature, television, cinema, and media art”, including “philosophical theory and cyber theory in the 1990s.” (165). But, differently from Malevich’s metaphors of biological bacilli applied to arts, Parikka’s discussion on viruses goes well beyond the allegorical, suggesting that “the digital virus is becoming-biological and that ultimately the biological deterritorializes and reterritorializes across different texts and contexts.” (Knight: 2015 n.p.).

Being reminiscent of this article’s initial epigraph, this layer of literalization that goes beyond its metaphorical meaning makes us think of *affinities*². In this sense, while the notion of virus is a trope of contagion that infects, contaminates, and mutates, from the moment it became associated, by *affinity*, with digital media, it underwent a state of “becoming-biological” (to use Parikka’s expression), ending in a current state of an in-between. Meaning that, as a permeable trope, through that in-between status, the word *virus* acts as an interface, along different fields of knowledge. consequently enabling transdisciplinarity. And ultimately, the Internet, “a space suitable to the spread of contagion and transversal propagation of movement (from computer viruses to ideas and affects),” (Terranova, as quoted in Parikka: 2010 XXIV), is the perfect ecosystem presenting ideal conditions for the propagation of these rhizomatic reactions.

Through language, not just understood as “communication or about thinking but a force that materially connects rhizomatically with its outside”, computer viruses are subject to “various assemblages of enunciation (such as mass media acts)”. As such, harmful viruses can mean “malicious software, a security problem, but also a piece of net art, an artificial-life project or a potentially beneficial utility program” (XXVIII-XXIX), a complex definition that is not far from the ways in which virologists Mario Mietzsch and Mavis Agbandje-McKenna talk of the “good that viruses do”, understanding the potential of viruses for the development of “useful biologics with therapeutic benefits to humans.” (2017 1).

Accordingly, for them,

If a survey were to ask nonvirologists for their opinions about viruses, the word “good” would be unlikely to arise. Instead, words such as “disease,” “infection,” “suffering,” or “life-threatening” would likely dominate, as people primarily think of viruses such as HIV, Ebola virus, Zika virus, influenza virus, or whatever new outbreak is in the news. However, as we are now finding out, not all viruses are detrimental to human health. In fact, some viruses have beneficial properties for their hosts in a symbiotic relationship, while other natural and laboratory-modified viruses can be used to target and kill cancer cells, to treat a variety of genetic diseases as gene and cell therapy tools, or to serve as vaccines or vaccine delivery agents. (2017 1)

² In Biology, “a measure of the attraction of one biological molecule toward another molecule, either to modify it, destroy it, or form a compound with it”. Examples of it being “enzymes and their substrates, or antibodies and their antigens. <https://www.genscript.com/molecular-biology-glossary/8371/affinity>. Accessed 7 May 2021.

The idea of the “good” virus is not limited to virology, however. In *The Exploit*, an experimental volume made of nodes and edges, Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker explore the ways in which “the good-virus concept” is transversal to a series of domains. Central to their argument is the notion of *networks*, understood as “aggregate interconnections of dissimilar subnetworks” (2007 34). Published in 2007, this volume by Galloway and Thacker already anticipates what would later become a pandemic. In fact, their analysis is so anticipatory of the effects that we are now experiencing to the point of being almost indistinguishable, specifically when it comes to understand SARS as a new virology of globalization and its associated transgression of boundaries (90):

The SARS virus, for instance, crosses the species boundaries when it jumps from animals to humans. It also crosses national boundaries in its travels between China, Canada, the United States, and Southeast Asia. It crosses economic boundaries, affecting the air travel industry, tourism, and entertainment industries, as well as providing initiative and new markets for pharmaceutical corporations. Finally, it crosses the nature–artifice boundary, in that it draws together viruses, organisms, computers, databases, and the development of vaccines. Its tactic is the flood, an age-old network antagonism. (91).

Largely derived from *General Systems Theory*, Galloway and Thacker’s *amplification* of the principles governing networks enables them to state that, when it comes to infectious diseases, they “take advantage of a range of networks, many of them human made: biological networks of humans and animals, transportation networks, communications networks, media networks, and sociocultural networks.” In this sense, “[m]edia and sociocultural networks can work as much in favor of the virus as against it – witness the pervasive media hype that surrounds any public health news concerning emerging infectious diseases.” (119).

Nonetheless, if, in 2005-2007, Galloway and Thacker’s understanding of the potentially nefarious effects of media and sociocultural networks came in association with the fear of bioterrorism, in 2020-2021, in the midst of a pandemic, it became linked to the so-called post-truth era, namely, a populism and authoritarianism marked by waves of misinformation. As a network that congregates and, to some extent, paradoxically (*im*)materializes many other subnetworks – communications, information, socio(cultural) networks – the infectious possibilities of Internet seem evident. What possibilities remain, then, for “good viruses” to take advantage of the networking abilities of its (g)host³ *medium*?

Art in Quarantine: a (post?) pandemic atlas

Reminiscent of a “good” viral-like behaviour intrinsic to mail art culture and community(ies) working as *subnetworks*, project “Art in Quarantine” (AiQ)⁴ project is an online gallery currently hosting more than 900 artworks produced in the first 40 days after the Covid-19 pandemic status (March – April 2020) by more than 350 authors from 57 different countries and aimed to facilitate a safe place for artistic creation and exhibition.

³ Reference to Marcel Duchamp’s famous *wordlyphagic* wordplay: “A Guest + A Host = A Ghost”, printed and distributed during the opening of William Copley’s show at Galerie Nina Dausset, Paris, 1953. <http://archives.carre.pagesperso-orange.fr/Duchamp%20Marcel.html>. Accessed 7 May 2021.

⁴ <https://wreading-digits.com/art-in-quarantine/>

In adopting several principles of mail art culture to the digital sphere, namely collaborative practices as a form of disrupting conventional (art) channels, the AiQ project was launched after an international Open Call for (e-)mail art and art via email by Portuguese cyberliterature collective *wr3ad1ng d1g1t5*⁵, making use of mail art channels in digital communication – a subnetwork in itself that, to a large extent, already started to depend on the Internet to keep its global snail mail circulation alive – as its main strategy of promotion.

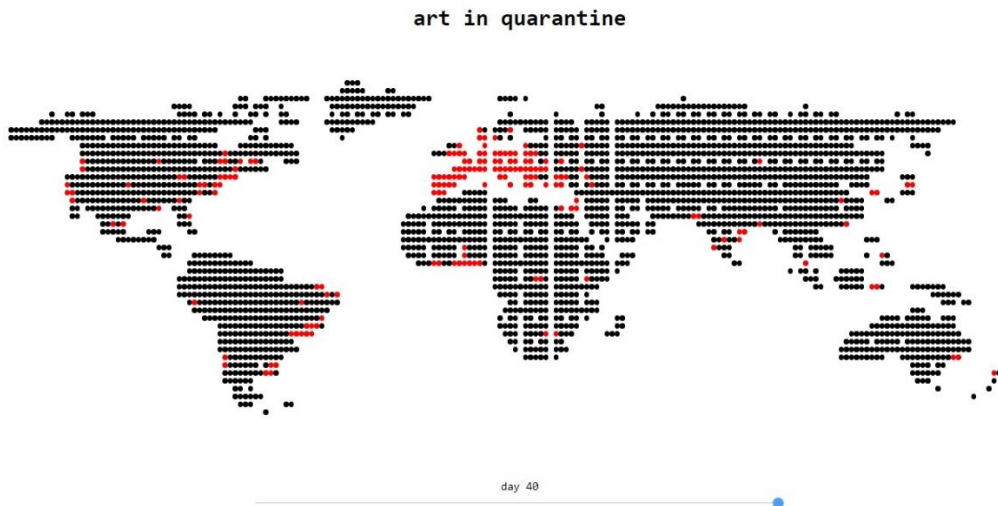


Fig. 1 Art in Quarantine, Interface. Screen Capture.

<https://wreading-digits.com/art-in-quarantine/#all-entries-2>

Functioning as a net art installation, it includes an interactive digital map in which users can track the arrival of artworks by day and location. Symbolically subverting a logic of infection, contamination, and contagion (from Latin *contagionem*, “a touching, contact”), this virtual interface conveys and reveals, day after day, the transmission chain of artistic expression, or infection, as proposed by Malevich.

On the whole, the gallery features artworks covering multiple formats and genres and presents two possible types of display: an individual gallery, containing the individual experiences of each of the participant authors, as well as a collective gallery featuring all of the artworks, and presenting yet with another type of experience, that is, the possibility of identifying visual patterns from a global experience of confinement due to COVID-19.

⁵ <https://www.wreading-digits.com>.

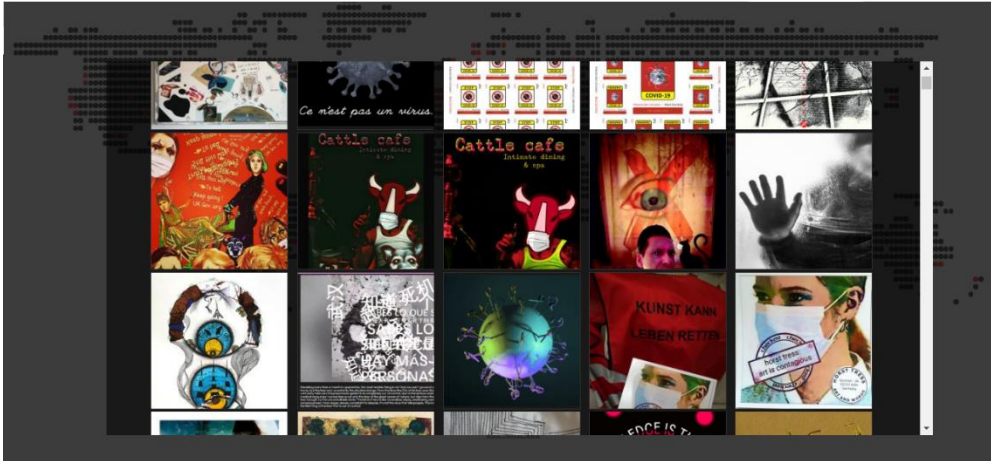


Fig. 2 Art in Quarantine, Collective Gallery. Screen Capture.
<https://wreading-digits.com/art-in-quarantine/#all-entries-2>

One of the main characteristics of AiQ collective gallery is the fact of having as an inspiration Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne* project (1929). In its surviving, unfinished version, the *Atlas Mnemosyne* consisted of a series of 63 panels, composed of more than 900 drawings, prints, newspaper clippings and photographic reproductions of paintings, sculptures and everyday objects. Focusing on the Renaissance period but drawing patterns of a visual continuity from Ancient Greece to the Republic of Weimar, this fractal-like *montage* displayed Warburg's attempt of representing two, often dueling, types of responses to psychological and emotional events. As described in the draft "Introduction" ("Einleitung") to the *Atlas*, the first being a Dionysian, reactive and "phobic-kinetic", and the second an Apollonian, more reflective and "artistically" contained type of response (Newman; Hatch n.p.)⁶.



Fig 3. *Atlas Mnemosyne*, Panel 46, "Nymph. 'Hurry-Bring-It' in Tornabuoni circle. Domestication". Credits: The Warburg Institute, Cornell University
<https://warburg.library.cornell.edu/>

⁶ <https://warburg.library.cornell.edu/image-group/panel-70-introduction-1-5>. Accessed 7 May 2021.

One of the particularities of the *Atlas Mnemosyne* is the way in which Warburg applied the concept of “bewegtes Leben” (*life in motion* or *animated life*) to artistic images, exploring the idea of “Gebärdensprache” (language of gesture) as an earlier type of “pathosformel” (pathos formula), composed by emotionally charged visual tropes that were directly transmitted from the Antiquity by Renaissance artists. By doing so, as Didi-Huberman describes in *The Surviving Image* (2002), the author experiments on the possibility of assembling an Atlas (or, one could say, a network) of archetypal forms of knowledge, memory, and desire, (in)forming western (psycho-emotional) history:

To this Warburg replies simply that images do not call solely upon vision. (...) They do, at first, call upon the act of looking, but also upon knowledge, memory, and desire, and upon their capacity, which is always available, of intensification. This already means that they involve the subject in its totality— sensorial, psychological, and social. (Didi-Huberman 88-89)

In this sense, just like Malevich, Warburg analyses artistic images through the contemplation of their materiality and transhistorical nature, but, unlike the former, associating it with its ability to intensify sensorial and psychological experiences, as well as to generate meaning. Following Warburg’s psychoanalytic and iconographic approach, it is possible to identify some of the themes or archetypes enunciated by the *Atlas Mnemosyne* in AiQ’s galleries, more precisely the tensions and dualities encapsulated in these *pathos*-charged representations of the pandemic experience. For instance, *pathos* formulas of sacrifice and triumph, order and chaos, anger and resignation, ecstasy and melancholy, and often abstraction (more or less exuberant or humoristic) as a response mechanism to fear – or to what Warburg would call loss of “the how of metaphor” (Hönes n.p.)⁷, or lack of recognizable explanations when facing an invisible and incomprehensible threat. Alongside, their corresponding visual and sound trope-like motifs: the contrast between *inside* and *outside* life, transparency and opacity, windows and screens, stillness and movement, noise and silence, greyness and vividness of colours, animistic and geometrical representations of the virus.

Another relevant aspect is the way in which artistic representations are indeed permeated by digital media aesthetics and *apparatus*, confirming the idea that digitality and mediates every single aspect of this pandemic. Falling under the spectrum of electronic literature, the *panel* of three selected artworks to be further analysed, and regardless of their fractal nature, function as organisms that are part of a specific subnetwork, or *population*. In their self-reflective nature, revealing language as a form of virus in itself, these artworks act as distinctive virus strains that make distinct uses of different programming and poetic languages for artistic purposes: a mobile screen capture performance, a generative online memorial, and a software system/digital art installation. In this sense, this *sample* also has the potential to take even further the idea of written language as a virus on itself, both as a figure of thought and an experimental laboratory for artistic/literary creation.

In *Status Offline*⁸ Lebanese visual artist and photographer based in Paris, Clara Abi Nader, makes use of screen captures and screen recordings of her mobile’s videos, photos and text notes in order to produce a performance of an alternative daily life, while in

⁷ <https://warburg.library.cornell.edu/image-group/panel-45-introduction>. Accessed 7 May 2021.

⁸ Part of short-video series, “Thoughts on Screen”. <https://www.claraabinader.com/thoughts-on-screen>. Accessed 7 May 2021.

confinement. Largely deprived from physical access to the outside world, the colourful videos and photographs stored in her mobile phone are used in order to (re)connect to nature, by revisiting a specific selection of *summertime* visual tropes. Using a layer of textual notes intended to express sensorial, emotional and psychological experiences associated with her memories, the author creates a fictional narrative, an infectious literary *constructo* overlapping present reality indoors, and weaving meaning into the otherwise isolated videos and images portrayed.

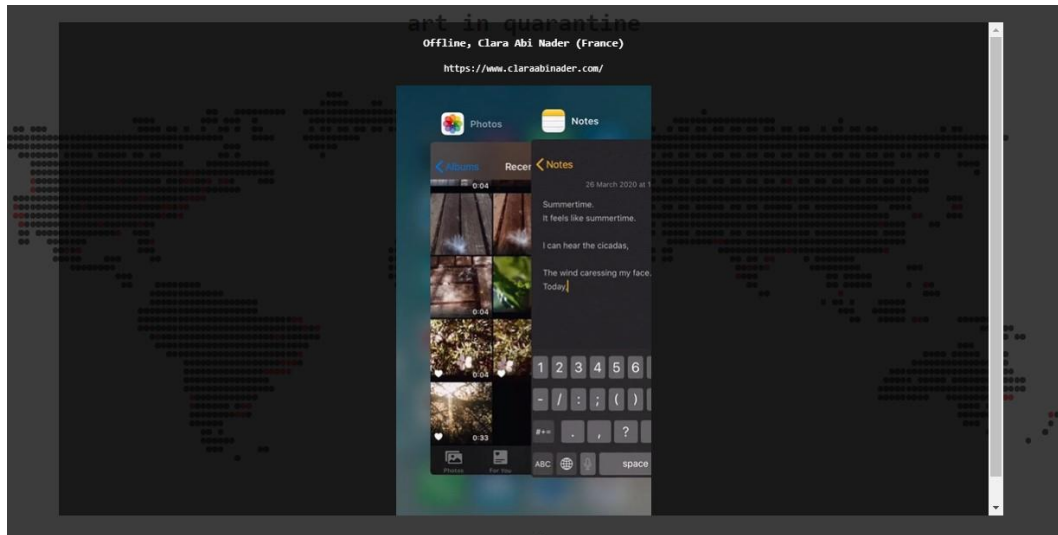


Fig 4. *Status Offline*, Clara Abi Nader, 2020. Screen Capture.

<https://wreading-digits.com/art-in-quarantine>

During performance, the device and its mediating action is always made visible, but a sense of proximity, or even intimacy, prevails, whilst it is the *medium* that grants us access to the author's feelings and thoughts *animated* through writing. Ironically, this piece ends with a disclaimer stating that "Clara isn't online", playing with the fictional nature of life inside and outside the (digital) screens.

In our second example, *Patient Zero (In Memory of Anyone Unknown to Me)*⁹, by Portuguese digital artist, Pedro Alves da Veiga, an adaptation of Elizabeth Jennings' poem "In Memory Of Anyone Unknown To Me" is used as part of an interactive online memorial of a different kind. Mimicking the action of a virus, the poem is hacked and transformed into *text-dust* animated sentences, conveying an additional, visual, layer of poetic meaning; "From ashes to ashes". The poem is then placed in dialogue with a symbolic and interactive representation of the transmission chain of the Coronavirus, through which the author pays homage to COVID-19 victims worldwide.

⁹ <https://pedroveiga.com/patient-zero/>

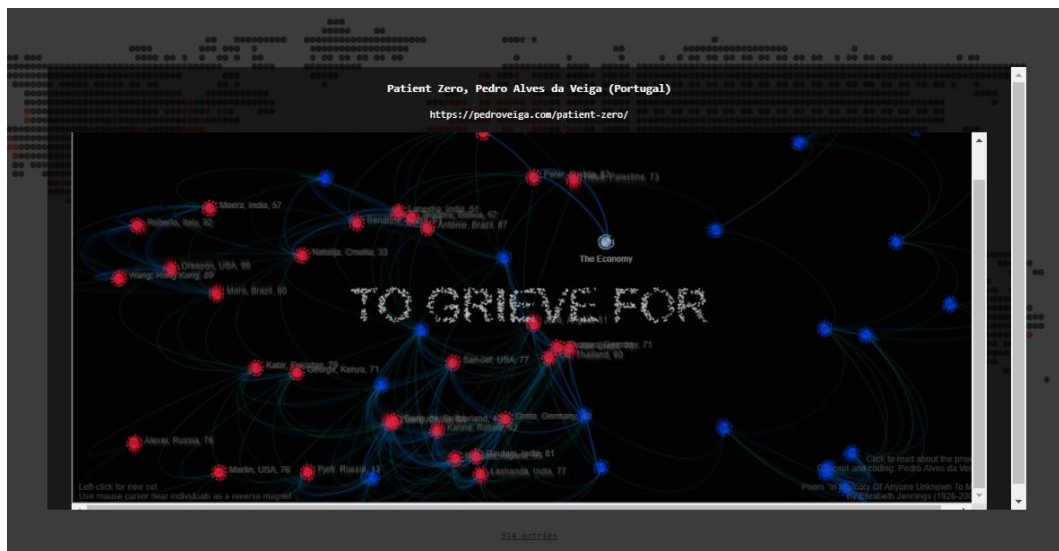


Fig 5. *Patient Zero (In Memory of Anyone Unknown to Me)*, Pedro Veiga, 2020. Screen Capture.

<https://wreading-digits.com/art-in-quarantine>

The individuals are represented by bright blue particles, except for Patient Zero, a single, initially infected individual, represented in contrasting red. Their real name, age and country of origin, generated from actual national databases, are (finally) made visible by the author, humanizing otherwise undifferentiated, anonymised particles. By interacting with the screen, the *observer*, whose cursor is presented as “The Economy”, accelerates the contact between infected individuals, spreading the disease and increasing the death toll. The interaction is accompanied by a soundtrack comprising a slowed down speech by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, in March 2020, famously comparing Coronavirus to a mild flu and condemning lockdown strategies adopted in other countries.

Presenting a distinct form of *digital contagion*, the third example, *viral#c*, by polish artist, mathematician and composer Robert B. Lisek, is a digital rendering of the software program developed in the context of a larger project which previously resulted in a video and sound installation¹⁰. The program allows for the combination of the author’s DNA sequence with that of different viruses (Lloviu virus, Polio virus, Marburg virus, HIV and Ebola virus), which gradually transform the initial sequence, generating new, entwined, sequences. The newly generated sequences are then converted, in real time, into pointing colour and sound outcomes and retroactively fed back into the machine.

¹⁰ <http://lisek.art.pl/CAPITAL.html>



Fig 6. *viral#c*, Robert B. Lisek, 2020. Screen Capture.
<https://wreading-digits.com/art-in-quarantine>

By exposing the *wordlyphagic* processes present in the interaction of the author’s genetic code with that of viruses and other *pathological* human and nonhuman agents – in this case, the software program that acts both as a mediator and an active coauthor – ultimately, in its AiQ rendering, *viral#c* reveals that language is indeed a virus, and that viruses are language, in whatever form they may take.

Burroughs understood language in its *material* dimensions and infectious ability to generate and transmit meaning, acting both as a *medium* and a significant of its own, i.e., acting like other cultural/technological artifacts/mediators which assume a symbiotic behaviour in regard to their (non)human host. Similarly, in applying the idea of “life in motion” to (artistic) images, Aby Warburg was profoundly influenced by the technological production of his time, namely the advances in chromatography, dynamography and the seismograph. As Didi-Huberman points out in *The Surviving Image*, Warburg’s notions of the *Pathosformel* and the Dynamogramm presuppose “an energetic and dynamic conception of the trace, which is viewed as a reflexive prolongation of the organic movements—mediated, however, by a stylus [style], a word that must be understood in its technical sense as well as in the aesthetic sense.” (71). Furthermore, Warburg would compare his own work as an historian to that of a seismograph, when trying to decode and translate the *pathological* shockwaves of historical events amongst his own, interior, experience of the event, the *symptom*, being that the seismic action also necessarily affects the device itself, making it, *empathically* tremble.

Demonstrating Parikka’s view on the Internet, himself a/effectively infected by Terranova, the AiQ project is representative of an optimal ecosystem for the *propagation of movement*, “often with a special emphasis on bottom-up emergence” (2010: XVII). Namely by, *taking advantage*, (using Galloway and Thacker’s words), on the one hand of the Internet, a rhizomatic and viral-like sociocultural subnetwork, and, on the other, the subnetwork of artists in quarantine, in order to create an online space for *benign* artistic infection. Constituting at the same time, *material* and *immaterial*, the Internet is a potential experimental laboratory, *materializing* some of the Coronavirus own characteristics; an airborne transmission virus, made visible only through its tropes (or masks) and *symptoms*.

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