Introduction

A History of Contagion

In February 2009, Caryl Churchill premiered a short play called *Seven Jewish Children* at London's Royal Court Theatre. This pointed, poetic meditation on contentious Jewish, Israeli, and Palestinian histories is both compact—its printed text running a scant six pages—and oblique, containing neither named characters nor specified settings. Each of the brief, elliptical scenes features adult voices arguing over how to explain fraught historical events to an unseen, voiceless child. They debate how to talk about the Holocaust, and later the Israeli war of independence and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. By the time *Seven Jewish Children* had its American premiere at the New York Theatre Workshop, the text had sparked local, and then international controversy. Viewers were outraged by what they perceived as biased depictions of Jewish and Israeli actions and rhetoric. But not only viewers. Equally angry responses came from those who had not seen or read the play but had instead heard of its subject matter secondhand.

As the debate surrounding *Seven Jewish Children* circulated through international media, the play began to proliferate too. Activists performed it at political rallies and community gatherings, from Israel to Washington, D.C., and videos of productions began circulating on YouTube. Churchill's text soon inspired a wave of copycat playlets, with titles like *Seven Palestinian Children*, *Seven Other Children*, and *The Eighth Child*—some of these curated into joint stagings with the original, others appearing only online. The authors of these new texts mimicked Churchill's form but replaced her dialogue with language reflecting their own perspectives. Within months, many versions of Churchill's play were in circulation around the world: geographically dispersed, but thematically connected. In other words, *Seven Jewish Children* is a play that, in the parlance of the digital age, “went viral.”

Not only did *Seven Jewish Children* go viral. It was, I believe, designed to do so. The play's eloquent brevity, its sparse staging requirements, and its deliberate political provocations suggest that it belongs to a new species of performance, self-consciously created for rapid international circulation: viral performance for the twenty-first century. If Churchill could not have predicted how artists, audiences, and reading and listening publics would
respond to her text, the play’s form still suggested openness to rapid dissemination and radical reimagining. So did the terms under which Churchill offered other artists the production rights, which were openly available at no cost, as long as audiences were not charged admission and the producing artists collected funds for the organization Medical Aid for Palestinians.¹

Understanding Seven Jewish Children not only as a play written for digitally dispersed publics, but more particularly as an instance of what I am calling “viral performance,” places Churchill’s drama in the company of a diverse collection of modern and contemporary projects that draw on theater’s contagious possibilities to engage with audiences and to spread ideas, gestures, and images in live and mediated form. This book traces the contours of such a constellation of artistic works, charting a series of viral dramaturgies across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They range from the Living Theatre’s revolutionary performances of the 1960s to the media-savvy ventures of the self-described viral artists General Idea, and from digital-age provocations by Eva and Franco Mattes to theatrical networks like the 2003 Lysistrata Project. The works I place in this category are almost always deeply political, seeking to mobilize spectators toward radical action or to engage them in considering the contagious properties of ideology in the culture at large. They also almost always harness the properties of emerging media forms in order to depict, but also create, fundamental shifts in the transmission of action, and especially actions meant to further social change and political critique.

The viral, a concept that has not yet been substantively applied to theater or performance, illuminates these artists’ responses to some of the oldest questions in theatrical theory, and to a rapidly changing world of new media, new audiences, and new modes of public participation. Viruses, in their many forms—digital, biological, artistic—nearly always function as disruptions in the fabric of daily life, making them natural allies for generations of avant-garde artists who elevated rupture into the primary dramaturgy of radical change. Meanwhile, viral dissemination, with its implications of speed, simultaneity, and multidirectional spread, draws new technologies into service, and pushes to the fore assumptions about how and why we pass ideas, affects, and gestures to one another: out of revolutionary fervor or allegiance to ideologies, motivated by social critique or inchoate affective response. In creating viral works, these artists provoke profound questions about the politics of dissemination itself, asking whether media-fueled transmission can ever be democratic, or whether it always ultimately shores up systems of control. They engage with the politics of spectatorship, dismantling easy equations between participation and political efficacy, and between contagious dissemination and the loss of individual identity and choice.

Viral dramaturgies also challenge fundamental ideas about theater. They stretch performance time, rejecting compact dramatic structures in favor of the open-ended series, the expansive network, or the evolving process.
They upend relationships between actors and spectators, turning audience members into performers or placing the actions of viewers center stage. They unravel distinctions between live and mediated art, and between performance and its documentation. They draw attention to the invisible circulation and dissemination of emotion and affect. This book, by examining a series of works that are productively described in viral terms, argues for the necessary inclusion of the viral in dialogues about radical, political, and transmedial performance.

My exploration of viral performance begins by drawing together the many strands of theatrical and cultural theory necessary to come to terms with the stakes and dimensions of the viral. No singular theoretical framework can account for the artistic and cultural power that concepts of virality and contagion have held; for the ways they have evolved; or for their changing relationships to performance, media, and spectatorship. Instead, I invoke a diverse range of historical precedents, from Plato’s foundational assertion of theater’s contagious power, to Artaud, whose essay “The Theater and the Plague” set the terms for modern artists experimenting with viral modes. I draw on the history of new media forms, which have frequently been understood to wield contagious power, and I examine contagion’s changing significance in affect theory and in postmodern philosophy.

Through such a wide-ranging introduction, I aim to offer the panoramic view of viral theory—and the performance histories it calls upon—that is necessary for the artistic close-readings that follow. My case studies are arranged chronologically, beginning in the 1960s with the Living Theatre’s Mysteries and Smaller Pieces and Paradise Now and viewing the company’s use of Artaudian principles as a point of origin for modern viral performance. Moving to the early 1970s in my second chapter, I juxtapose three dramaturgies of invisibility, all of which relied on spectators to perform in the near-absence of actors: General Idea’s transmedial spectacles, Augusto Boal’s invisible theater, and Marc Estrin’s radical infiltrative theater. My story then proceeds into the 1990s, investigating artists who created work alongside the evolving internet, and who use large-scale public fictions to test the contagious properties of new media and performance: the collective Critical Art Ensemble; the duo Eva and Franco Mattes; and the German film and theater director Christoph Schlingensief. Finally, I explore the twenty-first-century advent of viral performance networks, examining both the dramaturgy and the artistic philosophies fueling the 2003 Lysistrata Project, Suzan-Lori Parks’s 365 Days/365 Plays Festival, and Churchill’s Seven Jewish Children. I conclude with a meditation on “Virus in the Theater,” a 2006 performance project that simultaneously returned to the origins of viral dramaturgy and suggested new directions in which the viral might venture.

In grouping these artists together—in many cases, artists who have not been considered side by side before—and in calling them viral, my goal is to recognize their shared participation in a set of theatrical strategies, and
to build a case for the viral as a thematic and formal concept that has held profound meaning for many modern and contemporary theater-makers. I do not suggest that these theater-makers constitute an artistic movement, or that they represent a direct line of artistic influence (in fact, resistance to such linear modes of evolution is, for many of these artists, a motivating factor driving them to work in viral modes). I also do not presume to account for every artist who has created viral performance; my case studies are limited in number and in geographical and historical scope, representing a few of the many artists laboring in the aftermath of the European and American avant-gardes, and engaging, overtly or obliquely, with the legacies of Plato and Aristotle. Nor can I claim that every artist analyzed here has self-identified as a maker of viral or contagious work. Rather, I view the philosophical and artistic ideas explored in this book as multiple dimensions of a complex history: a series of linked schools of thought, adjacent lines of influence, and complementary modes of art-making that continue to permeate conceptions of contagious art, and of contagion itself. The artists described here challenge wider cultural assumptions about the meaning of “the viral,” about the nature of a “virus,” and about the ways ideas, feelings, and gestures spread.

I also deliberately avoid proposing a singular definition of the term “viral,” or its close cousins: “virus,” “contagious,” and “infectious,” among others. In biological terms, the virus is a modern discovery, emerging with the twentieth century. The word describes an agent that spreads infectiously, and that can only survive through the life of its host body. “Viral,” whose emergence in the *Oxford English Dictionary* postdates “virus” by nearly fifty years, describes the mode in which such pathogenic agents spread. “Contagion” is much older, referring more broadly to the communication of disease from one body to another. Such meanings have offered profound metaphors and, in some cases, structural principles for the artists in this book. Yet holding too closely to biological analogies would limit analysis of the artistic works under discussion. This book is not about the relationship between performance and medical disease (indeed, many wonderful studies already take up that topic). Rather, I seek out the changing cultural, artistic, and philosophical power that the concepts “viral” and “contagious” wield: their influence on radical theater’s form, and on its terms of engagement with spectators and with media. I use the term “viral” flexibly, exploring the vocabulary of infection’s evolving significance for ideas about cultural transmission, spectatorship, artistic power, and politics.

Such terminology—viruses and virality, contagion and transmission—is especially charged in the current era: our historical moment is a viral one. The advent of digital culture (as well as the evolving culture of technology that preceded it) has occasioned a seismic shift in the discourse surrounding contagiousness and the viral. “The virus,” wrote artist and scholar Zach Blas in a 2012 essay, “is perhaps the major trope of the postmodern condition.”


In so saying, Blas joined a growing number of philosophers and scholars in fields ranging from media studies to affect theory who have identified the figure of the virus, and viral modes of transmission, as primary metaphors in the contemporary imagination. Viruses and virality make legible many of the political, social, artistic, and economic relationships in twenty-first-century culture. They describe the workings of digital-age capitalism, the strategies fueling new modes of political action, and the affective properties of emerging media forms.

Viral and contagious models of thought emerged in philosophy both before and alongside the development of digital technologies. As early as 1987, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari proposed the concept of contagion as an alternative model for cultural and social transmission and development, one not tied to heredity or bound by capitalist-controlled channels of power. “We oppose epidemic to filiation, contagion to heredity, peopling by contagion to sexual reproduction, sexual production,” they wrote. While contagion here represented an escape hatch from constricted social systems and historical paradigms, in the decades that followed, the concept was increasingly linked to global capital and to digital technology. In 1996 Jean Baudrillard commented on the epidemiological power of the computer virus, writing, “The tiniest computer bacillus will soon create as much mayhem in our societies as the influenza or smallpox bacilli did among the Amerindians of the sixteenth century.” And in 2000 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri declared, “The age of globalization is the age of universal contagion.”

By the first decades of the twenty-first century, scholars were looking back, tracing the advent of the viral, and looking forward to predict its evolution. Thierry Bardini’s 2006 essay “Hypervirus: A Clinical Report” argued that it was in the early 1980s that philosophical concepts of the virus began to merge with ideas about the computer virus and about biological epidemic. “At the dawn of capitalism’s fourth phase, the hypervirus awoke,” writes Bardini—“hypervirus” referring, here, to the contagious spread of the viral concept itself (as Bardini puts it, “the ‘virus’ virus”). He continued, “From this point on, an explosive diffusion in ‘postmodern culture’ emerged, eventually it plateaued near saturation, redefining culture as a viral ecology.” The following year, the media scholar Jussi Parikka, in his study Digital Contagions, proposed the concept of “viral capitalism.” The year 2012 saw two significant works of scholarship dedicated to the concept of the viral: a volume of Women’s Studies Quarterly entitled “Viral” and Tony D. Sampson’s Virality, which synthesizes theories of social contagion, examining the claim that “the age of networks is indeed the age of contagion.” Such assertions, made over the course of decades and across intellectual fields, aid in identifying the models of viral transmission practiced and questioned by the artists in this book, and testify to the recent proliferation of viral theories.

And yet: theater, in the cultural imagination, has always been contagious. Since Plato, philosophers have argued that stage actions can be infectious
transmitted to audience members—some viewing this as a source of theater’s danger to society, others following Aristotle in seeing it as the reason why performance can serve as a form of moral inoculation against social ills. These classical modes of understanding theatrical reception have persisted: they remain, occasionally submerged, beneath centuries of anti-theatrical rhetoric, and they fuel defenses of theater’s moral potential. They structure our understanding of how and why performance works in society—the contentious question of theatrical “efficacy”—and they inflect modern philosophies of audience reception and response, from the writings of Artaud to those of Rancière. They add dimension and stakes to questions of theatrical contagion, recurring in renovated form in modern and contemporary viral performance.

These models of thought register, above all, a continued and widespread belief—one held by artists, philosophers, critics, political leaders, even corporate marketers—that when people come into contact with one another, something spreads. Whether we plan it or not, whether we like it or not, whether it spreads through imitation or through difference, through deliberate copying or subconscious somnambulism, something spreads. Performance, an art form requiring and relying on live contact, renders such spreading visible, raises its stakes, gums up its works with fiction, and encodes it in dramatic structure and theatrical form. The artists explored in this book rarely attempt to disseminate their ideas or gestures as directly as a viral marketer, a political leader, or a computer hacker would. These artists’ approaches to transmission, rather, tend to undermine such simplified concepts of contagion, to point out our susceptibilities to consumer capitalism and political slogans, to seek subversive forms of dissemination. Yet they also cannot help holding dialogue with the many strands of discourse, philosophical and popular, surrounding viral culture: all testifying to the viral’s persistent appearance and reappearance, all directing our attention to the age-old instinct that—in some form, through some mechanism—when people gather, something spreads.

**Platonic Foundations: Theater Is Contagious**

If “going viral” is a twenty-first-century concept, the idea that theater is contagious is as old as Plato, who laid the foundations for describing performance in the language of infection, contagion, and inoculation. His theories prompted Aristotle’s famous response in the *Poetics*, and structured anti-theatrical discourse for centuries to come. The historical distance separating these classical philosophers from contemporary artists like Eva and Franco Mattes and Critical Art Ensemble only deepens the significance of contemporary artists’ choices (implicit or explicit) to create work that engages with spectators in Platonic and Aristotelian terms.
In the *Republic*, Plato, speaking through the figure of Socrates, famously banished poets from his ideal city, citing the dangerous effects mimesis might have on the unformed minds of the city’s young leaders. Unflattering tales of gods and heroes could inspire morally muddled thinking on the part of listeners, and susceptible audience members might be persuaded to imitate the weak or immoral behavior they witnessed onstage. Actors, meanwhile, might absorb characters’ bad qualities simply by playing them. Plato’s initial discussion of the perils of mimesis occurs in book 3, where Socrates sketches a course of study for the hypothetical leaders of the new city. These unformed minds, Socrates declares, must listen only to stories in which gods and heroes are portrayed in the flattering light of virtue:

> For, my dear Adeimantus, if our young men listen to passages like these seriously and don’t laugh at them as unworthy, they are hardly likely to think this sort of conduct unworthy of them as men, or to resist the temptation to similar words and actions.”

Even comedy is suspect, since Socrates links it directly to the expression of violent impulses, noting, “Indulgence in violent laughter commonly invites a violent reaction.”

Not only would it be dangerous for the Republic’s guardians to witness examples of gods, heroes, or leaders behaving immorally; performance would also, as Jonas Barish notes in *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, allow for a vertiginous freedom of thought that could lead citizens to question their predetermined roles in a heavily regulated society. Socrates argues that each person possesses narrow aptitudes, “which makes it impossible to play many roles well, whether in real life or in representations of it on the stage.” For the guardians’ part, he says:

> If they do take part in dramatic or other representations, they must from their earliest years act the part only of characters suitable to them—men of courage, self-control, piety, freedom of spirit and similar qualities. They should neither do a mean action, nor be clever at acting a mean or otherwise disgraceful part on the stage for fear of catching the infection in real life.

With the phrase “catching the infection,” Plato directly links the concept of contagion to mimesis, bequeathing to future generations of anti-theatricalists the idea that performance is contagious, both to those who watch stage representations and to those who perform them.

The major classical counterpoint to Plato’s idea—Aristotle’s discussion of tragedy in the *Poetics*—envisioned a different conduit from performance to morality. Rather than resisting the temptation to fall under imitative poetry’s spell, Aristotle writes, audiences can experience catharsis by watching a
tragedy that follows particular dramaturgical principles, and through catharsis, can eliminate violent and antisocial impulses. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle describes the combined effects of the elements of a tragic plot, proposing that “through pity and fear it achieves the purgation (catharsis) of such emotions.”

Aristotle wrote relatively little on the precise meaning of catharsis, and the concept has been the subject of intense debate among classical scholars. In addition to the *Poetics*, the concept appears in the *Politics*, a work that cannot be assumed to employ “catharsis” in the same way, but which nevertheless offers additional description of the term. In the *Politics*, Aristotle suggests that listening to music, even music that conveys strong and dangerous feelings, can be morally beneficial, provoking a form of purgation in its audiences:

> An emotion which strongly affects some souls is present in all to a varying degree, for example pity and fear, and also ecstasy. To this last some people are particularly liable, and we see that under the influence of religious music and songs which drive the soul to frenzy, they calm down as if they had been medically treated and purged. People who are given to pity or fear, and emotional people generally, and others to the extent that they have similar emotions, must be affected in the same way; for all of them must experience a kind of purgation and pleasurable relief.

Such concepts of purgation and relief represent one powerful strand of thought about how theater can be socially valuable, not in spite of its immoral or antisocial themes but because of them. Many of the artists I explore in this book see their work as a form of inoculation, presenting audiences with performances of social and political threat in order to, emotionally or ideologically, immunize them against the greater harms of ignorance and paranoia.

The Platonic attack on the theater, and the associated language of contagion, contamination, and inoculatory catharsis, reemerged repeatedly in the anti-theatrical debates that cropped up in times and places where performance played a vital role in Western culture. Such concepts recurred under the Roman republic and empire, in the writings of the early Christian philosophers Tertullian and Saint Augustine. In the sixteenth century, Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defense of Poesy* echoed both Plato and Aristotle; in the seventeenth century, the Puritan William Prynne’s *Histriomastix* condemned the English stage in tones that recalled Tertullian’s, while Jeremy Collier’s *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* took a Platonic view of theater’s ability to influence the public. In the nineteenth century, the language of contagion emerged in, for instance, the scandals surrounding such modern dramas as Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, which was famously condemned as “a loathsome sore unbandaged; a dirty act done publicly.”
The Platonic fear of theater’s moral contagion, and the Aristotelian hope in performance as social inoculation, have endured. For my purposes, in describing the works of modern and contemporary artists who have drawn on these ideas, it matters less whether recent artists’ dramaturgies are precisely or consciously rooted in these philosophers’ texts, and much more that Platonic and Aristotelian ideas, reshaped and renegotiated, have proven inspiring to artists over two millennia, and function particularly as grounding assumptions for artists creating viral performance. Such concepts reemerged with particular force in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when new types of media—which, in turn, demanded new types of spectatorship and public participation—inspired avant-garde artists to rethink the contagious properties of performance. During the same era, evolving alongside new media forms, a new school of philosophy, known as crowd theory and promoted by social theorists like Gabriel Tarde and Gustave Le Bon, began to explore the social transmission of ideas, actions, and emotions. Their thinking would have a profound effect on the emergence of viral and contagious concepts in the modern era.

Social Transmission and Contagious Crowds

“The age we are about to enter will in truth be the era of crowds,” declared Gustave Le Bon in his 1895 *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, one of the most vivid expressions of the late nineteenth century’s fascination with the social transmission of affect, which was often viewed in contagious terms. Indeed, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, concepts of cultural contagion reemerged forcefully in the schools of thought surrounding social transmission, particularly transmission in crowds. Such modes of thinking provide a context for modern artists’ relationships to concepts of contagion: particularly Artaud, but more broadly, the many theater-makers in this book, such as the Living Theatre and Critical Art Ensemble, whose work engages with the transmission of feeling through live and mediated publics. (I am indebted to Kimberly Jannarone’s work for my fascination with crowd theory and for connecting it to Artaud’s ideas of contagion; more on this connection shortly.)

The French sociologist Gabriel Tarde’s *The Laws of Imitation*, first published in 1890, preceded Le Bon in theorizing social contagion, viewing imitation as the driving force in the propagation of customs, ideas, emotions, and more. “Everything which is social and non-vital or non-physical in the phenomena of societies is caused by imitation,” he wrote. Tarde’s theory offered several key interventions in the conceptualization of social interactions. He proposed dismantling distinctions between the natural and the cultural, a move that would later be echoed by many late twentieth-century philosophers, and particularly by the theorists of cultural evolution who, in
the 1970s, began conceiving the field of memetics, a school of thought whose ideas would in turn fuel much twenty-first-century thinking about viral culture. He also proposed that social imitation unfolds largely below the level of consciousness, that we adopt each other’s phrases, gestures, and affects through unexplained volition rather than deliberate decisionmaking. “I shall not seem fanciful in thinking of the social man as a veritable somnambulist,” he wrote.

For later thinkers who invoked concepts of contagion—including Gilles Deleuze, who drew on Tarde’s concepts of difference in *Difference and Repetition*, and Bruno Latour, who cited Tarde as a predecessor for actor-network theory—this model of social transmission proved foundational. Tarde’s assertions that affects and behaviors spread in indirect, nonlinear fashions, that they are passed along unconsciously and sometimes involuntarily, and that they travel along the lines of affective affinities rather than overt cognition, offered a theory of social development that evaded the restrictive models of cultural evolution embodied by normative systems of power and deterministic models of heredity. Though few of the artists I examine would directly endorse a “somnambulist” model of affective transmission, many—the Living Theatre, Eva and Franco Mattes—have been profoundly invested in nonlinear and emotion-driven concepts of contagion, while others, such as the creators of the networked performances examined in chapter 4, structured theatrical projects around the inclusive, nonlinear dissemination of performances and texts.

During the decade when Tarde was developing his theories of social transmission, Le Bon founded the field of inquiry that would come to be known as crowd theory, later to be associated with the right-wing fascist movements of 1930s Italy and Germany, and reconceived in the 1960s by Elias Canetti. Le Bon’s theories provide striking expressions of the power that ideas of social contagion, catalyzed by live presence, would assume in the twentieth century. For Le Bon, as for Tarde, transmission among the members of a gathered group occurred primarily at the subconscious level, and acquired its force from the loss of individual cognition that mass presence provoked. Both Tarde and Le Bon viewed social interactions as sites of involuntary contagious transmission; in Le Bon’s paradigm, this offered evidence of crowds’ ultimate malleability and their susceptibility to the seductions of powerful leaders:

> We see, then, that the disappearance of the conscious personality, the predominance of the unconscious personality, the turning by means of suggestion and contagion of feelings and ideas in an identical direction, the tendency to immediately transform the suggested ideas into acts; these, we see, are the principal characteristics of the individual forming part of a crowd. He is no longer himself, but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will.
This vision of de-individuation, which also reflected racial and class-based anxieties about the changing populations of industrializing European cities, was understandably appealing to political leaders seeking to maximize their charismatic sway; Mussolini famously cited Le Bon as an important influence. Le Bon was rightfully discredited in the mid-twentieth century and after, both for his association with fascist leaders and for the undisguised elitism and primitivism driving his thought.

Even so, crowd theory proved transformative for creators of political theater during the early twentieth century, and its implications for social transmission inflect viral performance today. Early twentieth-century mass spectacles, as Erika Fischer-Lichte persuasively documents in *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, drew on assumptions similar to those of crowd theorists, incorporating large groups of spectators or employing vast numbers of performers. From the first modern Olympic Games to the large-scale Soviet spectacle *The Storming of the Winter Palace*, Fischer-Lichte argues that modern mass performances functioned as attempts to revive a fantasy of long-lost communal feeling. These temporary assemblies, she explains, appealed to artists and publics seeking an antidote to a growing sense of isolation and ennui that—as Emile Durkheim observed—had emerged as industrial society created increasingly mobile populations and severed individuals from traditional ways of life. New mass performances created narratives of national sacrifice and resurrection (as in the case of many Nazi performances) or mythologized moments of nation-building (as in the Soviet spectacles). In most cases, these mass performances used the excitement created by the gathering of many bodies to forge new national communities bolstered by utopian ideologies and eschatological narratives.

Central to the appeal of mass spectacles, Fischer-Lichte proposes, was the belief that feelings and ideas are particularly contagious among members of a live, gathered crowd. In mass spectacles, theatre appeared to be capable of transforming individuals into members of a community, albeit only temporarily, by focusing on the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, on the physical acts of the actors and their capacity to “infect” the spectators as well as on the “contagion” occurring among the spectators.

The suspicion that live co-presence lends itself to contagious feeling grew, and assumed deeper implications, in the wake of World War II. Elias Canetti’s *Crowds and Power*, published in 1962 and often considered the landmark work of twentieth-century crowd theory, sought to understand the behavior of publics in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Although Canetti was critical of the anti-populist anxiety displayed by writers like Le Bon, he likewise explored the ways that crowds changed their members’ behavior and consciousness. “Few can resist its contagion,” he wrote of the crowd; “it always
wants to go on growing and there are no inherent limits to its growth.”

Canetti’s detailed analysis of mass behavior posited a taxonomy of crowds and argued for a specific sequence of events in the creation of a crowd—in particular, a watershed moment of “discharge,” when members of a group relinquish their individual wills to fuse emotionally with those surrounding them. “This is the moment,” Canetti wrote, “when all who belong to the crowd get rid of their differences and feel equal.”

The dramaturgical connections linking bodily co-presence, mass identification, and contagion famously reached an apotheosis in the writings of Antonin Artaud, who figures in this study as a central source of theory governing theater’s contagious potential. In *Artaud and His Doubles*, Kimberly Jannarone’s 2010 study of the French playwright, director, and philosopher’s politics and aesthetics, Jannarone argues that Artaud’s ideas about spectatorship align clearly and disturbingly with the strategies used by fascist regimes at rallies and mass performances. She demonstrates just how much early twentieth-century crowd theory, particularly as pioneered by Le Bon, has in common with the way Artaud envisioned spectators behaving at his ideal theater. Crowd theory, in turn, illuminates affinities between Artaud’s theoretical plans for an all-consuming theatrical spectacle and the real spectacles created by the Fascist and Nazi movements of the 1930s. “Crowd theory,” writes Jannarone, “helps us see that the Theater of Cruelty envisions the audience in many of the same ways people’s theaters in Italy and Germany did . . . as a group of people they would make feel liberated and exalted while also keeping it under tight control.”

Few of the artists examined in this book share the political goals of either Artaud or the creators of fascist people’s theaters. These artists, for the most part, engage with ideas of crowd-fueled contagion in order to complicate them—as in Critical Art Ensemble’s *Radiation Burn*, which directly pitted an audience’s susceptibility to contagious fear against its capacity for individual contemplation. Yet the principles of contagious social transmission have persisted through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, recurring as artists test their limits and as theorists renegotiate concepts of cultural circulation. These concepts found their way into modern and contemporary theater most directly through the writings of Artaud.

**The Theater and the Plague**

Antonin Artaud’s essay “The Theater and the Plague” is the best-known and most influential modern assertion of theater’s contagious power. Echoes of the essay’s convictions and refractions of its wild imagination recur in many of the works explored in this book, from the Living Theatre’s efforts to directly embody Artaud’s plague in *Mysteries* to Eva and Franco Mattes’s experiments with digital contagion.
The diversity of works taking inspiration from Artaud’s theatrical plague testifies not only to its influence but also to its ambiguity: the puzzle of just what he believed the plague was, how he believed it would spread, and how these things resembled the performance and reception of theater. His essay is steeped in medical terminology, yet disavows epidemiological science, at once detailing the theater’s powers of transmission and distinguishing these powers from the biological principles of germ theory. “We must recognize,” he wrote, “that the theater, like the plague, is a delirium and is communicative.”

There could hardly be a more direct statement of theater’s contagious power. Yet lingering alongside Artaud’s repeated recourse to medical description is, always, a deep anxiety about the terms in which science would or could understand the mechanisms of contagious transmission. In relating a parable from the eighteenth-century outbreak of plague in Europe, Artaud emphasized the spiritual dimension of the plague’s presence, its ability to communicate without physical connection. He described an incident in which a Sardinian viceroy, sensing the plague’s proximity in a dream, refuses to let nearby ships dock in his harbor, intuitively averting an epidemic in his territory. “It cannot be denied that between the viceroy and the plague a palpable communication, however subtle, was established: and it is too easy and explains nothing to limit the communication of such a disease to contagion by simple contact,” Artaud concluded. Later, he elaborated on the distinction between medical infection and his own more flexible epidemiology. “If the essential theater is like the plague, it is not because it is contagious,” he wrote, “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.”

This shift in the relationship between theater and plague—the revelation that contagion is not the point of connection, after all—gestures toward the philosopher’s antagonism to modern science and medicine. More importantly for this study, it also resists any temptation, on a reader’s part, to draw a straightforward analogy between biology and art: a rejection that later makers of viral art will echo and revise. Artaud dismissed newfound scientific explanations of viral contagion, centered on the recently discovered microbe, and asserted, “Personally, I regard this microbe only as a smaller—infinitely smaller—material element which appears at some moment in the development of the virus, but which in no way accounts for the plague.” I join scholars such as Stanton B. Garner and Kimberly Jannarone in viewing these assertions not as a sudden disavowal of contagion’s significance for theater, but rather as testaments to Artaud’s desire to take the widest possible view of the plague’s potential for physical and spiritual transformation. The idea of microbial contagion was never far from his thoughts; Artaud simply conceived contagion in broader terms than his scientific contemporaries would have. As Jannarone explains, scientific ideas of contagion offered important contributions to Artaud’s metaphysics:
The idea of the microbe had just entered into scientific thinking in the late nineteenth century, and while Artaud explicitly dismisses the medical importance of the microbe’s physical body, he adopts a viewpoint that the microbe made possible: that the world is at all times awash in *le mal*.

Indeed, Artaud frequently compared his ideas about contagion with the developing theories of early twentieth-century epidemiology, and his explicit denial of “contagion” as the scientific link between theater and plague only serves to underscore their broader relationship. Garner, in his article “Artaud, Germ Theory, and the Theatre of Contagion,” suggests, “Through a logic at once assertive and self-repudiating, contagion and the body become the animating centers of Artaud’s medical metaphysics at the very moment their clinical meanings are superseded or bracketed from consideration.” He adds, “Freed from its narrowly medicalized definition, the relationship between the material body and its double—between the plague and its ‘spiritual image’—reveals itself to be an essentially performative one.” Separating “plague” from, as Garner notes, a “narrowly medicalized definition” also serves an important function in opening space for the multiple modes of contagious transmission explored by the artists in this book. If “contagion by simple contact” is far too simple for Artaud, it is, too, for nearly every artist who has worked in a viral mode since.

In an essay titled “Cruelty and Cure,” Jane Goodall offers a persuasive reading of this Artaudian contradiction, arguing that Artaud’s plague is communicable, not through direct contact but through psychic transferal, traveling through thoughts, dreams, and emotions:

> The plague, Artaud asserts, is not virally transmitted. Its spread has nothing to do with contamination by contact. It takes hold only upon those in whom it finds the seeds for its growth already planted . . . the principle of quarantine with its associated stratagems of exclusion is useless against the plague, for it operates according to the principle of telepathy and thus in defiance of all physical boundaries.

For Artaud, in this reading, the plague does not pass directly from one infected person to another: rather, it contains the power to provoke an eruption of the disease in a person for whom it is already present in latent form. This model of contagion offers powerful illumination of the contagious dramaturgies described in this book. From the Living Theatre, whose mode of emotional and affective contagion used acting technique to summon audience response, to the networked performances described in chapter 4, which mobilized theatrical communities already in existence, contagious performance tends to call forth action from those in whom, in Goodall’s words, “the seeds for its growth are already planted”—artistically, politically, or both.
For Artaud, the theater and the plague were linked by their boundless powers of destruction; calling forth latent powers resulted, in both cases, in ruin. “Once the plague is established in a city, the regular forms collapse,” he wrote. “There is no maintenance of roads and sewers, no army, no police, no municipal administration. . . Entire streets are blocked by the piles of dead. Then the houses open and the delirious victims, their minds crowded with hideous visions, spread howling through the streets.”42 For nearly every other artist under discussion here, though, theater’s contagious potential is a source of social possibility. Whether seeking revolution or reform, promoting a sense of utopian togetherness or provoking skepticism and disbelief, the artists in this book put viral structures in the service of critique and change. Yet rather than viewing the appropriation of Artaudian aesthetics for non-Artaudian political ends as an artistic misfire or political misappropriation, I believe that such slippages simply testify to Artaud’s abiding hold on the viral imagination. Indeed, viral dissemination—including, but not limited to, the kind Artaud theorized—is culturally significant not in spite of, but because of its availability and appeal to practitioners of widely disparate politics. Virality has been powerfully attractive to forces of rupture and revolution, repression, and radical inclusion alike.

Although Artaud’s theatrical writings include very few ideas that could be construed as prescriptions for societal rehabilitation, his enthusiasm for destruction as a cleansing force bears affinities to later artists for whom viral performance can provide a social cure. “It appears that by means of the plague, a gigantic abscess, as much moral as social, has been collectively drained; and that like the plague, the theater has been created to drain abscesses collectively,” he wrote.43 This comparison of theater and plague is potentially restorative (and potentially Aristotelian): the draining of the abscess must, as Artaud describes elsewhere, release destructive forces, but it also leaves the body less contaminated than before. The idea of performance as a form of social cure—whether theorized as homeopathic remedy, imaginative inoculation, or social corrective—aligns with the theoretical approaches of more contemporary viral performance artists such as Eva and Franco Mattes, Christoph Schlingensief, and Critical Art Ensemble, who disseminate theatrical fictions in order to inoculate their societies against more dangerous types of infection. At the end of “The Theater and the Plague,” Artaud wrote, “we can see, to conclude, that from the human point of view, the action of theater, like that of plague, is beneficial, for, impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world.”44 Yet Artaud also shared affinities with the opposite point of view about the effects of mimesis on viewers—the Platonic perspective, which sees performance as a dangerous imitation of tangible realities, which are, in turn, imitations of their ideal forms, and thus an invitation toward realizing the acts of violence it depicts. Here is Artaud, describing the ways in which the
realities felt in performance can exceed or overpower the realities of the external world:

Once launched upon the fury of his task, an actor requires infinitely more power to keep from committing a crime than a murderer needs courage to complete his act, and it is here, in its very gratuitousness, that the action and effect of a feeling in the theater appears infinitely more valid than that of a feeling fulfilled in life.\(^45\)

This view of performance’s contagious possibilities bears more resemblance to Plato’s fears—that the act of performing would engender real-world violence—than to Aristotle’s more benevolent understanding of performance’s possibilities. In Artaud’s writings, both ideas are held in tension: the notion that performance can serve a purgative social function, and the idea that performed fictions can tip powerfully into reality. Both ideas are central to later dramaturgies of viral performance.

Artaud’s theories of contagion also intersected with his engagement with broadcast media, particularly in his late radio play, *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*. The poetic drama, scheduled to be aired in 1948, suggests an intrinsic link between new technologies and viral performance, laying the foundations for later viral experiments. In fact, Artaud believed, radio broadcast was necessary for communicating the particular kind of plague envisioned by his final, apocalyptic, dramatic poem. In his writings on the radio play, he drew an explicit and rich connection between contagion and broadcast media despite the fact that *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* was never publicly aired. In February 1948, a day before it was slated for broadcast, the radio station director Wladimir Porché canceled the presentation of Artaud’s drama. Artaud wrote a furious letter to Porché, demanding that the station director understand the significance of the piece he had presumed to remove from the public airwaves:

> And you are not unaware of the curiosity with which this broadcast had been awaited by the great majority of the public who looked to it for a kind of deliverance, counting on an auditory experience that would save them at last from the monotony of ordinary broadcasts.\(^46\)

Later, in a letter to Fernand Pouey, a director of literary programming for French radio, Artaud repeated this view of the radio play’s potential, insisting: “never/ has a broadcast been ANTICIPATED with greater curiosity and impatience by the great mass of the public who were specifically waiting for this broadcast to help them form an attitude to confront certain aspects of life.”\(^47\) The subject matter and artistic intentions embedded in *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* were, for Artaud, inextricable from its method of transmission. The dispersed public awaiting his words expected, in Artaud’s
thinking, not only that the play would offer an auditory experience entirely
distinct from the usual radio broadcast, but also that it would be physically
and spiritually transformative, that it would alter and correct their perspec-
tives on the world, offering a kind of religious leadership.

For Artaud, such a vision of immediate, geographically dispersed psychic
and spiritual transformation contributed directly to his larger, long-standing
artistic project: he reportedly believed that the final recording of *To Have
Done with the Judgment of God* constituted “a model in miniature of what I
want to do with my Theatre of Cruelty.”48 In an article tracing Artaud’s ideas
about the relationship between sound and image on film, Denis Hollier argues
that sound—the medium at work in Artaud’s radio drama—stood at the
center of the playwright’s vision for audience interaction and even audience
control. “Artaud’s theatrical utopia,” writes Hollier, “is primarily what I call a
sound system.”49 And Artaud’s theatrical utopia, of course, was a contagious
one. He was not alone on either count. In the years before and during Artaud’s
theorization of the Theater of Cruelty, and his contagious vision for radio
broadcast, a host of other artists and thinkers were imagining other equally
vast implications for the contagious power of new media and technology.

**A Vast System of Channels: Radio and the Politics of Transmission**

In a very short play entitled *Madness*, written by the Italian Futurist Mario
Dessy, the combination of performance and new media renders insanity irre-
sistibly contagious. The play is set during a film screening in, Dessy writes, “a
large, modern movie theatre.” Onscreen, a protagonist is going mad. Gradu-
ally, other characters in the film begin to go mad, too. Soon, insanity breaches
the movie screen and begins to spread through the audience. “The public
becomes uneasy,” writes Dessy, and before long

> everyone is disturbed, obsessed by the idea of madness that comes
over them all. Suddenly the spectators get up screaming . . . gestur-
ing . . . fleeing . . . confusion . . . MADNESS.50

This brief drama, written entirely in stage directions and occupying less than
half a page, is rich with implications for a theory of viral performance. First,
the scene reads as if it had been ripped from a Platonic nightmare. Performers
in a film, screened for a live audience, infect their spectators with mental and
spiritual illness, with a madness that manifests in physical and emotional loss
of control. Dessy’s onstage spectators are scripted and choreographed, cast
as the agents of contagion, a theatrical strategy that would be echoed by later
viral artists, from the Living Theatre to General Idea.

In Dessy’s play, it is not just performance that proves contagious, but also
the presence of a new media form, since the unnamed protagonist inspires
infectious madness by breaching the barrier of a cinema screen. For the Italian Futurists, as for a host of their contemporaries, new forms of media offered new ways of transmitting performances and reaching larger audiences more swiftly than previously imaginable. The story of twentieth-century viral performance unfolds alongside, and in dialogue with, the histories of new media and media culture, which have offered form and subject matter for makers of viral art. They have also put pressure on the politics of performance: the relationship between theater and media is an especially important one for viral dramaturgy because the viral—in representing the most prolific forms of dissemination and amplification, as well as the most participatory types of performances—also forces the question of political orientation. Is viral dissemination inherently democratic, participatory, or even subversive, as it is for many of the artists I describe? Or is it just as readily an agent of government or corporate control? Such questions recur in each chapter of this book, and while I avoid posing a singular answer—believing that the absence of a singular answer testifies to viral performance’s significance and complexity—these questions register the political significance of new media for the performance works under discussion.

The adjacent histories of new media and contagious performance overlapped on October 30, 1938, when Orson Welles’s Mercury Theatre on the Air began to broadcast what sounded like a dance-hall music program. Before long, the songs were interrupted by a series of announcements from “reporters,” who began to describe an odd meteorological occurrence involving several violent explosions on the surface of Mars. These news bulletins gave way to increasingly urgent local reports from a New Jersey farm, where, to the reporters’ apparent astonishment, a group of unidentifiable metal cylinders had crash-landed. Extraterrestrial monsters began emerging from the spacecraft, and soon a disaster of national proportions was underway. As the tale unfolded—this was, of course, Welles’s infamous *War of the Worlds* broadcast, adapted from H. G. Wells’s novel of the same name—reporters related the unfolding emergency without identifying it as fiction:

The monster is now in control of the middle section of New Jersey and has effectively cut the state through its center. Communication lines are down from Pennsylvania to the Atlantic Ocean. Railroad tracks are torn and service from New York to Philadelphia discontinued except routing some of the trains through Allentown and Phoenixville. Highways to the north, south, and west are clogged with frantic human traffic. Police and army reserves are unable to control the mad flight.  

This is a scene of technological and communications systems disrupted, a nightmare scenario staging the breakdown of the very networks that enabled
Welles’s broadcast to take place. Such communications networks are also, in a deeper sense, context for the real-world response that Welles’s program provoked: contagious panic that turned the broadcast into one of the legendary media events of the twentieth century.

I invoke *War of the Worlds* as an early study in media contagion, a half-accidental convergence of theater, infectiousness, and technology that forecast many such overlaps to come. Hadley Cantril’s sociological study of the broadcast, written in 1940, asserts—almost certainly hyperbolically, but not without basis in truth—that “people all over the United States were praying, crying, fleeing frantically to escape death from the Martians.” Cantril adds, “At least six million people heard the broadcast. At least a million of them were frightened or disturbed.”

Cantril’s survey of responses to the Welles broadcast identifies social influence—the coercive force of others’ belief—as an important factor in inducing listeners’ panic. He writes:

One of the things we would first suspect is the corroboratory effect of other people’s behavior: the contagion of other people’s fear. A person who was told to tune in by a frightened friend would listen under different conditions than someone who tuned in for other reasons. If the person who called him was someone whom he had confidence in, he would be particularly apt to accept that person’s opinion, tune in with a pre-existing mental set, and have his attitude confirmed.

Credulousness was contagious, spreading first through radio and then through social networks. The print media, Cantril contends, compounded public anxiety (even after the broadcast had been revealed as fictional) by running endless “human-interest stories relating the shock and terror of local citizens.” Welles’s tale of Martian invasion spread infectiously, and then continued to circulate as the media marveled at its own vertiginous powers of contagion.

In *The Citizen Audience*, a history of the American media consumer, the scholar Charles Butsch describes a phenomenon he calls “media panic.” Sudden and deep anxieties, he explains, have followed the introduction of nearly every form of communications technology—radio, television, internet—as public perception recoils from unfamiliar modes of watching or listening, simultaneously embracing each new paradigm for consuming information while also worrying that it will corrupt minds and unravel society. As early as the 1930s, Butsch writes, parents were switching off radios, declaring their children “radio fiends.” In the 1950s, publications warned that too much television viewing could send well-intentioned citizens down the path to family disintegration and financial ruin. Cantril’s study of *War of the Worlds*, written when memories of the public response were fresh, offers a description of radio’s power that exemplifies the concept of “media panic”:
Radio has inherently the characteristics of contemporaneousness, availability, personal appeal and ubiquity. Hence, when we analyze this panic, we are able to deal with the most modern type of social group—the radio audience—which differs from the congregate group of the moving picture theatre and the consociate group reading the daily paper. The radio audience consists essentially of thousands of small, congregate groups united in time and experiencing a common stimulus—altogether making possible the largest grouping of people ever known.\(^6\)

Radio’s power was, for many, not just a source of general social or moral anxiety; it also provoked specific fears about the potential for new media to aid in the rise of authoritarian powers. In a previous study, *The Psychology of Radio*, Cantril had described radio as “an agency of incalculable power for controlling the actions of men,”\(^57\) predicting that “the day cannot be far off when men in every country of the globe will be able to listen at one time to the persuasions or commands of some wizard seated in a central place of broadcasting, possessed of a power more fantastic than that of Aladdin.”\(^58\)

Welles’s program constituted perhaps the most infamous instance of contagious radio broadcasting, but other artists shared Cantril’s instinct that this relatively new form of communications technology held immense potential for the infectious transmission of idea and emotion. At the forefront of such thinking were the Italian Futurists—including but not limited to Dessy—who embraced the new technology as the herald of performance modes that could address previously unimagined publics with previously unimagined speed. The Futurists’ obsession with the communicative power of new technologies makes them an important predecessor for later viral performance artists. In a 1933 manifesto, “The Radio,” Futurist leader F. T. Marinetti critiqued the radio programming of his day—still under the sway of old dramaturgies and stagnant social mores—and laid out a series of principles governing “Radia,” his term for “great radio events.”\(^59\) Radia would include “compressed dramas comprising an infinite number of simultaneous actions,” all of them to be broadcast concurrently around the globe. “The possibility of picking up radio broadcasts from stations in different time zones, together with the absence of light, destroys the hours, the day, and the night,” he wrote. “Reception and amplification, by means of thermoionic valves, of light and of voices from the past, will destroy the concept of time.”\(^60\) The heady impulse to “destroy the concept of time” registers simultaneity and speed as central dimensions of the Futurists’ political and artistic program.

Such fascinations were timely. Speed, considered broadly, had generated increasing attention from artists and philosophers throughout the early twentieth century, as newly mechanized workplaces were created, city streets filled with automobiles, and an array of new technologies accelerated the activities of daily life. During this era, as Stephen Kern eloquently observes in *The
Culture of Time and Space, higher speed limits allowed for faster automobile travel, efficiency experts such as Frederick Winslow Taylor sought to speed up and standardize industrial production, and journalists began using the telephone to increase the pace of reporting. Speed would recur in the early twenty-first century as a fundamental characteristic of viral culture: the instantly shared internet meme, the split-second YouTube fad. It is also, more specifically, a central element in most modern viral dramaturgies (digital or not), which tend to test the pace of perception and participation, and the potential for images and ideas to circulate through public space long after a particular performance has ended.

Other elements of Marinetti’s vision for radio performance were formulated in direct dialogue with conventional theater, and challenged Aristotelian dramatic structure. Declaring that “radio has killed off the theater,” he proposed that Radia would eliminate “unity of action” and “the theatrical character”—as well as, crucially, “the audience, in the sense of a judgmental mass—self-electing, systematically hostile and servile, always antiprogressive and backward-looking.” The ambition to remove any “self-electing” element of spectatorship constitutes perhaps the most radical element of Marinetti’s vision for contagious radio performance, and the one with the most profound implications. It not only reflects Futurism’s well-known authoritarian leanings; it also suggests the stakes of viral dramaturgies in relation to the wider publics they address. Intentional participation is, arguably, a defining element of any listening or viewing public, as Michael Warner argues in his landmark book Publics and Counterpublics, which asserts that public speech is constituted through its intention to address not only specific listeners (or readers) but unbounded and unidentified others, and that those listeners become a public through the act of paying attention.

Contained within Marinetti’s invocation of involuntary spectatorship is the desire to create performance that can circumvent the conscious agency of those who spread it. Such a prospect places Marinetti in a history of both artists and philosophers imagining forms of involuntary transmission, reaching back to Tarde’s concept of social somnambulism and forward to thinkers conceiving the meme as a self-perpetuating unit of cultural evolution. Contagion, with its threat of uncontrolled, involuntary circulation, will surface again and again as a descriptor of performances that try to spread through affect, emotion, or unintentional transmission, from the Living Theatre’s embodiment of plague to Eva and Franco Mattes’s viral media experiments.

Even as Marinetti and his collaborators envisioned employing radio to create newly coercive modes of performance, others were exploring the possibility of employing radio to foster new modes of participation and exchange. Though many artists, writers, and philosophers were investigating such questions, I focus here on the radio theory of Bertolt Brecht, both because it offers particularly striking opposition to Marinetti’s approach, and because of Brecht’s foundational importance to later artists working in viral modes:
the Living Theatre, Boal, Critical Art Ensemble, and Caryl Churchill. Indeed, Brecht’s theory permeates the case studies in this book nearly as thoroughly as Artaud’s does, if less explicitly in many cases. Walter Benjamin, describing Brecht’s theatrical theory, wrote: “‘Making gestures quotable’ is one of the essential achievements of epic theatre.” Viral dramaturgy, in all of its forms, strives to do precisely that: to make gestures quotable, to make spectators quote them.

Brecht began experimenting with radio in the 1920s, shortly after it was introduced in Germany. He adapted the texts of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* as radio plays in 1926, and adapted his own plays *The Life of Edward II of England*, *Man Is Man*, and *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* for broadcast between 1926 and 1932. He was also immediately critical of the discourse surrounding radio, and of the uses to which the new medium was being put. Brecht believed (as did Marinetti) that directors of radio stations were squandering the medium’s particularities. “From the beginning the radio imitated practically every existing institution that had anything at all to do with the distribution of speech or song,” he wrote in his essay “The Radio as a Communications Apparatus.” “This was the radio in its first phase,” wrote Brecht, “as substitute: a substitute for theatre, opera, concerts, lectures, coffeehouse music, the local pages of the newspaper, etc.”

Radio—in Brecht’s view—could be useful only if it fulfilled its potential as a medium of exchange, rather than of straightforward dissemination. He wrote:

> when a technical invention with such a natural aptitude for decisive social functions is met by such anxious efforts to maintain without consequences the most harmless entertainment possible, then the question unavoidably arises as to whether there is no possibility to confront the powers that exclude with an organization of the excluded.

Brecht worked, in his experimentation with radio, to orchestrate such a confrontation, as in, for instance, the 1929 staging of the *Lehrstück Lindbergh’s Flight* as a radio play at the Baden-Baden Festival for German Chamber Music. Thus a play already built on the armature of participatory spectatorship (the *Lehrstücke* form) became material for exploring the radio’s participatory possibilities. As Marc Silberman writes in an introduction to Brecht’s writings on radio, Brecht was “not only thematizing the radio in a broadcast presentation but suggesting how the medium itself can transform social communication through its technological advantage: the ear is to become a voice.” In his own writings, Brecht used *Lindbergh’s Flight* to articulate an ambitious theory of radio: “The Flight of the Lindberghs is not intended to be of use to the present-day radio but to change it,” he declared. “The increasing concentration of mechanical means and the increasingly
specialized education—trends that should be accelerated—call for a kind of rebellion by the listener, for his mobilization and redeployment as producer." To effect such a renegotiation of power, Brecht wrote,

radio must be transformed from a distribution apparatus into a communications apparatus. The radio could be the finest possible communications apparatus in public life, a vast system of channels. That is, it could be so, if it understood how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a network instead of isolating him. Following this principle the radio should step out of the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers.

Brecht concluded by observing that his ideas for the repurposing of radio were “unrealizable in this social order but realizable in another”—a testament to how deeply new technologies’ forms reflect the societies that produce them.

Later artists, and later theorists of new media, would take up this very question, asking whether new communications technologies such as radio could ever be oriented toward mass participation, toward democratic discourse, toward countercultural agendas and anticapitalist messaging, or whether “one-sided” communications and capitalist ideologies were inherent aspects of the new technologies the twentieth century had made possible. Even as emerging media forms evolved from radio to television, and from television to the early stirrings of the internet, Brecht’s formulations continued to guide philosophers writing on this question. In 1971, the German Marxist philosopher Hans Magnus Enzensberger would return directly to Brecht’s 1932 essay to argue for a repurposing of all modern communications technologies for public participation and revolutionary agitation. Jean Baudrillard responded to Enzensberger with the argument that new technologies contained, within their modes of working, the capitalist ideologies that had given them birth. Reactionary media, Baudrillard warned, could never serve revolutionary messages.

In the meantime, of course, in the decades between Brecht’s essay and Enzensberger’s essay, media theory had emerged as a field of inquiry and mode of analysis in its own right, due largely to the 1964 publication of Marshall McLuhan’s Understanding Media. McLuhan’s foundational observations about the power of media forms to shape the meanings those media disseminate, about the relationships among various media forms and the human body, and about the types of systems that could be productively analyzed as “media,” from radio to the postal service, proved formative for many of the artists analyzed in this book—most directly, for General Idea, but more broadly for all of the artists working at the intersection of performance and media technology. McLuhan’s largely formal analysis provoked responses, in turn, from Marxist philosophers like Enzensberger, who advocated for more
attention to the politics embedded in media form—a debate that would recur with the dawning digital age.

The Advent of Viral Culture: Media, Memes, and Mobs

In the 1960s and 1970s, as dialogues about the politics of media continued to evolve—and as the dramaturgies described in the first two chapters of this book were beginning to flourish—cultural studies also saw the advent of a series of schools of thought that used viral and contagious models to describe the evolution of culture. These models, mixing biological, social, and cultural modes of change, took inspiration from the foundational philosophies of social imitation and crowd theory pioneered by Tarde and Canetti and emerged fully with the publication of evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins’s 1976 *The Selfish Gene*. In his study, Dawkins proposed the influential concept of the “meme” as a cultural analogue to the biological unit of the gene. The meme was, as he wrote, “a unit of cultural transmission,” which replicates itself in a manner analogous to the way genetic material spreads. Dawkins derived his term from the concept of mimesis—his initial idea for the new word was “mimeme”—and in his description, he explicitly linked the “meme” to imitation:

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.

In proposing imitation as a central component of cultural dissemination, Dawkins implicitly connected performance to cultural contagion. His insight about the proliferation of culture also laid the groundwork for later observations, particularly those made by cultural critics such as Douglas Rushkoff in the dawning digital age, about the media-enabled circulation of memes.

Dawkins’s meme theory helped to launch the field of memetics in the decades that followed: scholars explored the possibility that culture, ideas, ideologies, and customs could be analyzed using the model of the meme and the principles of biological evolution. Such thinking took shape in works like Aaron Lynch’s *Thought Contagion* (1996), Susan Blackmore’s *The Meme Machine* (1999), and Kate Distin’s *The Selfish Meme* (2005), in which Distin expands on Dawkins’s theory of memetic evolution, arguing that “the evolutionary processes—replication, selection, and variation—are present in culture” and that “memes provide the mechanism for that evolution.” Social transmission, so significant for crowd theory, played an equally
important role in memetics, and, as Tony D. Sampson notes in his recent book *Virality*, some scholars have claimed Tarde as a predecessor for this field.\(^7\)

Though memetic theories coincided historically with the artistic trajectory of this book, most of the artists whose work I explore would disavow the directness of the biological analogy memetics draws upon. In fact, despite its potential appeal as an elegant way of applying biological models to cultural evolution, memetics was also attended by discomfort nearly from the start. The uncertainty of what, exactly, constituted a “meme” lingered—after all, cultural “units” cannot be viewed in isolation or scientifically compared to one another as genes can. Scholars noted that the biological analogy fit culture uncomfortably, or not at all, and were troubled by the possibility that genetic comparisons could subject our understanding of culture to a model of deterministic progress precluding multiplicity, simultaneity, and variety. Tony Sampson describes the pitfalls plaguing the field of memetics in particularly persuasive terms:

Memetics treats social encounter as the passive passing on of a competing idea. By attributing this level of intentionality to the fidelity, fecundity, and longevity of the meme itself, the theory crudely consigns the by and large unconscious transmission of attitudes, expectancies, beliefs, compliance, imagination, attention, concentration, and distraction through social collectives to an insentient surrender to a self-seeking code.\(^7\)

I join Sampson in searching for a more flexible means of understanding cultural and artistic contagion. Memetics is as illuminating for its limitations as for the revelations it has produced. Yet memetics, for all its logical constraints, has persisted into popular discourse, holding double significance as a model for understanding contagious consumerism, and as a tool for propagating radical, often anticapitalist politics. Viral marketers attempt to sell products—and affective identities linked to those products—through the proliferation of memes, while activists create political memes to spread subversive slogans. The meme’s contested meaning, its capacity to serve both Wall Street and Occupy Wall Street, demonstrates how viral transmission operates in multiple and contradictory ways, opening questions about the politics of transmission itself.

Many of the artists described in this book probe precisely these contradictions and tensions, which continued to evolve simultaneously in scholarly and popular writing and in art-making. In 1994, novelist and media scholar Douglas Rushkoff’s study *Media Virus!* heralded the advent of a radical new media culture, fueled by the viral spread of images, ideas, and gestures, which—he argued—were disseminated through the newly democratic communications networks that new technologies made possible. Yet, only five
years later, Rushkoff published a follow-up study, *Coercion*, lamenting the speedy corporate adoption of viral tactics. In 2001, Malcolm Gladwell’s bestseller *The Tipping Point* offered an epidemiological approach to understanding the dissemination of social habits and culture, from crime to fashion. In 2009, Bill Wasik’s *And Then There’s This: How Stories Live and Die in Viral Culture* surveyed what Wasik described as a new landscape of media-savvy, semi-amateur creators of culture—reporters, video bloggers, musicians—who attracted brief, dramatic spikes of popular attention before vanishing from public view. “The ‘viral,’ whether e-mail or website or song or video, was gradually emerging as a new genre of communication, even of art,” he wrote, adding, “A marginal genre only a few years ago, the intentional viral has become central as this decade malingers on.”

Wasik’s book not only described viral phenomena he had observed, but also detailed his own efforts to provoke a viral phenomenon: the “flash mob” series he engineered in the summer of 2003, sending cryptic, anonymous emails to groups of acquaintances, intended to produce a contagiously popular gathering. During that summer, Wasik organized mobs at the Grand Hyatt Hotel on Forty-Second Street, in Macy’s rug department, and in Central Park. In each case, an anonymous email, passed along by increasingly eager recipients, advertised the event, and a large group of strangers converged upon Wasik’s location at an appointed time. Frequently, he assigned participants to perform a single action—arranging themselves around the railing of a hotel lobby mezzanine, then applauding for precisely fifteen seconds; bowing to a giant toy *Tyrannosaurus rex* in the Times Square Toys“R”Us—before disbanding and disappearing back into the streets. (I participated in the Grand Hyatt mob, responding to an anonymous email passed along by a friend.) By the end of the summer, flash mobs were everywhere. In an electronics store in Minnesota, which happened to be playing *The Lord of the Rings* on display televisions, a flash mob gathered and collectively requested popcorn. In London, hundreds of people performed odd ritual movements, brandishing umbrellas and bananas, near the London Eye. In Toronto, a group of about fifty people hopped up and down “like frogs” in a Toys“R”Us store, then performed jumping jacks in a gym. In Moscow, a flash mob gathered on the steps of the Bolshoi Theater, perused newspapers for several minutes, then dispersed on cue. Wasik’s flash mobs—mass performances minus the historical narratives and political aspirations of early twentieth-century spectacles—demonstrated a belated revival of interest in crowd thinking and crowd behavior. They hinted at the format of the political demonstration without actually demonstrating, and gestured toward contagious consumption while rarely consuming much.

In the years that followed, scholars, pop-culture writers, and marketers continued working to reverse-engineer viral popularity. In 2013, Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley published *Going Viral*, an attempt to analyze the process of twenty-first-century flash popularity in detail. That same year,
Jonah Berger published *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*, which, like Gladwell’s and Wasik’s studies, sought to dissect the evolution of contagious cultural phenomena in order to help others construct them. Viral popularity had become an elusive but heavily sought-after phenomenon, its unpredictable nature imbuing anything that successfully “goes viral” with a sense of authenticity and truly widespread appeal.

This book is not about viral marketing, or about memetics, popular YouTube videos, or brief, violent Twitter storms. Yet the discourse around contagion and virality that emerged over the last decades of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first reveals much about the shadow these concepts cast in theater and performance of the period. The ubiquitous urge to “go viral” testifies to the mysterious potency still held by the concept of cultural contagion, a power glimpsed not only in what might be considered “successful” viral phenomena, but more broadly and perhaps more significantly in the sheer volume of writing on the subject, the effort fueling our continued, largely futile struggle to understand popular viral phenomena (whether political, cultural, artistic, or consumerist) and to create them. The artists described in the chapters that follow do not, largely, seek to control viral phenomena, and do not view contagion as a linear, unidirectional force. Rather, they explore the politics and theatricality of contagion, the viral possibilities inherent to their art form.

### Affect and Emancipation: Theories of Spectatorship and Transmission

Viral thinkers, whether philosophers or marketing gurus, hold in common the belief that in social gatherings, something spreads. For many contemporary philosophers, this contagious force is both impossible to isolate from its channels of transmission, and also resistant to linear models of change over time. Yet it is, nevertheless, palpably present, and essential to understanding the social circulation of ideas, feelings, and behaviors. In this section, I describe a succession of overlapping theories of contagion—all testifying to the viral’s increasingly important role in our assumptions about social transmission—and then connect these ideas with models of audience response and participation particular to theater.

Even as Dawkins and his fellow travelers were developing the field of memetics, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were dismantling such models of evolution in their philosophy, placing contagion in direct opposition to heredity as a model for understanding change. The philosophers declared, in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

> Bands, human or animal, proliferate by contagion, epidemics, battlefields, and catastrophes . . . Propagation by epidemic, by contagion,
has nothing to do with filiation by heredity, even if the two themes intermingle and require each other. The vampire does not filiate, it infects. The difference is that contagion, epidemic, involves terms that are entirely heterogeneous: for example, a human being, an animal, and a bacterium, a virus, a molecule, a microorganism.

For Deleuze and Guattari, contagion offers a way out, a way around restrictive linear models of growth, change, and evolution. Its primary characteristic is less the involuntary nature of spread, and more its power to connect beings who are fundamentally different, and who do not need to become the same in order to participate in transmission and circulation. This includes, in their famous example, the wasp and orchid, who “become” each other—forming what the philosophers call an assemblage—without becoming the same as one another. In the case studies examined here, this model of heterogeneous transmission applies, most directly, to the relationship between actors and spectators, who transmit affects and behaviors to one another without necessarily erasing the distinction between them.

The philosophers’ assemblage theory, with its focus on fluid relationships, heterogeneity, and constant flux, has offered an important model for later thinkers of viral and contagious transmission. In Sampson’s Virality, assemblage is foundational for a flexible understanding of contagion: for viewing contagion as an element of both power and subversion, political systems and the resistance to them. Such flexible modes of thinking are important for the types of contagion explored by makers of viral art. The contagious image or gesture, in viral performance, is rarely transmitted in literal or linear terms (although some projects, especially those by Critical Art Ensemble and Eva and Franco Mattes, explicitly critique the perniciously unidirectional contagions that viral media and infectious paranoia can promote). Rather, virality takes complex shapes: finding form as imitation with repetition (as in Seven Jewish Children), dissemination through networks (as in 365 Days/365 Plays), and repeated mass choreography (as in the work of General Idea).

Or, as in the Living Theatre’s Mysteries and Paradise Now, contagion finds form through the spread of historically and culturally specific affective states. Affect theory, emerging in the 1990s after psychologist Silvan Tomkins’s Affect Imagery Consciousness, took up the question of contagion as part of a larger investigation of affective circulation. For some, contagion became a primary model for understanding emotional transfer: “Bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear—in short, communicable affect can inflame nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every conceivable kind of passion,” wrote Anna Gibbs in 2001. In 2004 Teresa Brennan argued for a broad, and bodily, understanding of affective spread, asserting that
The transmission of affect, whether it is grief, anxiety, or anger, is social or psychological in origin. But the transmission is also responsible for bodily changes; some are brief changes, as in a whiff of the room’s atmosphere, some longer lasting. The “atmosphere” or the environment literally gets into the individual.

Brennan’s work, one of the most significant and thorough investigations of affective circulation, views transmission in broader and more complex terms than a literal or mimetic understanding of contagion would allow.

Other thinkers, likewise advocating for variety and complexity, have argued directly against contagion as a model for affect. Sara Ahmed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, distinguishes between her own account of emotional circulation, and the school of affect theory that views feelings as explicitly contagious:

In this model, it is the emotion itself that passes: I feel sad, because you feel sad; I am ashamed by your shame, and so on. In suggesting that emotions pass in this way, the model of “emotional contagion” risks transforming emotion into a property, as something that one has, and can then pass on, as if what passes on is the same thing.

For Ahmed, “what passes on” is rarely contained or stable, rarely a “thing” that reaches a recipient in the same form it left the sender. The same is true for the majority of artists described in this book. The circulation of affects, emotions, and passions is central to viral dramaturgy, from the Living Theatre’s efforts to transmit revolutionary ecstasy to the feelings of communal connection inspired by *365 Days/365 Plays*. The artists in this book imagine affective circulation in complex terms, viewing contagion as a primary model for cultural and artistic spread. In doing so, they reimagine contagion into a richer, more complex means of thinking about transmission than it has sometimes been presumed to be.

This is, among other reasons, why I employ concepts of affective transmission in combination with theories of theatrical spectatorship and public participation, ideas about the particular ways emotions spread, transform, and provoke action among audiences. Many of the projects described in this book address themselves, directly or indirectly, not only to live audiences but to wide, dispersed publics, and so I draw on Michael Warner’s 2002 *Publics and Counterpublics* for insight about the nature of public speech. Foundational to Warner’s book is the belief that publics are not necessarily generalized and all-encompassing, but rather, can constitute particular audiences and readerships summoned up by the nature of a work of literature or art. “*The* public is a kind of social totality,” Warner writes. On the other hand, the form of “public” he theorizes is “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation.”
This, too, is the kind of public I examine: the kind that performances call into being, the kind that artists ask participation of, and the kind that responds, both in ways that creators invite and in ways that are unanticipated or unintended. Contagious artworks are, usually, inherently intended for wide and continuing distribution, aiming to reach broad publics, and to expand those publics as they circulate. The reliance of viral media on the viewers, listeners, or consumers who disseminate it aligns with Warner’s idea of a public that is created by attention (and, frequently, by active response). A viral public, as I see it, is a public created not only by attending to a particular work of art, but also by engaging in some way with its spread.

This engagement is always politically fraught. The viral imagination can—under the long shadow of philosophy that views contagion as an involuntary mode of transmission—risk eliminating individuality and choice from its understanding of spectatorship. So, too, can creators of viral art risk equating participation with political action, a stance famously dismantled by Jacques Rancière in his 2009 essay “The Emancipated Spectator.” Much of modern theater, Rancière writes, especially political artists working in the wake of Brecht and Artaud, is constructed on a series of faulty assumptions: that spectatorship is equivalent with passivity; that only by eliminating traditional notions of “audience” can theater avoid perpetuating nefarious social relations (such as the alienation that Guy Debord decried in Society of the Spectacle, an extension of the passivity and separation induced by traditional spectatorship).

Artists who have made this critique, Rancière writes, often believe, further, that live performance alone (as opposed to film, television, or other media) brings audiences together as a communal entity, and therefore that live performance alone has the power and the obligation to rouse spectators to action. “Theatre accuses itself of rendering spectators passive and thereby betraying its essence as community action,” writes Rancière. “It consequently assigns itself the mission of reversing its effects and expiating its sins by restoring to spectators ownership of their consciousness and their activity.” He argues for a reconsideration of the distinction between passive spectatorship and active participation and advocates for the identification of members of live audiences as intellectually engaged individuals. “Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity,” he writes. “It is our normal situation.”

These indictments of the false binary between action and observation, passivity and participation, illuminate the work of many of the artists described in this book, most of whom have labored under the sign of Brecht, Artaud, or both: the Living Theatre, attempting to rouse spectators to revolutionary action; Marc Estrin, seeking to go “beyond audience”; and Augusto Boal, striving to turn spectators into “spect-actors.” Yet, though such artists attempt to provoke participation, my argument here is not that viral performance falls into the trap of unthinking allegiance to participation as political
salvation—but, rather, that viral dramaturgies hold productive dialogue with Rancière’s terms. Many viral dramaturgies invite the active engagement of spectators, and many also address their audiences collectively, in the form of gathered crowds. In this sense, viral performance might be considered the limit case of the fallacy that Rancière describes. And yet viral performance also, almost always, creates the possibility for spectators (or spect-actors) to respond as individuals. Critical Art Ensemble hopes to change individuals’ assumptions about contemporary sources of political anxiety one viewer at a time—as did Boal, who believed that mass participation could never have the deep political effect that engaging with a single spectator could. Eva and Franco Mattes work to instill small seeds of doubt in their spectators’ minds, hoping that audiences will become skeptical of even the Matteses’ own performances. *Seven Jewish Children* went viral as individuals rewrote Churchill’s contagiously provocative script, displaying individual beliefs as they did.

Not only do viral dramaturgies challenge the distinction between active and passive forms of participation; they also challenge distinctions between participatory and non-participatory performances. In her 2012 study *Artificial Hells*, Claire Bishop offers an analysis of socially engaged participatory art that is guided by the idea that participation means “people constitute the central artistic medium and material.” Bishop investigates, specifically, works of art dedicated to “the creative rewards of participation as a politicised working process.” These concepts are frequently at play in the projects I examine in this book, since many of the artists who make viral performance view some form of active audience engagement as the link between art and social change, understanding theater either as a microcosm for a larger public arena (in the case of the Living Theatre) or as a provocative rift in the fabric of public life (in the case of Eva and Franco Mattes). Yet other projects—for instance, Suzan-Lori Parks’s *365 Days/365 Plays*—embody social formations more obliquely, engaging with community politics through their producing strategies without demanding direct audience participation on stage. Viral performance thus represents, at once, a kind of limit case for audience participation, and a broader, conceptual dramaturgy: a set of ideas that can guide the producing strategies, thematic concerns, and politics of theatrical projects, without requiring that audiences leave their seats.

**Case Studies**

The chapters in this book, although unfolding chronologically from the mid-1960s to the early twenty-first century, are also organized by dramaturgical affinity, linking artists and works that deploy the concept of viral performance in (sometimes unexpectedly) similar ways. I will, in some cases, be tracing lines of influence: from Artaud to the Living Theatre, for instance,
or from the Living Theatre to Critical Art Ensemble. In other cases, no such direct artistic dialogue exists, yet the viral dramaturgies in question emerged at similar times, and found similar significance in the possibility of contagious performance. Such is the case with, for instance, the artists described in chapter 2: General Idea, Marc Estrin, and Augusto Boal. All of these artists, I argue, conceived of themselves in viral terms, seeking to choreograph audiences in the absence of performers, yet none of them worked, to my knowledge, with an awareness of the others’ artistic practice. In such cases, I argue, the emergence of similar dramaturgies at similar historical moments testifies to the continued potency of the viral concept, particularly for artists creating politically radical performance that is often in dialogue with new forms of media.

Chapter 1, “Performing Plague,” examines the Living Theatre’s revolutionary performance works of the mid- and late 1960s through the lens of one of the company’s central influences, Antonin Artaud. Artaud’s writings, and especially his famous essay “The Theater and the Plague,” proved profoundly transformative for the Living Theatre. I parse the underlying questions of affective transmission and media circulation that undergird the theatrical strategies of both. This chapter employs affect theory and related concepts of historically specific emotion—Raymond Williams’s “structures of feeling”—to reexamine the company’s use of Artaud’s plague as a model for acting, and examines closely (and, to my knowledge, for the first time) the Dilexi Series’s 1969 televising of “The Rite of Guerilla Theatre,” an infamous sequence from Paradise Now.

In the 1970s, a constellation of artists drew on their experiences with radical 1960s performance and the emerging field of media studies to create viral performances that relied not on overwhelming presence (as Artaud and the Living Theatre did) but on absence, invisibility, and the carefully orchestrated actions of spectators. Chapter 2, “Towards an Audience Vocabulary,” examines the work of the American artist Marc Estrin, who coined the concept of “infiltrative theater”; Augusto Boal, who created invisible theater as a means of prompting spectators to engage in social change; and General Idea, a Canadian-American artistic trio who self-identified as a viral force within the art world, creating queer, media-savvy performances structured around the contagious choreography of their spectators. These artists drew on contemporary ideas about circulation and transmission to stage politically subversive performances that invoked the participation of spectators in making theatrical gestures spread.

Chapter 3, “Germ Theater,” brings my argument about the viral into the dawning digital age—beginning with a moment in the early 1990s when concepts of contagious spread acquired a host of new meanings, from runaway capitalism to newly instantaneous information transfer to the anxieties of biological contagion wrought by the HIV/AIDS crisis. The works in this chapter combine viral performance strategies with thematic explorations of
contagion, virality, and contamination. They include Critical Art Ensemble’s and Eva and Franco Mattes’s playfully subversive provocations; and German director Christoph Schlingensief’s 2000 *Please Love Austria!,* which confronted the Viennese public with its own paranoia through the intertwining of live performance, new media, and social action. The performance projects described here frequently take the form of large-scale public fictions: theatrical sleights-of-hand staged in public places and borrowing narratives or performance strategies from the institutions they seek to criticize—megacorporations, militaries, the mass media.

Chapter 4, “Everything Is Everywhere,” examines a series of twenty-first-century performance projects created by women artists, each of which summoned into being a dispersed, virtually linked network of theaters and theater-makers: the 2003 Lysistrata Project, Suzan-Lori Parks’s 2006–7 *365 Days/365 Plays*, and Caryl Churchill’s *Seven Jewish Children*. These networks—which relied, I argue, on conceptions of digital-age viral dissemination for their inspiration and their spread—were envisioned as structures for making theater radically inclusive, or for political intervention in protest of violence and war. In dialogue with these projects’ decentralized, dispersed performance structures were the material experiences of local performances, with artists’ bodies at their centers. These performance projects registered the intimate connections between networked structures and the viral, and demonstrated the political potency of theatrical networks.

In my conclusion, I return to the virus’s origin: a stage, an audience, a performance fiction ruptured in real time. Joanna Warsza’s 2006 piece “Virus in the Theater” employed a pair of performance artists to disrupt (or “virus”) a conventional play, stepping onstage to stop the action and announcing their intentions to act on behalf of the audience. This performance testifies to the continued significance of the viral metaphor, not just in performance but also in the theater itself. “Virus in the Theater” offers a glimpse of the viral’s evolving importance for theater, politics, and media, and, in looking back, also looks forward to a moment when the viral might leave the digital world behind, but continue to invade the theater.