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The Exploit

A Theory of Networks

Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker

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PART II

Edges

—Well there it is. There's the common basis for communication.
A new language. An inter-system language.

—But a language only those machines can understand.

—*Colossus: The Forbin Project*, 1970

Edges

The Datum of Cura I

Imagine an art exhibit of computer viruses. How would one curate such a show? Would the exhibition consist of documentation of known viruses, or of viruses roaming live in situ? Would it be more like an archive or more like a zoo? Perhaps the exhibit would require the coordination of several museums, each with "honeypot" computers, sacrificial lambs offered up as attractor hosts for the contagion. A network would be required, the sole purpose of which would be to reiterate sequences of infection and replication. Now imagine an exhibit of a different sort: a museum dedicated to epidemics. Again, how would one curate an exhibit of disease? Would it include the actual virulent microbes themselves (in a sort of "microbial menagerie"), in addition to the documentation of epidemics in history? Would the epidemics have to be "historical" to qualify for exhibition? Or would two entirely different types of institutions be required: a museum of the present versus a museum of the past?

In actuality such exhibits already exist. A number of artists have created and shown work using the medium of the computer virus, the most noteworthy being the *Biennale.py* virus, released by the collectives 0100101110101101.org and epidemiC as part of the Venice Biennale

in 2001. The work was included in the "I love you" computer virus exhibition curated by Francesca Nori in 2004. Likewise, in the United States, the first museum dedicated to disease was established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Called the Global Health Odyssey, it uses the format of the history museum to tell the story of epidemics in history and the CDC's "fight" against those epidemics.

But let us linger for a moment on the biological motifs of both these exhibits, as well as on what it might mean to *curate* them. The act of curating not only refers to the selection, exhibition, and storage of artifacts but also means doing so *with care*, with particular attention to their presentation in an exhibit or catalog. Both "curate" and "curator" derive from the Latin *curare* (to care), a word that is itself closely related to *cura* (cure). Curate, care, cure. At first glance, the act of curating a museum exhibit seems far from the practice of medicine and health care. One deals with culture and history, the other with science and "vital statistics." One is the management of "art," the other the management of "life." But with the act of curating an exhibit of viruses or epidemics, one is forced to "care" for the most misanthropic agents of infection and disease. One must curate that which eludes the cure. Such is the impasse: the best curator would therefore need to be the one who is most "careless." We shall return to this point in a moment.

Today's informatic culture has nevertheless brought together curating and curing in unexpected ways, linked by this notion of *curare*. The very concept of "health care," for instance, has always been bound up with a relation to information, statistics, databases, and numbers (numbers of births, deaths, illnesses, and so forth). Indeed, political economy during the era of Ricardo, Smith, and Malthus implied a direct correlation between the health of the population and the wealth of the nation. Yet public health has also changed a great deal, in part due to advances in technology within the health care industry. There is now talk of "telemedicine," "infomedicine," and "home care." At the most abstract level, one witnesses information networks at play in medical surveillance systems, in which the real-time monitoring of potential public health hazards (be they naturally occurring or the result of an attack) is made possible in a "war-room" scenario.

In these visions of health care—in which the law of large numbers is the content, and network topology is the form—there are also many questions raised. The sociologist Michael Fortun, in his study of population genome projects, wonders if we have moved from classical medicine's care of the body of the patient (what Foucault referred to as a "care of the self") to a more post-Fordist "care of the data," in which the job of public health is increasingly to ensure that the biological bodies of the population correlate to the informatic patterns on the screen.¹

The "epidemic" exhibits such as *Biennale.py* and the Global Health Odyssey are of interest because they are not simply exhibits that happen to have biological motifs. As different as they are, they put curating and curing into a relationship. It is a relationship mediated by *curare* or care. But what is "care" in this case? It is a type of care that is far from the humanistic and phenomenological notion of person-to-person care; it is a "care of the data" in which the life of information or "vital statistics" plays a central role.

The Datum of Cura II

Return to our imagined exhibitions of viruses and epidemics. What is the temporality specific to the practice of curating? The idea of *curare* (care) in curating and the activity of the curator plays a dual role. On the one hand, the care in curating conceptually tends toward the presentation of the static: collecting, archiving, cataloging, and preserving in a context that is both institutional and architectural. There is a stillness to this (despite the milling about of people in a museum or the awkwardness of an "interactive" exhibit). The care of stillness, within walls, behind glass, is a *historical stillness*. It is a stillness of the past. But there is also always an excess in curating, an opening, however wide or narrow, through which the unexpected happens. As a visitor to an exhibit, one's interpretations and opinions might vary widely from both the curator's original vision and from the interpretations and opinions of other visitors. Or one might not notice them at all, passing over all the care put into curating. Such is the scene: there is either too much ("what's your opinion?") or too little ("I didn't notice").

Curating is not, of course, exclusive to museums and galleries. The motif of curating was common during the Middle Ages, most often in reference to a spiritual guide or pastor who was put in charge of a body of laypeople—people whose souls were in the spiritual care of a “curate.” Foucault notes that such a practice entailed a certain form of governing. The dominant biblical metaphor in this case was that of the shepherd and flock. As Foucault’s later work shows, this type of caring—a caring-for-others—had its complement in an ethics of care for one’s self, a genealogy Foucault locates in classical Greek culture. For the Greeks, the notion of *epimeleia heautou* (care of one-self) not only was an attitude toward self, others, and world but referred to a constant practice of self-observation and self-examination. Central to Foucault’s analyses was the fact that this type of care was defined by “actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, transforms, transfigures, and purifies oneself.”² Here *epimeleia heautou* has as its aim not just the care of the self but the transformation of the self; self-transformation was the logical outcome of self-caring.

However, self-transformation also entails self-destruction. This is a central characteristic of change noted by Aristotle (“coming-to-be” complemented by “passing-away”). Is there a definable point at which self-transformation becomes auto-destruction? The phrase “auto-destruction” was used by Gustav Metzger for many of his performative artworks during the 1960s. In *The Laws of Cool*, Alan Liu describes Metzger’s auto-destructive artworks as an early form of what he calls “viral aesthetics.” This refers to an aesthetic in which the distinction between production and destruction is often blurred, revealing “a destructivity that attacks knowledge work through technologies and techniques internal to such work.”³ If Metzger is the industrial forerunner of viral aesthetics, then for Liu, the contemporary work of artists like Jodi and Critical Art Ensemble are its heirs. For Liu, such examples of viral aesthetics “introject destructivity within informationalism,”⁴ which is so often predicated on the information/noise division.

Curare thus presupposes a certain duplicitous relation to transformation. It enframes, contextualizes, bounds, manages, regulates, and controls. In doing so, it also opens up, unbridles, and undoes the very

*epimeleia
heautou*

*

control it seeks to establish. It is the point where control and transformation intersect. Which brings us to an ending in the form of a question: is there a certain “carelessness” to *curare*?

Sovereignty and Biology I

Political thought has long used the body as a metaphor for political organization. Plato analogizes the political order of the polis with the biological order of the body and in doing so medicalizes politics. After having spent the majority of the work discussing the constitution of a just political order, the *Republic* turns to the forces of dissolution or decomposition that threaten the body politic. Primary among these is the descent from concerns of justice to concerns of wealth (oligarchy) and concerns of appetites (democracy). Though economic health and basic necessities are central to the proper functioning of the polis, it is their excess that creates the “illness of a city.”⁵ For Plato, if oligarchy represents the excessive rule of wealth for its own sake, then democracy, in his terms, represents the imbalance between desire and freedom, in which freedom is always the legitimation for desire. The combination of the two results in the diseased body politic: “When [oligarchy and democracy] come into being in any regime, they cause trouble, like phlegm and bile in a body. And it’s against them that the good doctor and lawgiver of a city, no less than a wise beekeeper, must take long-range precautions, preferably that they not come into being, but if they do come into being, that they be cut out as quickly as possible, cells and all.”⁶ This same logic—a kind of medical sovereignty—is played out in mechanistic terms in Hobbes’s *De Corpore Politico*, and in organicist terms in chapters 13 to 20 of Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*. In the current era of genetics and informatics, has the concept of the body politic changed? If the understanding of the body changes, does this also require a change in the understanding of the body politic?

Sovereignty and Biology II

In one of his lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault suggests that contemporary analyses of power need to develop alternative models to the tradition of juridical sovereignty: “In short, we have to abandon

the model of *Leviathan*, that model of an artificial man who is at once an automaton, a fabricated man, but also a unitary man who contains all real individuals, whose body is made up of citizens but whose soul is sovereignty.⁷ Foucault himself acknowledges the imbrication of sovereignty with the more bottom-up paradigm of discipline. At the same time that disciplinary measures are developed within institutions, a "democratization of sovereignty" takes place, in which the people hold the right to auto-discipline, to accept and in fact demand modes of auto-surveillance in the name of a biological security. But the reference that Foucault makes to Hobbes is significant, for it raises a fundamental issue of contemporary political thought: Is it possible to conceive of a body politic without resorting to the paradigm of absolute sovereignty? In other words, can a political collectivity exist without having to transfer its rights to a transcendent body politic?

One of the ways that sovereignty maintains its political power is continually to identify a biological threat. Giorgio Agamben points to the "state of exception" created around what he calls "bare life." Bare life, life itself, the health of the population, the health of the nation—these are the terms of modern biopolitics. By grounding political sovereignty in biology, threats against the biological body politic, in the form of threats against the health of the population, can be leveraged as ammunition for building a stronger sovereign power. Foucault is just as explicit. Medicine,⁸ or a medicalization of politics, comes to mediate between the "right of death" and the "power over life": "The development of medicine, the general medicalization of behavior, modes of conduct, discourses, desires, and so on, is taking place on the front where the heterogeneous layers of discipline and sovereignty meet."⁸

Abandoning the Body Politic

There are two states of the body politic. One is the constitutive state, where the body politic is assembled, as Hobbes notes, through "acquisition or institution." This kind of body politic is built on a supposed social contract, or at the least a legitimized basis of authority, to ensure the "security of life." The other state of the body politic is that of dissolution, the source of fear in virtually every modern political

treatise: Machiavelli's plebs or Hobbes's mob rule. Even Locke and Rousseau, who authorize revolution under special conditions when the contract is violated, still express an ambivalence toward this dissolutive state of the body politic. Every political treatise that expresses the first state of the body politic thus also devotes some furtive, discomforting sections to the second. In some cases, this dissolutive body politic is simply chaos, a return to the "state of nature." In other cases, it is a force synonymous with the sovereignty of the people, as it is in Spinoza. Whatever the case, each expression of a constitutive and constituted body politic also posits a dissolutive body politic as its dark side. But there is a problem: the two types of body politic feed into each other through the mechanism of war. We can reiterate Foucault's inversion of Clausewitz: politics is war by other means. Whether the ideal war of the state of nature, or the actual war that continually threatens the civil state, war seems to be the driving force of the two body politics. "In the smallest of its cogs, peace is waging a secret war," wrote Foucault.⁹ In this light, perhaps Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of "abandoned being" can be read as a call to abandon the body politic. For Nancy, abandoned being is both the leaving-behind of the being/nonbeing distinction, as well as an assertion of a new fullness, the fullness of desertion: "If from now on being is not, if it has begun to be only its own abandonment, it is because this speaking in multiple ways is abandoned, is in abandonment, and it is abandon (which is also to say openness). It so happens that 'abandon' can evoke 'abundance.'"¹⁰ Abandoning the body politic not only means leaving behind—or deserting—the military foundations of politics but also means a radical opening of the body politic to its own abandon. When the body politic is in abandon, it opens onto notions of the common, the open, the distributed. "What is left is an irremediable scattering, a dissemination of ontological specks."¹¹

The Ghost in the Network

Discussing the difference between the living and the nonliving, Aristotle points to the phenomena of self-organized animation and motility as the key aspects of a living thing. For Aristotle the "forming Soul" enables inanimate matter to become a living organism.