Chapter 3

Germ Theater

Critical Art Ensemble, Eva and Franco Mattes, and Christoph Schlingensief

In 1994, Douglas Rushkoff giddily traced the contours of a new phenomenon he called the “media virus.” Seeing the potential for democratic social change in countercultural zines, burgeoning niche-interest cable television networks, and the rudimentary beginnings of the internet, Rushkoff employed the vocabulary of infectious disease to describe a proliferating set of cultural practices. He wrote:

Media viruses spread through the datasphere the same way biological ones spread through the body or a community. But instead of traveling along an organic circulatory system, a media virus travels through the networks of the mediaspace . . . Once attached, the virus injects its more hidden agendas into the datastream in the form of ideological code—not genes, but a conceptual equivalent we now call “memes.”

His study, also entitled Media Virus!, was among the first to use the term “virus” in describing the contagious circulation of images, ideas, and performances in an age of rapidly evolving media technology. Although some media viruses spread through mainstream channels, the ones that most fascinated Rushkoff—and that made him hopeful about the advent of a new, radically egalitarian media ecology—resisted the dominance of government and corporate structures. These ranged, in Rushkoff’s descriptions, from the AIDS protest group ACT UP’s distribution of highly replicable images and slogans (“Silence = Death”) to graffiti artists tagging buildings in underserved neighborhoods, and activists interrupting television stations’ signals to broadcast subversive messages.

Though the field of memetics dates back at least to Richard Dawkins’s work of the mid-1970s, Rushkoff’s refashioning of the “meme” for the early 1990s media landscape signaled a seismic shift in the cultural and political significance of the viral. This was a moment when media was becoming viral,
and when the concept of the viral was perceptibly identified with media. Contagion was emerging as a prevalent concept for understanding a dizzying variety of abstract forces: corporate and capitalist structures, the spread of digital information and misinformation, and the proliferation of new kinds of epidemics. Viral terminology permeated the public imagination, and the cultural anxieties of the moment included a spectrum of uncontrollable contagions, physical and metaphorical.

Meanwhile, a growing number of writers and artist-activists were imagining new methods of performative public intervention in viral terms. Five years after Rushkoff published *Media Virus!*, Kalle Lasn—co-founder of the anticorporate environmentalist magazine *Adbusters*—advocated “meme warfare” as a strategy for breaking corporations’ power over consumer identity and economic inequality. “The next revolution—World War III—will be, as Marshall McLuhan predicted, a ‘guerilla information war’ fought . . . in newspapers and magazines, on the radio, on TV and in cyberspace,” Lasn wrote, in his influential book *Culture Jam* (which also featured a chapter titled “Media Virus,” though with no overt reference to Rushkoff). Artists developed new tactics for infiltrating public space and consciousness, echoing infiltrative strategies developed by artists of previous generations, such as Boal or Estrin, but reshaping them for the dawning digital age. A set of viral dramaturgies began to cohere. Artist-activists reveled in the presentation of fictional events in public spaces, framed as if they were facts. Performances and conceptual works of this era often combined viral structures and tactics with thematic explorations of contagion, epidemic, and contamination.

Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing into the early twenty-first century, these practices emerged in the work of anonymous collectives like Rtmark and gleefully political impostors like the Yes Men, as well as a constellation of groups following the leadership of *Adbusters*. And they emerged, particularly, in the work of the three artists and collaborative groups I discuss at length in this chapter—the American collective Critical Art Ensemble; the Italian-American duo Eva and Franco Mattes; and the German film and theater director Christoph Schlingensief. I single these artists out from political and aesthetic fellow travelers because they began working at the dawn of the digital age, and because their projects—which I trace through the first decade of the twenty-first century—offer particularly rich insight into the shifting stakes of the viral between 1990 and 2016. I conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of recent work by artists Shu Lea Cheang and Anicka Yi, both of whom explore the gendered and sexualized body as a contagious force. Yi’s and Cheang’s practices register the continued significance of the viral as overlapping social metaphor and biological fact, linked to new technologies and the circulation of contagious affect.

In *Media Virus!* Rushkoff drew an intimate connection between emerging media and the contagious spread of images, ideas, and actions. Preceding YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and other contemporary sites of viral dissemination
by roughly a decade, his insights have proven central to understanding the virtual proliferation of memes in contemporary internet culture. Since the publication of *Media Virus!* the term “viral” has become ubiquitous, commonly referring to ideas, images, videos, and information that spread rapidly, increasing in significance as they gain viewers, participants, and co-creators. YouTube created the viral video; Twitter created viral hashtags; Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr created viral images and spread them around the world. Each of these platforms rewards contributions that “go viral” in precisely the sense Rushkoff described, and by the end of the twenty-first century’s first decade, the term “viral” had come to refer, first and foremost, to the infectious properties of digital media and technology. As Tony D. Sampson noted in 2012, the newfound prevalence of the viral metaphor soon shaped it into a primary term for understanding all digital-age dissemination. “It is via these various contagion models,” he wrote, “that financial crisis, social influence, innovations, fashions and fads, and even human emotion are understood to spread universally like viruses across networks.”

Sampson’s last example—“even human emotion”—is perhaps the most significant for performance. Though, following Sara Ahmed, I do not consider the spread of emotion to be “universal,” its circulation in shifting form lay at the center of the emerging cultural relationship to contagion in this period. And emotional contagion did not apply equally to all feelings. In the cultural imagination of the dawning twenty-first century, the most virulently viral emotions included anxiety, paranoia, and terror. “Fear is an object that is omnipresent and transmitted,” Schlingensief said. “Politics only needs fear to be able to say, ‘Don’t worry, we’ll look after it.’” Contagious anxiety was the result, or perceived result, of the increasingly viral structures governing a wide range of social, biological, and technological systems, and, as Schlingensief observed, frequently worked to the advantage of repressive political structures, encouraging apathy and disengagement. In response, artists began performing the politics of viral fear.

While Rushkoff was diagnosing the media virus as the harbinger of a new radical politics, philosophers such as Jean Baudrillard were exploring the metaphorical convergences among biological, scientific, and digital viruses. “The high degree to which AIDS, terrorism, crack cocaine or computer viruses mobilize the popular imagination should tell us that they are more than anecdotal occurrences in an irrational world,” Baudrillard argued in 1990. “The fact is that they contain within them the whole logic of our system: these events are merely the spectacular expression of that system.” In his later work *Cool Memories II*, he again linked epidemiological structure with digital information transfer:

> As integration increases, we are becoming like primitive societies once again, with all their vulnerability to the slightest germ . . . On computer networks, the negative effect of viruses travels even more quickly than
the positive effect of information. But the virus is itself information. If it gets through better than the other information, this is because, biologically speaking, it is both the medium and the message. It achieves that ultra-modern form of communication McLuhan spoke of, in which information is not distinct from the medium which bears it.\textsuperscript{8}

For both Rushkoff and Baudrillard—writing in an era when the HIV/AIDS crisis had recently reached its epidemic height—biological contagion frequently haunts the edges of discourse about viral media or information. It’s no accident that Rushkoff cites the AIDS advocacy group ACT-UP as an early maker of memes.

Yet, as both writers observe, viral media also strains against the biological analogy. Even Rushkoff’s vocabulary of “datastreams” and ideological code, imagery summoned to reinforce the analogy, proved less durable than the concept of the virus itself, which circulated in media and artistic discourse alongside a constellation of related terms: infection, contamination. The viral performances described in this chapter test, and revel in, such contradictions. They diverge from the shapes and behaviors of biological viruses, but also hold dialogue with them, employing viral artistic structures to explore themes of affective, virtual, or biological contagion. Likewise, they interrogate and often veer away from the viral’s relatively narrow set of immediate associations with instant popularity, modeling transmission and dissemination in richer and more complex ways.

These performances also hold explicit dialogue with the viral terminology that, during this era, was increasingly employed in describing the controlling structures of corporations, globalized economies, mass media, and government bodies. Only five years after publishing \textit{Media Virus!} Rushkoff released \textit{Coercion: Why We Listen to What “They” Say}, which reported on the shifting marketing strategies employed by large corporations, who had begun calling upon Rushkoff himself for advice on how to manufacture viral success. “Ironically, perhaps, it was my faith in the liberating powers of cyberspace that made me one of the last people to take such efforts seriously, and to reckon with the Internet’s coercive potential,” he wrote with dismay.\textsuperscript{9} This viral marketing vogue both responded to and inspired viral political intervention. In a 2003 essay heralding the advent of viral activism, Dennis W. Allen argued it was, among other things, the structure of the rapidly globalizing economy that shaped the viral modes of resistance practiced by collectives like Rtmark. “Rtmark’s view,” he wrote, “is that [corporate] power is ‘viral,’ by which they mean to suggest both the way that it proceeds through a vast multiplicity of small actions and the fact that it ‘reacts to attack by mutation.’”\textsuperscript{10} Like Rtmark, Critical Art Ensemble, Eva and Franco Mattes, and Christoph Schlingensief enacted such “sabotage” in public places, testing media’s subversive potential and its susceptibility to capitalist forces, merging viral form and viral subject matter.
These artists’ works are heirs to many of the radical performance projects described in the first two chapters of this book, explicitly changing the terms of engagement from the radical riots of the Living Theatre, or the overt audience choreography of General Idea, to immerse spectators in provocative public fictions. Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) stages scientifically accurate experiments that mock and undermine myths spread by corporations and governments: anxieties about dirty bombs, fears of terrorist infiltration. Eva and Franco Mattes use the channels of mainstream press and public opinion to spread provocative rumors, which they later dramatically expose. The film and theater artist Christoph Schlingensief made a career of staging politically subversive multimedia events that challenged audiences to rethink habitual relationships to media and politics.

Also like the cultural activists Rushkoff described in Media Virus!, many of the projects explored in this chapter take the form of large-scale public détournements in the tradition of the French situationists. These artists borrow and reshape the actions and images of other artists or of the institutions under critique. They often work under pseudonyms, and impersonate real or fictional figures from the systems of control into which they intervene. These artists employ different names to describe such practices: for Critical Art Ensemble, they might be called “critical realism.” For Eva and Franco Mattes, strategic borrowing—from “cloning” to “plagiarism”—constitutes a core artistic strategy, while the Yes Men refer to their strategic impersonation of corporate or governmental figures as “identity correction.” Copying—or copying with a difference—emerged as a significant element of viral dramaturgy in this era, echoing the radical strategies employed by situationists half a century before. “Plagiarism is necessary,” Debord had written. “Progress implies it.”

The dramaturgy of publicly performed fiction—spectacular stories, unbounded by theatrical stages—also locates these artists within art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty’s useful category of “parafiction”: artistic works that are presented to the public as “plausible” reality, and often experienced by spectators as reality, before being unveiled as fictional. Lambert-Beatty argues:

In parafiction real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived. Post-simulacral, parafictional strategies are oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust. Simply put, with various degrees of success, for various durations, and for various purposes, these fictions are experienced as fact.

Parafiction and the viral make natural allies in the work of the artists described here. Both invoke the dramaturgy of provocation and surprise, and take shape in public space. Both make frequent use of digital media’s contagious properties: “Parafiction’s natural home is the blog, the discussion board, or the wiki, where information is both malleable in form and material in effect,”
writes Lambert-Beatty.\textsuperscript{16} I employ Lambert-Beatty’s term in describing the work of Critical Art Ensemble, Christoph Schlingensief, and (as she herself has done) Eva and Franco Mattes, even as the destination of my argument diverges from hers. While Lambert-Beatty employs parafiction as a means of exploring the contested nature of truth and knowledge, I examine parafictional works as experiments in the contagious properties of performance and media. These artists use parafictional techniques to test the boundaries of live performance, revealing overlaps among viral theme and viral structure: the affective circulation of fear, the physical circulation of viral weapons, or the accumulation of clicks on a provocative page in virtual space.

**Molecular Invasions: Critical Art Ensemble**

Critical Art Ensemble—collective creators of performance, video, visual art, and theory—has employed viral imagery, and explored themes of contagion, since their founding in the late 1980s. These themes emerged explicitly in an early video project, a two-minute collage entitled “Ideological Virus,” which presents an overt parallel between physical contagion and the dissemination of affect and ideology. In the video, familiar Nazi-era film footage plays over a swirling soundtrack of static, snatches of songs, and bits of news broadcasts. A parade of trucks bearing swastika flags fades into shots of a crowd tossing books onto a blazing fire. Slides declare “Symptoms Onset: Censorship” and “Advanced Symptoms: Military Fetishism.” We see a human body with badly blistered skin, Nazi rallies, and warplanes assembling into formations in the sky. As the video unfolds, the “Advanced Symptoms” are revealed to include not only fascism, but also consumer capitalism and American politics. A woman’s voice advises us about a money-back guarantee, and a newscaster describes a protest by AIDS-awareness activists.\textsuperscript{17} The vocabulary of viral transmission links capitalism, genocidal warfare, and the lack of government response to the AIDS crisis.

Though their performances frequently employ new types of communications technology, CAE finds inspiration in the work of earlier practitioners and forerunners of viral performance, including the situationists, the Living Theatre, and Boal. Often, the collective creates “invisible” performances staged outside of theaters, in which they pose as educators or activists, disseminating information about corporations’ efforts to genetically modify crops, or about the politics of paranoia in an age of terrorism. In an interview, cofounder Steve Kurtz described his inspirations, positioning CAE as an heir to political experimenters of decades past:

Groups like the Situationists and the Diggers realized that cultural participation and production is a significant political act, and that
no successful political campaign or movement can survive without a
cultural wing. I think anyone who is interested in using culture as a
political force will share cultural DNA with such groups. So we cer-
tainly looked back to the Diggers, the Situationists, the Feminist Art
Movement, and to the Living Theatre for a lot of our dramaturgical
models. The way that they conceived of reality in the theater, their
ontology, was what was really interesting to us.18

CAE’s affinities with the Living Theatre and Boal run particularly deep. The
Living Theatre’s approach to staging “reality,” Kurtz explained, inspired CAE
to stage performances outside the bounds of conventional theaters, drawing
political power from the relationships between fictive theatrical action and
real-world intervention. Kurtz argued:

The Living Theatre seemed to understand the implosion of the real,
and to be able to move around in fictional theatrical space, back into
real situations, and then back into theatrical space again. It was such
an expansion of the theater, and of how the real and the unreal or the
imaginative could be used together with a political purpose, and in
their case, a biopolitical purpose. CAE sees them as being very out in
front, in terms of what would come in the late seventies, and in the
eighties particularly, when all the discourse around simulation began.
They already had a battle plan.19

In *Paradise Now*, mythic historical narratives and realistic acting blended
with blueprints for real social change. In CAE’s projects, fictive scenarios
and characters—often, performers posing as members of nonexistent
organizations—frame the delivery of scientifically or statistically accurate
information on subjects such as genetically modified crops, germ warfare,
and economic inequality.20

Like Boal, Kurtz views carefully constructed fictive scenarios—scenes
played out in the real world, unmarked as performance—as a means of pro-
foundly affecting a few audience members at once. In fact, Kurtz explains,
reaching vast numbers of potential allies is less important to CAE than
creating lasting effects in a few minds. He distinguished CAE’s work from
conventional ideas of the “viral”:

CAE believes that there is a continuum between the qualitative and
the quantitative within which cultural activists position themselves
in relation to the audience. We do not believe that any one position
is more valuable than another. All points should be occupied and
explored. At one end of the spectrum would be a group like the Yes
Men. For them, the success of an action can be measured by how
much viral attention it gets, in conjunction with the amount of secondary representation. So if a million people hear about an action and hundreds write about it, or publish photos, they are doing well. They are banking on power through numbers, mass visibility, and reproducibility. CAE is at the other end of the spectrum, in that we don’t really care about quantity. Our concern is with the qualitative experience of the person who sees or participates in one of our actions. We are interested in direct experience and not secondary representation. We want our projects to be fully embodied. We want to capture people’s attention for a while. We want them to be thoughtful and reflective. We design our theaters so that people have an actual stake in the performance. So let’s say we have information about transgenic bacteria. Who really wants to know about transgenic bacteria? But, if people are walking by and you tell them, “We are about to release some transgenic bacteria here,” then they want to understand what is about to happen, and what it means in an existential sense. They have a stake in what is about to happen, and once in that state, we can put all kinds of fairly complicated information into their minds. Complexity and viral information tend not to go well together, but both have necessary functions.21

Kurtz’s comparison with the work of the Yes Men is an apt one. Famous for, among other projects, their 2004 impersonation of Dow Chemical representatives, calling attention to the company’s responsibility for the 1984 industrial disaster in Bhopal, India, the Yes Men stage parafictional performances that employ the most recognizable of twenty-first-century viral structures. The two collaborators, who work under the pseudonyms Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonnano, impersonate figures from major corporations or government entities as a means of playfully revealing vast, structural hypocrisies and crimes, primarily focusing on the ravages of globalization and the inequalities fostered by megacorporations and the government entities that aid them. They have posed as representatives of the World Trade Organization, Dow Chemical, and Exxon, and routinely accompany their projects with fake corporate websites, mimicking the aesthetic and tone of the real pages so convincingly that reporters sometimes contact Bonnano and Bichlbaum for interviews or comments.22

In comparing the Yes Men with CAE, Kurtz aptly distinguishes between “quality” and “quantity.” CAE’s performances are not “viral” in quite the way the Yes Men’s are. And yet viral performance has never been solely a matter of proliferating secondary representations, but instead has always modeled the relationship between individuality and scale. Viral performance links the viral unit to the expanding viral structure, the isolated gesture with its act of “becoming-number,”23 and the local performance with its global proliferation, onstage or online. This power to connect local and global
manifests in Artaud’s vision for plague, erupting in Marseilles and spreading as the infected disperse to other countries; in the Living Theatre’s dramaturgy of local revolution with global ambition; and especially directly in the networked performances described in chapter 4. As I see it, in viral performance, quantity manifests its own form of quality—the Yes Men’s affinity for secondary representation inevitably shaping the dramaturgy of their live actions—while performances pitched toward quality, evincing little interest in mass dissemination, hold other, equally profound relationships with numerical scale.

CAE articulates its relationship to transmission and dissemination in its manifestos and theoretical texts, available for free download on its website. In its earliest books, *The Electronic Disturbance* (1994) and *Electronic Civil Disobedience* (1996), CAE outlines a theoretical blueprint for what the collaborators term “cultural resistance,” invoking the strategies of 1960s-era political theater groups in order to create a proposal for updating those artists’ methods for a digital age. “Postering, pamphleteering, street theater, public art—all were useful in the past. But as mentioned above, where is the ‘public’; who is on the street? Judging from the number of hours that the average person watches television, it seems that the public is electronically engaged,” writes the group in *The Electronic Disturbance*. Power, they argue, now resides in the “bunker”: the network of data shaping identity, comprising citizenship information, banking and medical records, and credit scores. This shift renders earlier modes of radical performance ineffective and demands new forms of artistic resistance:

The aim of The Living Theater to break the boundaries of its traditional architecture was successful . . . The problem is that effective resistance will not come from the theater of everyday life alone. Like the stage, the subelectronic—in this case the street, in its traditional architectural and sociological form—will have no effect on the privileged virtual stage.

The writers describe an imagined performance of digital-age revolt, played out live before an audience, in which the sole “actor” is a technology expert who infiltrates official databases in order to break the shackles of his or her own electronic imprisonment. The result would be viral in a digital sense—disseminating chaos via computer code—and in a wider social sense, as the hacker’s actions ripple outward. “Such an action spirals through the performative network, nomadically interlocking the theater of everyday life, traditional theater, and virtual theater,” they write. For Critical Art Ensemble, the publication of freely available digital books constitutes one strand of a diverse set of strategies for public intervention, all of them deeply engaged with questions of speed, dissemination, and affective spread.
CAE’s performances stage put these questions to the test in public, often for unsuspecting audiences. In *Marching Plague* (2005), inspired by the Bush administration’s post-9/11 resurrection of an offensive germ warfare program, the group combined biological infectiousness with themes of contagious political paranoia. Kurtz and his collaborators researched the fraught twentieth-century origins of biological weapons programs, discovering a history of errors and anxieties surrounding germ warfare, and then re-created a heavily flawed British Navy experiment from the post–World War II era. CAE’s performance simultaneously protested the germ warfare programs (their enormous consumption of resources, their inability to function as effective deterrents to conflict) as well as the dangers in dabbling with bacterial agents whose true properties are unknown. As a reenactment of a British Navy project, *Marching Plague* functioned as a large-scale détournement—as an attempt to spread skepticism about germ warfare, using the physical components of germ warfare themselves.

Few audience members witnessed a live performance of *Marching Plague*. Its central action took place on the North Sea, off the Scottish coast. A video on CAE’s website provides a detailed look at the performance and its process, framing the experiment within a larger historical narrative about biological weapons. The video begins by linking post-9/11 fears with World War II–era anxieties about germ warfare. In 1950s America, fears about new kinds of weapons, particularly biological ones, mingled with political preoccupations about Communist infiltration and information warfare. Meanwhile, scientific advances made possible a more detailed understanding of viruses themselves. Priscilla Wald documents this convergence of viral imagery in *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, a study of postwar conceptions of infectiousness in film and pop culture, noting that “as viruses became increasingly sinister and wily, sneaking into cells and assuming control of their mechanisms, external agents, such as Communists, became viral, threatening to corrupt the dissemination of information as they infiltrated the nerve center of the state.” Viral imagery was flexible, adapting to the fears of the historical moment. Early twenty-first-century America, for CAE, simmered with the same interlocking fears of germ warfare, infiltration by terrorist cells, and the transformative possibilities of information technology.

The video opens in black and white, with a familiar domestic setting: a kitchen counter, a period-appropriate radio, patterned wallpaper, a plate of fruit. A housewife whisks ingredients in a mixing bowl as her husband looks on contentedly. As a young girl enters, smiling, wearing a white pinafore and grasping a blonde doll, the ominous voice of a radio announcer—shades of “War of the Worlds”—reports that new evidence suggests that a biological attack on the United States is underway. The video then shifts to a mid-twentieth-century history of germ warfare, describing weapons developed in
1930s Japan and in the postwar United Kingdom and United States, many of them ineffective or incomplete. The British experiment “Operation Cauldron,” of particular interest to CAE, was an effort to use plague bacteria as a naval weapon, to be sprayed from British Navy ships in the direction of enemy vessels. The Navy’s first tests used what CAE refers to as a “harmless plague substitute,” while the final ones dispersed real plague particles. These experiments, performed near the Isle of Lewis off the coast of Scotland, employed live guinea pigs as their test targets, positioning the animals on a pontoon floating near the ship. Like the Japanese efforts to produce biological weapons, this British attempt to create a method of distributing plague was never proven effective or deployed against an enemy.

Operation Cauldron appealed to CAE both because of its ostensible danger and because of its high-stakes ineffectiveness. The group decided to re-create the British experiment, failure and all. At this point, the video shifts to documentary footage of CAE members from 2005. They have traveled to the Isle of Lewis, bringing test tubes of Bacillus subtilis, the same “plague substitute” the British deployed—as well as a raft of guinea pigs and a guinea pig “wrangler.” Steve Kurtz, speaking to the camera, explains the layout of the new experiment: the location of their own guinea pigs, the vantage point from which CAE will spray them with bacteria, the direction of the breeze. “We’re expecting, just like there is right now, to have a light breeze off the Atlantic, so we’re hoping that’s going to carry our atomized matter toward the guinea pigs, and that, unlike the British military, we shall be successful,” he says, clenching his fist in an ironic gesture of victory.

The camera walks us through the steps of CAE’s studious scientific recreation. Members of the group sit around a table, piping tiny amounts of liquid into test tubes. “We’re inoculating broth that we will grow in the incubator,” says Kurtz, “and hopefully by tomorrow we’ll have all the bacteria we could ever imagine.” Outside on the water, Kurtz and his team of scientist-performers work through the stages of “Operation Cauldron,” testing the wind direction, aligning their ship with the floating raft of guinea pigs, and spraying whitish fumes in the guinea pigs’ direction. Finally, the scientists test the animals for evidence of Bacillus subtilis. Kurtz runs cotton swabs down the guinea pigs’ backs, then smears the samples into Petri dishes. In the end, only one guinea pig, and its human wrangler, show signs of B. subtilis. This, the video captions explain, “indicates the infection rate,” if real plague bacteria had been used, “would also be poor or zero.” As Kurtz explains, the bacteria’s non-infectiousness was always part of CAE’s attraction to the project. “Marching Plague was inspired by the Bush administration’s plan to relaunch the U.S. germ warfare program,” says Kurtz. “We wanted to remind everyone of how foolish this initiative was the first time, and to show the kind of absurd activities that would be supported by public funds.” Marching Plague was designed to fail.
CAE’s accompanying book, also called *Marching Plague*, overtly linked the specter of epidemic to media hype and mass hysteria:

Mass body invasion by germs is always one of the potential threats to which the index may refer. This fearsome possibility can then be reinforced by the news fictionalists that are presented to the public as expert consultants. As if this is not enough, mass spectacles of under-preparedness are simulated in cities around the United States in conjunction with the federal government. Coverage of these media circuses circulates on the airwaves and in newspapers nation-wide.33

In their live experiment, CAE presumed the presence of a contagiousness beyond biological weapons at work in the public imagination: the proliferation of anxious rumor, disseminated by a news industry inseparable from the larger economic forces that American biological weapons programs are designed to protect.

Yet *Marching Plague* diverges from the model of straightforward political intervention in important ways. The piece unites questions of contagious weaponry and contagious affect, but does so by placing the entire experiment in a quarantine of sorts, far from frenzied crowds and the frantic news media. Most witnesses could only watch it unfold in the form of a video filled with information from CAE’s contextual research, and therefore without the possibility of ever being fully absorbed in the action. The backdrop of dangerously infectious paranoia is visible, in *Marching Plague*, only in photonegative form, in CAE’s efforts to remove spectators’ media-inspired paranoia. The piece functioned most importantly as a *détournement*, a quotation of an action performed by an organization representing power (in this case, the postwar British military) which CAE faithfully replicated,34 isolating the action from any potential audience reaction in order to examine it on its own terms: to glimpse the virus itself, rather than simply its viral spread. Through hermetically sealed solitude, CAE countered the problems of incessant interconnectedness.

Other variations on *Marching Plague* (some performed, others planned but never executed) altered this formula, calling for more human witnesses and toying deliberately with the possibility of public panic. In a version entitled *Target Deception*, for instance, filmed in Leipzig, Germany, in 2007, CAE artist Steve Barnes sprays *Bacillus subtilis* from the top of a downtown building. A cast of “human guinea pigs”—outfitted with T-shirts bearing the label “human guinea pig corps” alongside biohazard symbols—parades up and down the street below, accompanied by the sounds of a marching band. After Barnes finishes spraying, Kurtz tests the volunteers for signs of *Bacillus subtilis* (as in the naval version, the infection rate is effectively zero).35

In 2010 CAE produced a new project, *Radiation Burn*, using a similar model: a seemingly dangerous activity, intentionally slated for failure,
followed by a sincere investigation of the fear it inspired. This time, Kurtz explains, the group decided to challenge publicly circulating anxieties about the possibility of terrorists setting off a “dirty bomb”:

In much of Europe and certainly here in the U.S., the threat of a “dirty bomb” has been the big scary bogeyman, and it’s been a cornerstone of propaganda aimed at convincing people to give up their rights for reasons of personal safety and national security. We wanted to shatter that cornerstone. CAE also wanted to talk about why, in history, a dirty bomb has never been used.\textsuperscript{36}

\textit{Radiation Burn} took place in a park in Halle, Germany, where members of CAE set off a fake “dirty bomb”: a real explosive, whose blast radius was intended to achieve the same geographical reach as a dirty bomb, but without radioactive material inside. A few of the spectators who witnessed \textit{Radiation Burn} were forewarned about the event, but most members of the piece’s small, impromptu audience arrived at the scene when they saw the billows of whitish smoke, and as the park authorities, police, and bomb squad hastily assembled and began testing the area for radiation.\textsuperscript{37} As a crowd gathered,
local public safety officials tracked the scope and shape of the cloud, treating the harmless mist as if it were really lethal.

Meanwhile, Ulrich Wolf, a German medical physicist and radiation expert recruited by CAE for the occasion, stepped up to a lectern near the fake explosive’s “ground zero” and began calmly delivering a lecture on radioactive weapons. He mused on the extreme unlikelihood that a terrorist group could successfully secure the necessary materials or expertise to construct and deploy a dirty bomb. He described, for the assembled public, different types of radioactivity and their uses and effects, pointing out, for instance, that people encounter radiation every day the sun is shining and every time they use cell phones. “The biggest problem with these radiological weapons,” he argued, “is not so much their immediate effects on human health, but rather the fact that they will trigger panic among the population.”

The immediate danger posed by a dirty bomb is less the threat of infectious radiation and more the threat of infectious fear.

A photo of the piece succinctly conveys the disjuncture between the two responses to the explosion: Wolf’s coolly rational speech, and the terror-inducing sight of officials wearing hazmat suits. Wolf, clad in jeans and a black jacket, stands at a grey podium in the center of a grassy field, speaking into a microphone. Meanwhile, two emergency responders wearing bright yellow hazmat suits, their faces hidden behind plastic hoods, spool out reams of caution tape to delineate the danger zone all around him. (“A nuclear physicist remarks on the triumph of the spectacle of radioactivity over the scientific understanding of radiation,” reads the photo caption on CAE’s website.)

While he recalls with pleasure that the project surprised some visitors to the park, Kurtz believes Radiation Burn was successful in swaying spectators away from unthinking panic. He and other CAE members walked through the crowd as spectators listened to Wolf and watched the emergency responders test the air for radiation, distributing “dosimeter stickers” so that individual audience members could check whether they had been irradiated. These measures, along with Wolf’s speech, he believes, managed to preempt spectators’ contagious fear:

After the explosion, we had the voice of reason (a nuclear physicist), standing at ground zero, explaining why this would never happen. In contrast, we also had the full spectacle of emergency, complete with roped-off areas populated with people in hazmat suits, police and fire trucks—everything that tends to scare people so badly, in order to see how our audience would balance out the two events. I do think at the end of it that reason actually won out.

As with Marching Plague, CAE appropriated an aggressive militant action in order to demonstrate its unlikelihood and ineffectiveness. The spread
of “radioactive” explosive material and the affective spread of fear were measured side by side. The bomb itself was part fact, part fiction—it really exploded, but was not really radioactive—and the emergency responders’ behavior was a true-to-life rehearsal for disaster, just as the information in Wolf’s speech was drawn from scientific research. The scenario was hypothetical and imaginative, and more importantly, CAE proposed, so are public assumptions about dirty bombs. Like a latter-day, self-conscious echo of “War of the Worlds,” Radiation Burn drew on the vertiginous terror inspired by technology to stage a performance about viral fear.

**Détournement and Plague: Eva and Franco Mattes**

In 1994, the year Rushkoff published *Media Virus!*, the pair of artists known pseudonymously as Eva and Franco Mattes began collaborating on a body of playful, provocative works traversing the boundaries of visual art, performance, and digital media. If media and public anxieties provide the context for Critical Art Ensemble’s *détournements*, the Matteses’ work frequently concerns the “spectacle” itself: representation and spectatorship in a contemporary digital landscape. The two artists were among the earliest and boldest practitioners of Net Art during the early days of the internet, and their works are prime examples of parafictional performances (Lambert-Beatty features their project *Nike Ground* in her article on the subject). Like CAE, the Matteses—who also work under the title of their website, 0100101110101101.org, often shortened to 01.org—view computer networks as crucial sites of social and political control, and as an important arena for resistance and intervention.

Their mode of working, across live performance, visual media, and digital spaces, has been viral from the beginning. In an interview, Franco Mattes described the duo’s approach to performance and spectatorship:

> Probably figuring out the viral thing was our only option for spreading something quickly. I never believed in the artist closed off in the studio, painting alone. The kind of art I like usually is the kind that tries to get out there as fast as possible, as loud as possible. I’m especially fascinated when this process comes from the bottom, when it’s not top-down.42

Mattes not only affirms that viral modes of dissemination are practical, and that they are aesthetically central to his approach to live art, but also that they are ideologically subversive, a means of disseminating ideas, information, and culture that can function outside of mainstream media or power structures. Viral modes of dissemination imply resistance. Meanwhile, large-scale public fictions, spread through mainstream communications networks
and then exposed by the artists themselves, present, Mattes explains, an optimal format for viral art. “My ideal piece of art would involve audience in a strong way,” he says.43

These lines of inquiry led the Matteses to a project that linked the viral metaphor with new technology and live performance, and that offers a model for understanding and staging twenty-first-century viral performance. Invited to present their work at the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001, the duo, in collaboration with another digital art collective suggestively titled “Epidemic,” decided to create a computer virus, which they would unleash from the exhibit hall on the exhibition’s opening day and send coursing through computer networks around the world. The result, entitled biennale.py, was a computer virus with aspirations beyond cyberspace, designed to provoke and examine media-fueled public anxiety.

Spectators viewed biennale.py in a variety of formats. The official exhibit at the Slovenian Pavilion, entitled “Contagious Paranoia,” included two large computers, placed back-to-back on pedestals, both infected with the virus, their screens displaying streams of code and rogue files, and a large wall hanging on which the computer code that comprised the virus had been printed in large type. The artists also printed the virus code on T-shirts, sold it on CD-ROMs priced at $1,500 (at least three of which were purchased by collectors), and made the code available for download on their website.44 The international press began anxiously purveying apocalyptic predictions about the virus’s effects on important institutional networks, and gleefully inflating the drama that biennale.py incited, even as they questioned the virus’s status as a work of art. “At 7PM the Slovenian Pavilion officially opens its doors,” wrote a journalist named Alessandra C. in La Stampa. “The chaos breaks out. Journalists with recorders, televisions with microphones. Everybody hunting the virus.”45

These journalistic constructions of the project inflated the virus’s threatening public image, helping to spread the Matteses’ “contagious paranoia.” “The organization [the Venice Biennale] got into a panic when it started to reproduce itself endlessly,” wrote Rafael Cippolini.46 Pike van Kememade called biennale.py “the most aggressive self-replicating piece of art I’ve ever seen.”47 Recalling the sequence of events, Franco Mattes mused, “The virus spread way faster in the media than on the computers. It was basically pure media hysteria.”48

From computer code, the Matteses thus created a suspense narrative for the twenty-first century, starring the virus as shadowy villain, lurking in virtual networks and waiting for corrupted floppy disks to convey its infectious codes to fresh machines. Antivirus companies like McAfee and Symantec (whom the Matteses warned about the virus, providing information about how to disable it) were cast as representatives of a stodgy status quo, lurching about in the light-footed virus’s wake, and dispatching complaints to the
Matteses that computer viruses did not constitute art. The artists, mysterious originators of the virus, became dashing amoral commandos, seizing new forms of power for the digital age. Observers, including those who watched the virus devouring the computers on display at the Biennale, as well as those who followed its trail in newspaper headlines, were recruited as a new, dispersed audience—or, to use Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst’s term, a diffused audience—and were asked to see computer networks as the stage for a drama without defined geographical or chronological limits. “A virus is about losing control,” Mattes pointed out. “You know where you start and when you release it, but you don’t know where it’s going to lead you or where it’s going to spread.”

The project’s aim, the Matteses asserted, was to change public perceptions of the dangers computer viruses posed. Echoing CAE’s views on the possibility for viral performance to serve as public “inoculation,” the artists told reporter Reena Jana of Wired.com, “The only goal of a virus is to reproduce. Our goal is to familiarize people with what a computer virus is so they’re not so paranoid or hysterical when the next one strikes.” But the formal implications of biennale.py are richer and more complex still, and are as deeply engaged with the virus’s aesthetic lure as with public education. Speculating on the artists’ attraction to the virus as both form and subject, critic Domenico Quaranta mused on biennale.py’s larger cultural implications:

Viruses attracted 0100101110101101.ORG for various reasons. It was probably the only metaphor arising with the advent of the Net that had entered the collective imagination. Another thing they liked about the idea was the psychological effect that viruses have on people, the media-driven paranoia they generate and which in many cases is their only real consequence.

Realizing Baudrillard’s vision of information as virus, and literalizing Rushkoff’s vision of contagious “memes,” Eva and Franco Mattes materialized a tension that lies at the heart of the viral itself: between virus as information, and virus as destroyer of information.

This double identity has attended viral concepts and structures since the early days of computer technology. Long before Media Virus!, long before internet memes, when Norbert Weiner was founding the field he called cybernetics, viruses were already understood to be both information and a threat to the systems that allowed information to spread. As Wald notes:

The thinking that would eventually lead to an understanding of viruses as “among the most primitive means of information transfer” was consistent with that technical meaning, but more mainstream representations of viral information produced the image of the body
as a communication system that viruses could hijack, corrupting the information crucial to its healthy functioning.\textsuperscript{34}

For Baudrillard, the virus is “both the medium and the message”; for Derrida, a virus “introduces disorder into communication.”\textsuperscript{35} Indeed, the history of viral theory is the history of such double identities: viruses are information and misinformation, identity and otherness, language and its disruption.

The Matteses told this story not only through the public events surrounding \textit{biennale.py}'s release, but also within the source code itself. Examining the code comprising \textit{biennale.py}—attending to the text’s surface meanings, rather than the commands it contains—reveals playful gestures to the computer virus’s namesake (medical disease) and to the social circulations that the encoded virus mimics. Among strings of abbreviated commands, the untrained eye locates recognizable words, tauntingly arranged as if to suggest a narrative: “if find (body, [\texttt{epidemic}]),” reads one line; “soul = open (guest, \texttt{\'w\'}),” reads the next. Another section begins with the line “def chat (party, guest),” and closes with “fornicate (party + guest)—wryly hinting at the project’s social implications, evoking the informal physical networks by which rumors, public fears, and even real human viruses are spread. (Only at the end of its text does the virus offer a definitive statement of its own identity, a line that reads, “This file was contaminated by biennale.py, the world’s slowest virus.”)\textsuperscript{36} Though the string of code is ultimately legible only to the computer “bodies” it is designed to infect, the virus’s text, conjuring images of the body and the soul, parties and chatting guests, registers the associative dimensions of the virus: disease; affective transmission; the dramaturgy of contagious transfer within the body politic.

In his 2007 essay “The Virtual Artaud,” Jason Farman reads \textit{biennale.py} as deeply Artaudian. I agree, and build on his analysis here: Artaud helps to illuminate the significance of spectatorship for the creators of \textit{biennale.py}, while \textit{biennale.py} contributes to a broader history of Artaud’s influence on viral performance. Farman points out, for instance, that the “plague” Artaud envisioned would take the form of “a battle of symbols.”\textsuperscript{57} The Matteses’ piece, Farman argues, offers a suggestive realization of this vision, employing a series of “symbols”—the marks and commands of computer code—to infiltrate the machines’ interiors. The virus’s effects, meanwhile, are made visible to the user, onscreen, as (to use Artaud’s term) forms. Farman also views \textit{biennale.py} as a figure for the global spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. While carefully distinguishing the effects of the computer virus from the ravages of a real disease, he argues (and I agree) that \textit{biennale.py} constitutes an electronic analogy for an epidemic whose rapid international spread could only have happened in a globalized era, an age of rapid transit for information and human travelers alike.

I view \textit{biennale.py} as Artaudian not only in its use of signs and symbols, and its epidemic spread, but also in the terms under which it engaged
spectators. In “The Theater and the Plague,” Artaud details the power of epidemics to create, in Michael Warner’s terms, new publics, wreaking havoc on social and political structures and leaving profoundly altered societies in their wake. “Once the plague is established in a city, the regular forms collapse,” Artaud writes. “There is no maintenance of roads and sewers, no army, no police, no municipal administration . . . Entire streets are blocked by the piles of dead.” As social forms disintegrate, a crowd of spectators gathers to watch, becoming a new public forged by the plague.

These events, for Artaud, are a direct analogy for theater’s effects on audience members:

Just as it is not impossible that the unavailing despair of the lunatic screaming in an asylum can cause the plague by a sort of reversibility of feelings and images, one can similarly admit that the external events, political conflicts, natural cataclysms, the order of revolution and the disorder of war, by occurring in the context of the theater, discharge themselves into the sensibility of an audience with all the force of an epidemic.

Art here distills the violence of the outside world, impressing it on the spectator’s senses in condensed, electrified form. Biennale.py channeled anxieties about the unknowable corners of the digital landscape—the viruses lurking there, the hackers discharging them—and, framing such dangers as art, presented them to a public that assembled, live and virtually, for the occasion. Artaud’s plague, by destroying social structures, also revealed them, illuminating lines of communication and institutional networks as they crumbled. Likewise, biennale.py made visible networks of global media and connections among organizations, corporations, communities of spectators, and—across digital networks—computers themselves.

More than fifteen years later, few statistics register the virus’s geographical footprint: infecting only Python operating systems, it never made the list of high-priority viral threats. But anecdotal evidence suggests that biennale.py did spread beyond the Mattes’s control and expectations, infecting machines and provoking publics around the world. Franco Mattes recalls receiving numerous angry email messages from people whose computers were corrupted. According to Mattes, biennale.py made its way onto a commercial religious-education CD-ROM, and customers began to complain after discovering, to their surprise, that they’d installed more than a digital Bible on their computers. (The artists even heard from some whose computers were not affected at all: the virus inspired a kind of digital hypochondria, he says.)

Records of biennale.py’s existence can also still be found in the databases of major antivirus corporations. Most antivirus companies rename viruses as they detect them, and it lives on, in the Symantec Corporation’s alphabetized
list of “Threats and Risks,” under the title “Python.Bien.” Its profile, with the heading “Python/Bien,” also lingers in McAfee’s virus database (its risk assessment is listed as “low,” its origins “unknown”). Under the name “Python/Biennale,” it has a page on Microsoft’s Malware Protection Center website. According to Franco Mattes, there are others: the antivirus Kaspersky Lab named it “Python.Bien.a,” while the RAV company called it “Python/Biennale”.

Biennale.py shares with Critical Art Ensemble’s projects an element of what Steve Kurtz refers to as “critical realism.” Just as CAE, in Marching Plague, attempted to spread (harmless) bacteria in a re-creation of germ warfare techniques, and, in Radiation Burn, to detonate a “real” dirty bomb (without the radiation), the Matteses’ piece was an actual computer virus, a composition of code that infected other computers, rather than simply the representation of that code. Like CAE, the Matteses used technology to create a viral performance piece whose potency, both technologically and in the public imagination, was predicated on its being real. The virus was, to take up Lambert-Beatty’s concept of “parafiction,” plausible: plausibly destructive, plausibly contagious, inserting itself between fiction and reality as it spread through computer networks and in the public imagination.

One of the Matteses’ following projects tested the plausibility principle even more theatrically. In 2003, the pair was invited to create a new project to be exhibited in the historic Viennese square of Karlsplatz. A friend had loaned the artists a sleek glass-and-metal container, roughly the size of a small room, and the pair took inspiration from the container’s form, conceiving a project that might be considered a twenty-first-century paradigm for the “media virus” Rushkoff had outlined nearly ten years before. Covering the booth’s walls with “Nike” logos and slogans, the Matteses turned the structure into a fake “Nike” headquarters and began to circulate fictive announcements that Karlsplatz had been purchased by the sportswear corporation. Soon, their press releases declared, the plaza would be renamed Nikeplatz, and would feature a giant statue of Nike’s iconic “swoosh” logo in its center. “Nikeplatz (formerly Karlsplatz)” was stenciled on the box’s glass window, with a statement below reading: “This square will soon be called Nikeplatz/Come inside to find out more.” A large “swoosh” rested on top of this legend, as if to mark the company’s new territory.

The booth’s glossy modern stenciling and sharp angles stood in stark contrast to the square’s ornately old-fashioned architecture. Inside the booth, a detailed architectural sketch displayed the square’s new “look,” with the giant red swoosh as centerpiece. Visitors were invited to contemplate the Matteses’ custom-designed “Nikeplatz” sneakers, carefully angled as if alighting gracefully on their concrete pedestal, and decorated with horizontal stripes crossing their toes and white-edged swooshes displayed prominently on their outer sides. Two “Nike representatives” inside the Infobox answered the questions of curious passersby, proudly announcing that Nike would be
planning corporate takeovers of many historic city squares in the future, renaming Europe’s cultural landmarks, variously, “Nikesquare, Nikestreet, Plazzanike, Plazanike, or Nikestrasse.”

In the “NikeGround” video on 01.org’s website—which documents the project, while maintaining its fictive premise—a caption informs the viewer that “these days, the Nike Infobox travels from city to city announcing the places that have been chosen to wear the new Nike name.” Like biennale.py, Nike Ground drew its potency not only from its local incarnation, but also from its threatened spread—from the viral leap between local and global, quality and quantity, individual and crowd. “You want to wear it, why shouldn’t cities wear it too?” flashes on the screen, as peppy music plays and the “Infobox” zooms in and out of focus.

According to the Matteses’ initial press release from October 10, 2003, Vienna’s residents began writing angry letters to the editors of local newspapers almost immediately, protesting their municipal government’s apparently crass profit-seeking behavior. The Matteses’ video contains person-on-the-street interviews with local Viennese, who display varying levels of disgust and resignation over what has been presented to them as a fait accompli, the multinational corporation’s latest dismayingly predictable power-seeking move. “It’s a disaster!” says a young woman, smiling shyly. “Karlsplatz is historically rooted,” says a man, looking mildly concerned. “To convert it into something commercial like Nike is a doubtful decision.” “That sucks,” declares a younger, long-haired man glumly. “They have all these little children manufacturing their shoes, and now they want to present themselves in such a spectacular way?” Other interview subjects laugh, unsurprised by Nike’s newest conquest.

Meanwhile, on October 6, Nike itself had distributed a press release declaring the “Nikeplatz” publicity a fake, and requesting that Vienna residents remain calm until the perpetrators could be identified. Eight days later, the corporation demanded that the Matteses cease all activities related to copyrighted Nike material, and threatened to sue the pranksters for 78,000 euros in damages if they did not comply. 01.org replied with a series of playful press releases of its own. “Where is the Nike spirit?” inquired Franco Mattes in one of these. “I expected to deal with sporting people, not a bunch of boring lawyers!” Eva Mattes, meanwhile, pointed to the history of modern artists’ mimicry of corporate brands. “Think of Andy Warhol’s soup cans,” she wrote. “Nike invades our lives with products and ads but then forbids us to use them creatively.”

The mimetic impulse behind Nike Ground drew on the dramaturgy of the Matteses’ earlier projects and paralleled CAE’s wry pranks, but here, rather than replicating real phenomena (a dirty bomb, a computer virus), the artists shifted the fictional stakes, creating a fictive cosmos, a “plausible parafiction.” In Marching Plague, it is the possibility for successful infection that’s fictive, while biennale.py amplified the virus’s destructive power for
performative effect: the viruses were real, their spread imagined. But Nike Ground slid further into the fictive, creating a form of viral theater that was, like Boal’s invisible performances, grounded in realities but not itself real. In “claiming responsibility” for the performance, Eva Mattes explicated the artists’ motives and theatrical vision for the piece: “We wanted to use the entire city as a stage for a huge urban performance, a sort of theatre show for an unaware audience/cast,” she explained. “We wanted to produce a collective hallucination capable of altering people’s perception of the city in this total, immersive way.”

This précis contains many elements in common with earlier ideas of the “media virus,” even obliquely echoing the discourse that followed “War of the Worlds,” which likewise produced a contagious “collective hallucination” using the formal principles of new media. As embedded performance, to use Levin’s term, the piece brought unnoticed urban backgrounds into sharp focus. And as viral performance, the piece not only employed the viral properties of media and rumor; it evoked the viral nature of capitalism, the capacity for one Nikeplatz to rapidly transform into numberless plazas, streets, and squares.

Invoking Warhol, Eva Mattes placed Nike Ground in a long tradition of détournement, and indeed the situationist legacy is palpable in the Matteses’ intervention. Bruce Sterling compares Nike Ground, in its brevity and audacity, to “a wheat-pasted Situationist poster during May ’68,” but the affinities also run deeper than this. Situationists aimed to reveal the possibilities buried beneath the smooth exterior of buildings and public spaces, to reexamine urban geography as a means of locating escape hatches from utilitarian routine. Nike Ground acted in reverse, asking spectators to see the power structures embedded in everyday public space. In doing so, the project offers critical commentary not only on détournement, but also on situationism’s approach to “recuperation,” a concept usefully articulated by Tom McDonough: “the idea that avant-garde innovations might be recovered for use by the reigning social order, that revolutionary negativity might be recouped to strengthen bourgeois affirmation.” This concept, McDonough argues, testifies to a significant anxiety attending situationist thought: the possibility that their interventions simply reproduced, in photonegative, the actions of bourgeois capital. He concludes that “the bourgeoisie was as adept at détournement as the situationists themselves, that, in fact, recuperation and détournement were one and the same, a shared cultural strategy.” Nike Ground corroborates this conclusion. The megacorporation had already appropriated the language and ethos of freedom and revolt, leaving the artists to détournre its détournement.

The video documenting Nike Ground eventually shifts its focus from the opening “act”—the Matteses’ promulgation of their fiction—to the climax and denouement, a revelatory press-conference style announcement of the artists’ theories and intentions. “Our life is sponsored,” says a masked figure,
addressing the camera. "It’s here that we make publicity for free with our bodies every time we wear branded clothes. It’s more than natural that now we have the desire to manipulate these symbols that we see every day." Like *biennale.py*, and in a distant echo of Artaud’s theatrical metaphysics, *Nike Ground* thus staged a confrontation between symbols, the historic Viennese architecture staring down the new marker of global capital, the ever-present “swoosh,” an image of motion and speed.

*Nike Ground* drew on a form of affective transmission that has been described in especially eloquent terms by Maurya Wickstrom in her 2006 study *Performing Consumers*. Wickstrom explores the efforts of several large corporations, “lifestyle brands” such as Disney, Ralph Lauren, and American Girl, to permeate and script the daily lives, self-perceptions, and social attitudes of their consumers. These companies embody what Wickstrom, citing journalist Otto Riewoldt, refers to as “brandscapes.” By entering these stores and participating in their rituals—coveting the lifestyle they promise, purchasing and transporting their merchandise into the wider world—customers are seduced into serving as actors in a drama of capitalist world-making, ultimately at the cost of older, less consumerist modes of self-identification.

Perhaps not coincidentally, one of the early stops on Wickstrom’s survey of mega-brands is Niketown, the company’s flagship store in midtown Manhattan. Wickstrom details the sensory overload induced by the store’s hyper-mediated surroundings, the inspirational cant of slogans celebrating physical achievement and record-breaking feats of athletic ability, bolstered by surround-sound video and scientific-looking diagrams of human bodies mastering superhuman tasks. “There I stand, vibrating with the pulverizing, contagious experience of the swoosh, alive with a sense of how I might be changed,” she muses. Like the Matteses, Wickstrom views the “swoosh” logo as a potent symbol for movement. In her analysis, the logo is a visual analogue for bodily acceleration; in *Nike Ground*’s appropriation, the “swoosh” looks more like a checkmark registering one stop on a vast agenda of corporate takeover.

The Niketown environment, Wickstrom writes, manufactures a form of contagious affect, drawing her into a performance of identity that the company scripts, while encouraging her to believe she is unique and free:

Calling out from us our mimetic tendencies as a productive capacity allows the designers of these environments to release the self from its boundaries, and to give us the sensation that our identity is escaping foreclosure (even as the script of the play reenclous us, giddy with our felt escape, into the corporate agenda). Without knowing, and here is the first hint of what my labor produces, I begin to rehearse and produce as a quality of my own subjectivity the continual, restless movement of capital.
Even as she assesses Niketown’s sensually overwhelming scenography, Wickstrom observes that Nike is a particularly self-aware corporation, noting that it was one of the earliest large “lifestyle” companies to employ irony in its self-presentation. Sterling, describing *Nike Ground*, likewise draws this distinction between Nike and older, less self-aware mega-brands, suggesting that if the Matteses had staged the same performance just a couple of years later, the company might have been in a position to strategically respond, not with litigation but with glee at the unanticipated publicity. “If some lesser artists than our invisible pair pulled off some similar effort today, Nike would leap all over it as ‘viral marketing’ and grass-roots ‘urban experience design,’ ” he suggests.79

Yet *Nike Ground* also offered its spectators a contrasting mode of participation, one at odds with the comprehensive immersion for which Niketown strives. First, rather than surrounding spectators with sights, sounds, and slogans, the Matteses offered them only an idea: an imagined corporate takeover, rather than a real one, present in diagrams and on slides, superimposed over Karlsplatz in bystanders’ minds. Imagining themselves as participants in an urban drama in which new forms of capital confront established architecture, the people on Karlsplatz’s streets became self-aware spectators, rather than overwhelmed ones. The artists’ video interviews with passersby also reveal a spectrum of opinion about the dangers of corporations taking over urban space. While some interview subjects reject the hypothetical “Nikeplatz,” or display scorn for the new project, others accept the news as an unsurprising development in a world where money makes power. One woman asks, laughing, what anyone would do without money; others point out that corporate takeover is an unfortunate but expected contemporary phenomenon. “Nike to me is shoes, and that’s it,” states an older woman in a long overcoat dismissively.80

Allowing for a range of opinion, confronting Nike with its own image, and puncturing habitual relationships to public space, *Nike Ground* functioned as a kind of inversion of the Niketown store. There, as Wickstrom described, Nike’s aspirational aesthetic is contagious; in the Matteses’ stunt, an even greater act of public imagination inspires rumor to spread virally, the contagious fiction prompting reexamination of everyday facts. Franco Mattes, in his interview, connected *Nike Ground* to the pair’s larger dramaturgical strategy, their effort to leverage dramatic public fictions into wider public skepticism about the media:

My hope is that once you realize that that Nike campaign was not real . . . that you start thinking that maybe other things that you read in the newspaper that day, or saw on TV, could be fake, constructed: maybe what the priest told you, on Sunday during church, may not be 100% accurate.81

Like Critical Art Ensemble’s experiments, in which imitating the most frightening types of contagious warfare aims to inoculate publics against fear, *Nike
Ground sought to train its spectators—both live and dispersed—in skepticism toward digital-age media.

In 2010, Eva and Franco Mattes embarked on another experiment with social contagion and public space. This one asked more literal questions about contamination and fear, in what might be seen as a companion piece to CAE’s Radiation Burn. Plan C, first presented at the Abandon Normal Devices festival in Manchester, England, explored the many forms of fallout caused by the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear reactor meltdown. The piece was conceived in collaboration with other artists including the photographer Tod Seelie, New York-based event organizer Jeff Stark, Oakland-based artists Steve Valdez and Ryan C. Doyle, and filmmaker Todd Chandler. As Franco Mattes explained to me, Plan C was partially motivated by personal history: Eva Mattes suffers from an illness that many European doctors attribute to the nuclear meltdown’s aftermath, when radioactive clouds trailed over the couple’s native northeast Italy. The piece was also inspired by Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1979 film Stalker, in which a group of men follow a mysterious guide (known as the “Stalker”) to an eerily abandoned region euphemistically described as “The Zone.” This stretch of silent, overgrown fields and crumbling, long-forsaken buildings has been, the “Stalker” explains, mythologized as an area that is potentially deadly to visitors, but also capable of making their deepest wishes come true. Filmed several years before the Chernobyl disaster, Stalker’s treatment of the blighted region appears to anticipate the irradiated area created by the nuclear catastrophe (the “Stalker” tells his charges that “The Zone” may be the site of a meteor’s fall to earth, but that no one is sure).

In the first stage of preparing Plan C, the Matteses and their collaborators traveled to the radioactive zone surrounding Pripyat, an abandoned Ukrainian workers’ city that has stood vacant since its hasty evacuation in 1986. Pripyat, one of the Soviet “Atom Towns,” built in the 1970s to house entire communities of power plant workers, has long served as a particularly poignant image for the devastation wrought by Chernobyl. As Franco Mattes recounted to me, the town was hastily evacuated three days after the power plant exploded in April 1986, its approximately 50,000 residents crowded onto buses and assured they’d be returning in a matter of days. As a result, Mattes observed, the fleeing community left most of its possessions behind, turning Pripyat into an eerily intact ghost town. An amusement park, meant for the town’s children, had been under construction the same year, and was slated to open for the Easter holidays at the beginning of May, only to be abandoned when the town was emptied in late April. In photographs, the Ferris wheel, with its festive yellow-and-orange seats, rises from cracked pavement among the vacant buildings.

After obtaining legal permits to enter the “alienation zone” around Chernobyl, the Matteses and their collaborators arrived in Pripyat, dressed in hazmat suits and holding Geiger counters, which would alert them if they stepped into “hot spots,” where radiation levels are still lethally high. There, they began
scavenging scrap metal and building materials from the empty town. Franco Mattes described the otherworldly feeling of walking through Pripyat:

You have this crazy city, a utopian city created by the Soviets, totally taken over by nature and highly radioactive, where people left one day, without carrying anything. So when you go there, you feel like you’re in a science fiction movie, or a horror film, depending on your perspective.

The Plan C team transported their finds from Pripyat to a public park in Manchester, where they reassembled the metal scraps into a gawky, makeshift amusement park “ride.” Half public plaything and half eerie sculpture, the piece evokes the rusted Soviet-era architecture that still stands, untouched, in the long-desolate disaster zone. Red industrial-looking poles, supported by weathered wooden struts, lean in to brace a central column, from which branches jut out at odd angles. One is pyramid-shaped, like a tiny oil well; others are no more than narrow beams. From these extremities hang a group of mismatched passenger chairs: a wooden bench, a few repurposed car seats. Signs with Cyrillic lettering, one bearing a red star and a yellow lightning bolt, adorn the top of the Mattees’ refashioned amusement park ride, and in photographs, park visitors perch gleefully on the seats, smiling as the ride’s spinning arms whirl them, slightly shakily, off the ground.
Stark and Doyle created a short film about the project, which documents the making of the irradiated carnival ride and its opening for British audiences in Manchester. At the festival, a line of eager participants waits outside a fenced-in area as the Matteses, dressed in white protective hazmat suits, swing a gate open and allow them to file inside. The artists assist spectators in strapping themselves into the ride’s idiosyncratic seats, which range from chairs to a pogo stick-like contraption, which the carnival-goer grasps tightly with both hands. Then the ride begins, spinning slowly, then more quickly, as riders smile at each other and laugh. (The ride, although ostensibly radioactive, poses little threat to public safety, Mattes noted. The “hot” portions of the contraption—the irradiated metal from Pripyat—were placed well out of carnival-goers’ reach, while the seats were constructed from presumably safe materials scavenged at local British junkyards.)

Like Radiation Burn, Plan C attempted to turn radiation, a deadly, imperceptible tool of warfare and destruction, into something both visible and nonthreatening, to challenge public paranoia by forcing spectators to confront the specter of an irradiated environment all around them. Both staged twenty-first-century collective nightmares: in CAE’s case, anxieties over the possibility of a dirty bomb; in the case of Plan C, the possibility that meltdown looms everywhere a nuclear power plant is insufficiently protected, and everywhere that nuclear fuel lies unsecured. Both toyed with the potential for mass panic and staged the imperceptible, unpredictable spread of radioactive contamination. Plan C materialized a borderless form of dissemination, retraced radiation’s spread, and made tangible its dispersal across space and time. Franco Mattes explains that the irradiated zone around the power plant won’t become clean for at least 50,000 years, making the project, in his view, as timely in 2010 as it would have been twenty years earlier. (After the March 2011 nuclear accidents at Fukushima, he notes, no one questioned Plan C’s contemporary relevance.) As Hardt and Negri argue in Empire, permeability marks the borders of the twenty-first-century nation, which are porous both to the movements of global capital and to the spread of mass epidemic. Both Plan C and Radiation Burn walked spectators through the motions of such a confrontation with contaminants.

Plan C also, subtly, expanded the Matteses’ dramaturgical model, the large-scale public fiction. One of the reasons why the Matteses found Pripyat’s abandoned amusement park so compelling, Franco Mattes recalls, was its brief, fraught history. The so-called Luna Park, intended to be inaugurated on May 1, 1986, was in fact put to use only once, the day Pripyat was evacuated, when the rides were turned on as a sort of mass distraction. “The story goes,” Mattes says, “that they only turned it on one day, during the evacuation, so that it would transmit a sense of normality to the people—you know, so the music of the Ferris wheel, the Luna Park and so on, would calm people down. So it was actually used to entertain them, but in an extremely evil and sad way.” In reconstructing a Luna Park of sorts,
one whose defining quality was its score on a Geiger counter, the collaborators reversed the ruse, assembling the irradiated materials back into the form of an amusement park ride—a strange, lopsided one, with its history and radioactivity explicit rather than concealed. Chandler, Seelie, and Stark’s film about the project is, appropriately, entitled *Let Them Believe*, a direct quotation from Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*, but also a broader gesture to the questions of public credulity and deception that run through the story of Pripyat, and of the Matteses’ work. (Franco Mattes reports that many of the pair’s longtime followers, and even curators seeking to book *Plan C* into galleries and museums, refused to believe that the construction materials were really imported from Pripyat, instead insistently waiting for the artists to reveal the piece as a fiction. “People that know what we have done before are still waiting for us to say that the whole thing was a fake. It’s a fake fake.”) 

If *biennale.py* translated Artaud’s ideas about the plague into computer code, creating a twenty-first-century corollary to the philosopher’s concept of public communicability, *Plan C*, too, should be seen as an updated version of Artaud’s metaphysical contagion. This project addressed another form of communicability, equally hidden from easy public view, equally abetted by porous borders. Examining *Plan C* alongside “The Theater and the Plague” reveals a number of unexpected ways in which the piece realized Artaud’s ideas for a theater of contagion, offering new models for understanding the plague as a template for artistic work. *Plan C*’s divergences from Artaud, meanwhile, testify to the shifting stakes of contagion over time, and to the viral’s political flexibility. For Artaud, the plague’s devastations presaged authoritarian rule, while for the Matteses, the unacknowledged contagions of Chernobyl constituted fallout from an authoritarian regime.

First: the narrative overlaps. Both “The Theater and the Plague” and *Plan C* contain narratives of communicability across borders, and particularly between the exoticized “East,” from whence Artaud’s plague springs, and the apparently safe West. In Artaud’s story, commercial ships hailing from Asia deposit a plague of nightmarish proportions on European shores. The Matteses’ story is a post-apocalyptic parable about a group of rogue artists who enter a disaster zone in Eastern Europe and import artifacts from it to the apparently “safe” zone of suburban England. In Artaud’s description, the plague that infected Marseilles had two points of origin: it was imported to France, but it was also lurking in French territory already, waiting to be activated. *Plan C* takes up both of these modes of contagion. In describing the project, Franco Mattes explained that growing up in Europe after Chernobyl had meant confronting the disaster’s fallout as a persistent presence in the air, the soil, and the bloodstream. Like the ever-present plague of Artaud’s essay, radiation remains. It is, as Artaud wrote, a “latent disorder,” lingering in Europe the way the plague lingered, unseen, in France. *Plan C* made these invisible dangers available: if not visible, then tangible, contained in a whirling contraption that was both entertainment and threat.
The project also materialized Artaud’s description of a plague delivered on a trading ship, the result of the global circulation of people, goods, and, of course, invisible infectious particles. In a contemporary era of globalized trade and easy international mobility, such networks are faster, more comprehensive, more geographically dispersed than ever. Even the theoretically contained disaster zone could not be cordoned off from the rest of the world. Radiation drifted in clouds over Europe, affecting people far from Pripyat. (A blog entry about Plan C also noted that, after the disaster, Soviet authorities sold Pripyat’s trove of abandoned vehicles to China—suggesting endless possibilities for where the bulk of the town’s irradiated detritus might have ended up. Perhaps the seats on the Mattees’ ride, scavenged from materials in England, weren’t so safe after all.) Like the sailors on Artaud’s plague-bearing ship, the remnants of the Chernobyl meltdown circulated, and in transporting building materials from the alienation zone to England, the Mattees made this circulation tangible.

The theatrical plague Artaud envisioned was intended to subsume its spectators entirely, leaving no space for contemplation. And this is where the Mattees part ways with Artaud. While Plan C’s spectators experienced the ride physically, their encounter with the ride’s meaning was also staged in their minds, in their reflection after the fact. Plan C was contagious not only because it spread radiation, but also because it generated headlines, circulating in public discourse as well as in the air. It was, in this sense, a critique of contagious paranoia just as much as a requiem for a destroyed city. As with CAE’s Radiation Burn, Plan C presumed the presence of media-fueled anxieties in its audience and, also like CAE’s project, it asked spectators to confront these fears physically and directly, without media to either guide them or to amplify the alarm.

Plan C also diverges from Artaud’s vision in a darker way, by evincing a different image of the plague’s aftermath. Artaud viewed the theatrical plague as apocalyptically final, a total cleansing from which some new power structure might emerge. And Artaud’s vision for a new power structure was explicitly totalitarian: at the essay’s conclusion, he wonders whether “there can be found a nucleus of men capable of imposing this superior notion of the theater.” Writing during the interwar period in Europe, such a construction makes sense: catastrophe did feel final, and totalitarian powers were on the rise. Plan C, by contrast, examines a form of contagion that erupted, and was repressed, by an authoritarian power, whose invisibility was due partially to the public lies that followed in its wake. The project is a meditation on aftermath, evoking a contemporary world in which there is no finality to disaster and in which the media might not accurately report the fallout. This is a world in which the physical, social, and geopolitical remains of nuclear catastrophe linger without disappearing, or float across borders unannounced, in which tense nations are always on the brink of conflict. In the world of Plan C, the plague is a permanent condition.
Chapter 3

A Bit of Poison: Christoph Schlingensief’s
Ausländer Raus—Bitte liebt Österreich

This chapter’s third case study takes up a single project created by the German film and theater director Christoph Schlingensief in the year 2000, a “media virus” in the sense of Rushkoff’s vision that manifested both in public space and in the media-fueled public imagination. As with Marching Plague, Radiation Burn, biennale.py, and Plan C, the contagious affect under investigation was fear. Ausländer Raus confronted a spectrum of anxieties: public preoccupations with immigration into Austria, fueled by the rise of right-wing ideology in the Austrian government; and concurrently, anxiety about that very rise in extremism and its implications for the Austrian public. (Fear would be a recurring subject of Schlingensief’s work: his 2003 project, Church of Fear, not only interrogated the affective dissemination of fear, but was also arguably viral, expanding internationally to create a global network of participants.)

The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), led by Jorg Haider, a right-wing populist and overt Nazi sympathizer, had made unprecedented gains in the 1999 elections, garnering 27 percent of the national vote. The party espoused an extreme form of xenophobia and employed slogans and imagery deliberately reminiscent of the Nazis (Haider was notorious for a 1991 speech in which he praised Nazi hiring practices). When the party was incorporated into a new, controversial conservative government, several members of the European Union, frightened at what appeared to be a resurgence of policies and public sentiment reminiscent of Nazism, began diplomatic sanctions against Austria.

Schlingensief responded by staging a public performance that was part reality television show, part experimental theater piece, part parafiction, and part political demonstration. In Ausländer Raus—Bitte liebt Österreich (Foreigners Out, or Please Love Austria), the director confronted the Austrian public with its own anxieties about immigration by gathering a group of international refugees, all seeking asylum in Austria, and offering them temporary housing in a large shipping container situated in one of Austria’s historic squares. Video cameras filmed the refugees’ daily lives inside the container, reality television-style. Each day, Austrian citizens were offered the opportunity to vote online, registering preferences about which of the asylum-seekers should be allowed to stay and who should be forced to leave the country. Ausländer Raus was partially inspired by the Dutch (and later, internationally franchised) television show Big Brother, which restructured surveillance into entertainment, and emerged as one of the earliest widely popular reality television shows in Europe. Big Brother offered viewers a glimpse of its characters’ otherwise-hidden “real” lives. Accordingly, Schlingensief’s project allowed the public to pore over the daily minutiae of members of one of the most contested groups in Austrian society. Here, though, the television footage
available for view occupied a kind of limbo between everyday life and deliberate performance, between the participants’ real situations and Schlingensief’s scenario. Though their status as refugees was real, the performer-participants wore outlandish disguises—wigs, funny glasses—in order to conceal their identities; and the publicized “biography” of each asylum-seeker, intended to assist members of the public in voting, was also falsified. When walking in front of the cameras, the participants often held newspapers over their faces, heads down, rendering them unrecognizable.

*Ausländer Raus* was almost instantly notorious in the Austrian media, condemned both by those sympathetic to the FPÖ, whose political stance the piece skewered, and by those anxious about the performer-participants’ fates, and their level of agency in the performance. In the years since the container took up temporary residence in Vienna, Schlingensief’s deeply political provocation has also become a touchstone for critics exploring questions of digital-age performance, public art, and the avant-garde. Denise Varney views the project as a contemporary instance of Brechtian *gestus*, a “Street Scene” updated for a digital-age audience. Christopher Balme understands the project as a turning point in the relationship between theater and the public sphere, an instance in which digital media fused a theatrical audience with a wider public. Michael Shane Boyle invokes the piece as an instance of twenty-first-century “container aesthetics”: works of art and performance housed in shipping containers, which function as metonyms for the increasingly standardized movement of global capital. Claire Bishop’s observations, in *Artificial Hells*, are particularly useful to my reading of the piece. She points out that, for the Austrian public, the highly visible presence of an artistic project about deportation proved more provocative than the presence of a real detention center, housing many more refugees, just a few miles away. In the end, Bishop argues, the piece reveals a deep contradiction in the construction of democratic political regimes (“Schlingensief’s model of ‘undemocratic’ behaviour corresponds precisely to ‘democracy’ as practised in reality,” she writes). The project exemplified, she notes, a form of artistic efficacy premised on disruption and provocation rather than advocacy or persuasion.

I view *Ausländer Raus* as deeply viral. Reading the piece in this way illuminates the stakes of spectatorship and links the project’s thematic and historical dimensions with its approach to participation. This reading also assists in the larger historical project of tracing the emergence of works that include multiple kinds of viral dramaturgy: Schlingensief’s piece unites the Living Theatre’s practices of live provocation and affective spread with the infiltrative strategies of Marc Estrin, and the Matteses’ digital-age détournements. In what follows, I describe the piece in viral terms, sketching out the plot, and attending to the biological metaphors at work in Schlingensief’s project—the immunological thinking that both fueled his artistic self-conception and undergirded the fascist history that *Ausländer Raus* invoked.
Filmmaker Paul Poet’s documentary *Schlingensief’s Container* offers vivid footage of the performance and its spectators’ responses. The first time we see Schlingensief’s cast members, they are clambering onto a bus, its windows covered with newspaper to preserve their anonymity. Several of them wear sunglasses and wigs: a bright orange pageboy on one performer, a mess of gray curls on another. The bus glides through downtown Vienna, as twilight turns the city’s fairy-tale architecture even more picturesque. The camera cuts between shots of the asylum-seekers, riding placidly toward their indefinite voluntary confinement; crowd shots of gathered viewers’ expectant faces; and Schlingensief himself, addressing the audience from a perch atop one of the container structures.

Finally, the bus halts in the middle of a crowded square, and Schlingensief leads the performers out, their faces covered, eyes averted from the crowds of spectators pressing in and the banks of television cameras aimed at them. A marching band plays. Men in “security” T-shirts are everywhere. The performers disappear inside their new home: a large white shipping container, its makeshift form standing in contrast to the surrounding stately architecture, which includes the famous Sacher Hotel and the Vienna State Opera House. Soon, the performers reappear on video screens around the square, where they can be glimpsed from above, through the surveillance cameras inside their very public bunker. Perched on top of the container is a large sign proclaiming the project’s title: “Ausländer Raus” (“Foreigners Out”).

If *Nike Ground* staged the infiltration of public space by faceless capitalist forces, *Ausländer Raus* meditated on a related aspect of globalized, late-capitalist society: increased mobility and population shift, the movements of workers following the movements of capital. (And capital, as Sampson reminds us in *Virality*, is increasingly structured and understood in epidemiological terms.) But Schlingensief’s piece also made these concepts concrete: *Ausländer Raus* was not just a parafictional abstraction, a set of symbols meant for media distribution, a live staging oriented toward, as the Yes Men would say, “secondary representation.” It was also a real instance of what Austria’s right-wing politicians, and their followers, so feared: the daily presence of non-Austrians in Vienna’s city square. Indeed, *Ausländer Raus*, more than any other project described in this chapter, made both deliberate and unintentional use of the affective possibilities of live performance. Unlike *Marching Plague*, *biennale.py*, or *Plan C*, Schlingensief’s piece consistently drew large, emotionally charged crowds of spectators together, offering a study in affective contagion that was, in certain ways, reminiscent of the Living Theatre’s participatory spectacles. *Paradise Now* trapped spectators between the competing emotions of revolutionary rage and affective confusion, and *Ausländer Raus* deliberately placed its audiences in an equally contradictory emotional landscape: it confronted contagious fear, while causing contagious anger.

On the one hand, *Ausländer Raus* thematized the affective spread of FPÖ ideologies: Austria’s growing, increasingly contagious paranoia over
immigrant populations. At the same time, the spectators who gathered outside the shipping container—with varying amounts of context about the project’s status as a performance piece—were outraged by the presence of such unabashedly xenophobic sentiments in public space, as well as by the plight of the refugees inside. And their outrage, a response to the circulation of fear, spread too. Live affective contagion was perhaps most palpable at a moment, partway through the weeklong performance, when a segment of Schlingensief’s public became dissatisfied with following the modes of participation he’d set out for them. A group of, according to Schlingensief, more than 3,000 protesters attempted to intervene directly, storming the staging area and freeing the asylum-seekers from their container. This brief scene, recorded in part in Poet’s documentary, looks like chaos. One activist leads chants through a megaphone, while two more scramble to the top of the container and, kicking and grabbing at the giant “Ausländer Raus” sign, frantically attempt to dislodge it. The asylum-seekers look on, apparently bemused by the proceedings, from a small window in the container’s side. Soon, unable to destroy Schlingensief’s billboard, the activists begin spray-painting their own slogans over it. In the end, calling themselves members of the “Anti-Fascistic Front,” this group of activists forces the immigrants out of their container home. *Paradise Now* imagined contagious outrage as a revolutionary feeling, meant to propel theatrical action beyond the theater and into the street. Here, contagious outrage was a (deliberately provoked) rebellion against the terms of performance, as the anger of gathered spectators turned inwards to intervene in the staged event itself.

Throughout the six-day proceedings, Schlingensief’s willing captives performed skits and cabaret acts, commenting ironically on their own situation. They took part in a German language class, repeating basic German phrases over and over. One performer danced to a German song. The Austrian playwright Elfriede Jelinek, a regular collaborator of Schlingensief’s, developed a short puppet play with the asylum-seekers, which they performed on the roof of the shipping container for an audience gathered in the square. The hand puppets, which the performers hoisted over their heads above a plywood “stage,” resembled the stock figures populating children’s stories: a crocodile, a blonde princess with a tiny crown, a bizarre clown, a devil. The characters acted out a goofy, childlike distillation of the real-life conflict being played out by their puppeteers. A puppet named Gretl mechanically announced her love for Austria, asserting her desire to acquire a work visa and stay there. “Please help me, I love Austria,” she exclaimed over and over again, to no avail. Finally, the “Crocodile”—who repeatedly identified itself as Heidemarie Unterreiner, a leading Freedom Party politician—put Gretl out of her misery by abruptly eating her. “We live in Europe with Europeans! Our greatest wish is to become actors. Please help us. Thank you!” announced Crocodile, along with a figure named Kasperl, who self-identified as Federal Chancellor.
In an email interview, Sandra Umathum, a German scholar and a collaborator of Schlingensief’s, recalled the puppet performance as a deliberate attempt to skewer the patronizing attitudes encountered by non-German-speaking immigrants to Austria, attitudes displayed even by well-intentioned politicians and activists. Its satire ran deeper than that, too. By speaking the stock phrases and impersonating the stock characters of Austrian culture, the immigrants were, in a sense, assuming the mantle of Viennese culture, inhabiting Viennese identity, just as they were infiltrating Viennese public space. (One might consider this as a reinvention of Marc Estrin’s “A New Family Moves In” scenario, intended to introduce families from different cultural contexts to each other through a housing swap—a one-sided reinvention, of course, an infiltration with higher stakes than he might have imagined.) The Austrian characters repeatedly declare their desire to become actors, but, Jelinek suggests, they already are. Temporarily donning the cultural trappings of their new homeland, the puppets, and the bodies operating them, hidden behind plywood walls, gestured to the hollowness of any such essential cultural designation. The asylum-seekers’ story became a new Austrian fairy tale, as grisly and dark as any traditional fable. In Poet’s video of this unsettling piece of “children’s theater,” the camera pans back from the performers’ puppets to the watching crowd—a large gathering of spectators who gaze with rapt attention at the puppets’ childish antics.

_Ausländer Raus_, like several other projects described in this chapter, created a new public all its own, through its operation in both live and virtual realms. Running parallel to the live performances was the circulation of _Ausländer Raus_ on screens, its media presence superimposing the ironies of a reality television show onto the deeper ironies attending the refugees’ situation and Austria’s larger political context. Schlingensief’s website provided “profiles” of the performers, and advertised the voting numbers. Each day, after the latest deportees had been voted out of the country, members of Schlingensief’s “Security” team brought them out of the container to a waiting car for their “deportation,” and newspaper headlines regularly announced new developments in the asylum-seekers’ plight. _Big Brother_ provided a particularly apt template for Schlingensief’s project, partially because the television series was itself a model for global mobility and international replication. Developed in the Netherlands, it was so successful that it was quickly reproduced by television networks from Denmark to Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and eventually Russia, Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. The show employed a newly popular formula, developed perhaps most famously for MTV’s _The Real World_, in which cameras follow a group of housemates through their daily lives, giving spectators the sensation of spying on others’ ordinary activities. Unlike _The Real World_, _Big Brother_ was also a contest, with participants periodically ejected from the televised “house.” Different versions of the show involved the public in varying ways, but in most cases, viewers were allowed to vote, online and by text message, on who should be
evicted. This made the series, like Schlingensief’s project, a transmedial event, played out across multiple forms of media, including text messages, websites (both official and unofficial), and news headlines that documented the contestants’ victories and losses.\textsuperscript{109} As Lothar Mikos points out in an essay on the television series, \textit{Big Brother} combined the dramatic elements of a drawn-out competition with the “reality” effects produced by surveillance; the show, he explains, was “a carefully produced drama of authenticity.”\textsuperscript{110}

By inviting his spectators to participate digitally, casting votes for the least desirable asylum-seeker, Schlingensief not only mocked the reality television format, but also gestured toward the larger questions of participation and agency that viral media implies. Like the work of CAE and the Matteeses, \textit{Ausländer Raus} employed a framing device from pop culture—which had in turn adopted its format from government surveillance culture—thus borrowing the format of the institutions under critique. But \textit{Ausländer Raus} also directed spectators’ participation, offering them only a single sanctioned way of engaging with the project: by voting asylum-seekers off the show. (Alternatively, they could break Schlingensief’s rules and object to the options that the project’s frame provided, as the live protesters did.)

In channeling its public toward a particular mode of participation—voting to expel was a given, voting on who to expel next was the only variable—Schlingensief implied a critique of communications modes that aligns, in a deep way, with the critiques suggested by media philosophers like Baudrillard, who viewed communications modes as inherently ideological. In \textit{Requiem for the Media}, the philosopher argued that mass media obviate true response and reciprocity in the same way that a political referendum obviates open dialogue, by implying a single answer to the question it poses, by eliminating the possibility of any response outside of affirmation or denial. Likewise, to Baudrillard, in the case of both consumer goods and mass media, “the consumption of products and messages is the abstract social relation that they establish, the ban raised against all forms of response and reciprocity.”\textsuperscript{111} Schlingensief’s piece provoked spectators into responding, and then, as Baudrillard suggests, channeled their responses into the ideologically constricted format of the television competition. In the gulf between digital voting and live protest, spectators’ responses to \textit{Ausländer Raus} raised, once again, questions Brecht had posed nearly a century before: whether communications technologies could function as channels for multidirectional dialogue, whether media could serve democratic ends.

Though viral media and affect were the primary sources of contagion in \textit{Ausländer Raus}, biological metaphors lingered in the background: in Schlingensief’s artistic self-conception, and in the Austrian politics attending the piece. The son of a pharmacist, Schlingensief reportedly “used to say that like his father . . . he administered a bit of poison to his audiences in order to cure them of the ills of our time.”\textsuperscript{112} In this philosophy of performance, tinged with Aristotelian thinking, theater is inoculation, injecting spectators
with small doses of disease to prevent them from succumbing to the full force of epidemic. Ausländer Raus, in its transmedial complexity, constituted a form of creative inoculation: rather than “contaminating” Viennese public space with radioactive particles or contagious bacteria, Schlingensief brought people into the city square, and infectious, virulent rhetoric to the forefront of public attention.

More than this, by invoking Austria’s Nazi past and its neo-Nazi present, Ausländer Raus summoned an attendant set of immunological metaphors. As many critics have noted, by housing the refugees—theatrical captives and disenfranchised non-Austrians—in a temporary shipping container, Schlingensief at once orchestrated a confrontation with the FPÖ’s xenophobic rhetoric and politics and visually echoed the deportation trains and concentration camps of the Nazi era, invoking Austria’s history of collaboration.113 The piece overtly staged a fable about the invasion of the body politic—a narrative structure that, historically, served as a powerful framing device for Nazi ideology. Nazi rhetoric frequently emphasized, as Jennifer Kapczynski has written, “notions of a healthy Volk and its perceived enemies,”114 and, as Robert Esposito notes, viewed the purgation of Jews and other persecuted groups as a form of homeopathic cure for Germany as a nation.115

In his insightful essay about Austrian playwright Thomas Bernhard’s viral polemics, Jack Davis observes that to summon the specter of the Nazi era is, inherently, to invoke an immunological metaphor. Davis argues that Bernhard’s language not only functioned in a homeopathic register by “incorporating aspects of an oppositional discourse in order to oppose that discourse,” but that “this process becomes all the more apparent and important when the oppositional discourse Bernhard appropriates is the rhetoric of fascism.”116 Ausländer Raus operated similarly. Invoking an immunological narrative served both as an expression of Schlingensief’s personal artistic identity, and as a gesture toward the biological metaphors haunting fascist history. And spectators responded in kind. The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk reportedly argued, in response to debates over whether Ausländer Raus participated in avant-garde aesthetics, that “‘the epoch in which an avant-garde could work with surprises or with direct attacks on an unprepared nervous system is over . . . [we] are thoroughly immunized.’ ”117

Sexuality and Quarantine: Shu Lea Cheang and Anicka Yi

Critical Art Ensemble, Eva and Franco Mattes, and Christoph Schlingensief began working in viral modes at a moment when convergences of virus as media, virus as performance, and virus as scientific pathogen were fresh. Viral media disseminated contagious anxiety, and artist-activists intervened. Though I view the 1990s and early 2000s as a crucial point of departure for works investigating the overlaps among contagious affect, scientific
contagion, and new technologies, such projects, and the converging contagions they registered, continued to evolve. I conclude this chapter with a brief look at two recent projects, conceived and created between 2009 and 2016, that continue to probe the questions brought up by CAE, the Mattees, and Schlingensief, pressing on the prospect of viral anxiety in new ways. Neither project is explicitly parafictional, yet both engage with the viral as a primary structuring principle for understanding biology, systems of information and technology, and affect and emotion. In distinction from the previous works examined in this chapter, both projects explore perceptions of the gendered or sexual body as a contaminant or source of contagion, and align these themes alongside other forms of viral spread. These works suggest that viral technology and viral anxiety continue to emerge in tandem, and that viral sexuality figures as an evolving subject matter for artists working across media forms and exploring the contagious dissemination of emotion and affect.

In 2009, the multimedia artist Shu Lea Cheang began work on a transmedial constellation of projects titled *U.K.I.*—an inversion of the title of her 2000 feature film, *I.K.U.* Comprising video, live performance, and a participatory digital game, *U.K.I.* constructs a futuristic, apocalyptic sci-fi universe that envisions viruses as biological, technological, and affective forces. In the 2000 film, a corporation employs new technology to collect mass data about sexual pleasure, and then to formulate a device able to dispatch “sexual pleasure signals . . . directly to the brain without physical friction”; in other words, achieve orgasm without sex. In *U.K.I.*, the transmedial sequel, sexuality and information have merged, and biological code converges with computer code:

In post-netcrash UKI, the data deprived I.K.U. coders are dumped on the Etrashscape where coders, twitters, networkers crush and crashed. Exchanging sex for code, code sexing code, UKI as virus emerge while GENOM retreats to BioNet. Taking human body hostage, GENOM reformats blood cells into microcomputing ORGANISMO (organic orgasm). UKI, the virus, enacted to infect a city, propagated, mobilized to infiltrate BIONET, sabotage ORGANISMO and reclaim the lost orgasm data.

Between 2009 and 2016, Cheang staged a series of “UKI Viral Performances” across Europe and in Canada, beginning with a performance in Barcelona that combined the work of computer programmers, noise artists, and “queer/postporn performers.” Videos blended imagery of digital code and biological cells, and four tons of “e-trash junk”—heaps of discarded computers, disks, cables, and other fragments of recently obsolete technology—served as set and props. Simultaneously, Cheang developed *U.K.I.* as a participatory game, staged in Norway in 2014 and in Switzerland in 2016, in which players themselves take on the roles of virus, with the goal of infiltrating
vast biological systems. “Infiltrate the BioNet. Sabotage the Production . . . Your heartbeat, your blood flow, your emotion, your actions are your assets to join the UKI bio-game,” read the instructions superimposed onto a video of live players taking part in the game. In the video, human participants interact with projected images of streaming digital code and abstract shapes resembling red blood cells.

In U.K.I.’s various forms, Cheang offers a vision of a future world (the narrative ostensibly takes place in 2030) where the distinction between technology and biology has entirely dissolved, and where virus is the defining structure for both. Sexuality has been divorced from individual human behavior and desire, and governmental systems are vulnerable to both biological and technological infection. This narrative, though fictive and apocalyptically tinged, suggests continuity with the work of groups like CAE, which—even from their early video “Ideological Virus”—viewed scientific, informational, and affective contagion as linked and overlapping forces. It reflects Sampson’s observations about “contagion models” as the central means of understanding twenty-first-century systems of all kinds. It also suggests gender and sexuality as emerging subjects for viral art, a theme also under investigation in Anicka Yi’s 2015 installation piece, You Can Call Me F, which was rooted not in the future but in the live interaction between gendered, ideologically charged biological material and human spectators, present in a gallery. These explorations of contagious gender and sexuality
would find new form—employing less biological, more structural visions of the viral—in the networked performances I describe in chapter 4.

Between March 5 and April 11, 2015, Yi transformed the upstairs gallery at the New York performance and art space The Kitchen into a site of biological quarantine. At regular intervals along the glossy black floor stood rectangular tents of transparent plastic, dotted with colorful, blocky shapes and patterns, like sets of mod shower curtains. Inside the tents nestled idiosyncratic arrangements of objects: shiny metal bowls, glass decanters, a motorcycle helmet. Each of these prop collections, carefully arranged inside its translucent stall, served as a host environment for Yi’s primary object of interest—live bacteria, which Yi had collected from approximately one hundred women’s bodies, “mostly friends, or friends of friends,” explained an article in *Artforum.* (The Kitchen’s website credited the long list of “participants,” including several anonymous donors.) You Can Call Me F was an exploration of the conceptual and affective links connecting “society’s growing paranoia around contagion and hygiene” and “the enduring patriarchal fear of feminism and potency of female networks.”

Yi’s vision fused commentary about gendered bodies, the politics of the art world, and contemporary discourse about contagion, contamination, and quarantine, both biological and metaphorical. Bacteria swabs from participating women were subjected to a series of scientific interventions, accomplished in collaboration with biologists and a custom scent-development firm called Air Variable. First, Yi and her collaborators followed a scientific process that allowed them to preserve the scent molecules produced by the live bacteria. Next, these molecules—the “scents” of the women’s cells—were combined with scent samples taken from the Gagosian Gallery during an exhibition of work by the artist Urs Fischer (a sardonic nod to the rarefied air of the male-dominated art world). Using a process akin to the procedures for creating commercial perfumes, this combination of molecules was then formulated into a synthetic compound, to be sprayed by a scent diffuser into the air in the Kitchen.

The Kitchen’s gallery, in Yi’s playful conceit, thus smelled both like the art world, and like the combined bodies of one hundred different women. These scents (barely detectable when I visited near the end of the exhibition, but highly distinctive, according to other writers who likely visited earlier) accompanied the clean, carefully arranged installments within each clear plastic tent, which were meant to mimic, Yi explained, the structures of quarantine tents. (The Ebola outbreak of 2014, with its attendant contagion of public anxiety, would have been fresh in collective memory.) Lingering invisibly in the air, these molecules—whether perceptible or not—would have physically entered the spectator’s body, circulating in ways that echo Teresa Brennan’s description of how an affective “atmosphere” in a social situation “literally gets into the individual.” Matter from female bodies was circulated and disseminated, and the piece, according to the statement on The
Kitchen’s website, was intended to “cultivate the idea of the female figure as a viral pathogen.”

In Yi’s vision, both abstract and insistently literal, the “potency of female networks” was subjected to scientific testing, available for affective and metaphorical as well as physical dissemination. Yi’s assembled bacteria represented, at once, biological pathogen, inquiry into the logic of public paranoia, and contagious artistic form, unavoidable (even when undetectable) to the spectator passing through. As many viral artworks do, the project challenged the boundaries of liveness, containing real biological matter that grew and changed over time, but coralling it into still installations, without performance’s more overt forms of living human presence. As in the work of CAE, the Matteses, and Schlingensief, biological and metaphorical contagions overlapped, merged, and held tension with one another. As in the work of Cheang, biological contagions emanated from the sexualized body. And as in the works described in the following chapter, individual bodies were linked—and linked again—into vast networks, which drew their power from the tensions between local embodiment and geographic dispersal.