

Viral: distributed agencies and irreversible change

The call for papers for *Viral* suggests that “(p)arallel discourses of the viral have generated a space where attempts to contain and drive contagions continue to influence and determine relationships between people, animals, technologies and ecologies. In the 1980s and 1990s the virus was seen as a replication machine that forced a questioning of the boundaries of bodies (whether carbon or silicon) and the hybrid borders of identity.”

The writers here engage with what the term viral has come to mean, including a movement from the literal to the figurative. Its histories in 1980s philosophical concerns with the HIV virus, a direct challenge to the resilience of the human and therefore an indicator of what came to be known as the post-human, remain. The virus’s qualities equip it to serve as a model for the cyborgian theories of the post-modern and post-structural period, for changing understandings of subjectivity and its boundaries, and the elision of human and non-human futures. Understood as a microscopic entity, the virus combines organic and inorganic properties and its only concern is to replicate itself rapidly, sometimes through an inorganic and machine-like drill, by hijacking a cell’s nucleus. The sexualisation of the term, a consequence of its association with the HIV virus, gives the analogy further purchase on the imagination.

In this issue, we see discussions around agency and complexity, and in particular ways that apparently slight interventions can produce what seem to be disproportionate changes and different kinds of boundary riding. Most of the texts are concerned with or employ the arts, where the term viral in itself operates as a vector, transmitting a sense of contamination, of inevitable transformation, of radical imbalance between scale and agency. Writers deal with subjectivities that are at risk or transformed in some way, and with attempts to provide alternative viewpoints and strategies. The digital environment comes under scrutiny as its utopian ideals are challenged and appropriated by less benevolent entities.

Philip Leonard brings together London-based Canadian writer Cory Doctorow, Yochai Benkler’s *The Wealth of Networks* and the developers of free and open-source software to consider the hybrid and distributed nature of contemporary subjectivity. Doctorow’s interdisciplinary writing deals through a mixture of fiction and reportage with the hardening of corporate and legislative entities as they undermine the possibility of utopian ideals. But specificity and materiality also infect and infect identity as, for instance, his characters include the progeny of a mountain and a washing machine. The social capacities of such extreme examples of distributed and cyborgian subjectivities provide a platform for an analysis of the power plays of network culture.

The digital acceleration of this culture sees artists intervening directly in the products of commercial and political media. Such interventions are regarded by some legal structures as theft of intellectual property and by others as a protected demonstration of the freedom of speech. The post-structural characterisation of media as having agency in their own right implies that dialogue within the semantic fields of the texts' visual or aural forms is inevitable. Bronwyn Holloway-Smith discusses the problematics of the use of existing material in the production of artworks that seek to alter meaning or to recontextualise material through its partial reproduction, and the resistance that notions of intellectual property and the delineated 'author' function have for this freedom.

In the digital environment, information networks slip between situations of control and of free-flowing, hacker-like interventions. Martin Kean discusses the ways in which informal user-led systems adapt programmes to fit circumstances which may require a diversity of outcomes in print or digital form and may be as focused on the social environments of the users as on the systems themselves.

Is the term viral positive or negative? Is it useful as a mode to access complexity, or pathology? Discussions often use sexual analogies. Hoetger's review of the work of *viruscircus* speaks of the use of the framework of sexuality to indicate the impossibility of entirely individualised relationships and bodies of knowledge, in particular within the medical profession.

The destabilisation of the genetic identity of our food is signalled in Vivienne Smith's distressed relationship with her breakfast banana. The varroa mite's destabilisation of the immune systems of the bees is a complex negotiation played out through pragmatics and prayers: Kerrin P. Sharpe reminds us of the emotional intensity of that particular human-animal relationship and its enduring metaphorical strength.

As metaphor or analogy the term indicates damage or unwelcome, unwilling alteration; a power that cannot be revoked. Its application to the implication of the past upon the present through familial structures occurs in David Howard's *Memory is Viral*. Howard describes the ineradicable significance of apparently minor details and the thrown shadow of the father after death.

The power of the father is also a concern in the artist's page on Adrian Hall's work *DataFlower*, a public sculpture involving a disjointed transmission through contaminating and destabilising media of the voices of city fathers from a Town Hall Clock to the public space below.

Another aspect of several of the texts here is the resistance to human agency of the hard knock of the inorganic. The physical operation of complex change upon both the geological and the socio-economic structures of the city is the focus of Kristen O'Sullivan Peren's design for a public sculpture, discussed here by Cassandra Fusco. Peren proposed a work that would use a city's entire plastic refuse for three years in the production of luminous cubes. While that project was radical in its absorption of the detritus of a city into an artwork, its demise lay in its intersection with the event of the Christchurch earthquake and a very different kind of agency. The work was commissioned for a site on the most significant fault line in the North Island, one that familiarity had made almost invisible.

Finally, Brendan Hokowhitu's review of *Racism, Colonialism, and Indigeneity in Canada: A Reader*, while retaining its autonomy as a review, argues that the notion of racism has contaminated post-colonial and indigenous studies, and should be distinguished clearly from them.

The term *Viral* then allows us to think through the destabilisations endemic to twenty-first century life, small-scale rapid change with complex implications and the struggle to determine what holds fast against such change; and to question the value of characterising any entity as stable or pure.

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