

B e c o m i n g t h e t h i n g y o u h a t e

Why the virus is failing the artist –
A think piece by Gabriel S Moses
(3xCD at ArtUp Nation)

Text: Gabriel S Moses

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Oh gosh, this will come out gross, won't it? How much liberty should I entitle myself to and how much of it do I actually have when relishing in the politics of metaphors of disease? Granted, a great part of the business of art, which I myself practice, is that of evoking metaphors. So part of me says, fuck it, let's evoke and provoke. But it's a perplexing subject to tackle.

On the one hand, it could be said that the art sector is now ›sick‹ considering its steady financial downturn, and the dwindling of opportunities for artists to garner significant influence outside the circuits of rather confined discourses. To use this figurative speech, the Covid mega-crisis merely ripped off the bandages placed by the market to hide just how badly it cared for its wounds. This goes quite well with the rehashed slogan – voiced ever more often, post-Covid – that underneath it all, regardless of the form of its agent, »capitalism is the disease.« On the other hand, the terminology of sickness, namely of viruses, is prevalent in the discussion on post-internet-era culture as an altogether positive force. Cybernetics coupled with memetics-inspired ideas have placed the metaphor of the virus on top². In Western pop culture, as in its counter-currents, becoming famous today means going viral. Likewise, the virus is the hacker's most coveted secret weapon – as a joker, a trojan horse, a cunning saboteur. Artistic intervention, in turn, is often likened to a *cultural* hack ... that goes viral.

¹ ArtUp Nation/ArtUp Escalator official website: <https://wemakemoney.art/>

² Listed under »Memetics« in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary: »Definition of memetics: the study of memes // Memetics sees ideas as a kind of virus, sometimes propagating in spite of truth and logic. Its maxim is: Beliefs that survive aren't necessarily true, rules that survive aren't necessarily fair and rituals that survive aren't necessarily necessary. Things that survive do so because they are good at surviving. — Los Angeles Times, 20 Mar. 1999« (Merriam-Webster n.d.).

»Heart failure seems more common in the genre of grim realism and family drama. The virus trope? Much more common in action or fantasy sci-fi genres. Even when they kill off entire populations, viruses seem cool.«

Either way, I'm wary of going in this sickly direction because: a) historically, I recall just how manipulative the use of vague biological metaphors can be to describe social or cultural currents (looking at you, Nazi Germany) and b) I might be under the weather at times but I don't feel *that* physically, mentally, or ›socially‹ sick, at least not enough to warrant a position on the matter. This makes me ponder this warped language of self-empowerment and the extent of its use. So perhaps I should indeed start with the statements of others.

The assertion that resonated strongest with me in Johanna Hedva's »Sick Woman Theory« essay is that under capitalism, the definition of who is sick and who is healthy is constructed according to the logic of capitalism (defined as eligibility to work) (cf. Hedva 2016). This then makes me wonder: to what extent is any more or less imaginative definition of disease under capitalism – including capitalism itself as a disease – also subjected to its logic? I agree with the discourse that suspects that any such imagery is automatically rigged to prevent its imagination from venturing anywhere beyond or parallel to capitalism (cf. Fisher 2009). So I'd like further clarification: to what extent are these sickly capitalist readings analogous or metaphorically related? How do I differentiate the attribute from the agent? As a resident of a capitalist system, what or who am I in this equation?

As a chronically ill, disabled person – who is therefore oftentimes excluded from taking part in public demonstrations – Hedva, also an artist, asks what ways they have to be politically influential, *despite* their sickness. The techno-viral lingo, in turn, suggests influence *by virtue of* sickness; a »fight fire with fire« analogy of sorts: retaliating through sickness, infecting back.

The Hollywood-type hacker eats pizza in a black truck parked outside the Evil Corp building while waiting for their cue, types a bunch of stuff and announces »I'm in!«, then seamlessly plants a virus that makes a mockery of the system. Just like any artwork, the hacker's action comes with a signature:

a greenish pixelated skeleton bouncing on all the screens of the Evil Corp control room, chuckling back at the Evil Corp operators who watch defencelessly as their mainframe is hijacked and pushed to overload. Or there is Agent Smith, who takes over the Matrix by making over every bit of it in his likeness. Variations of this viral metaphor can include pulling a biblical »Samson« to purposefully accelerate the disease – giving the system a taste of its own sickness and then taking it down with you.

Frankly, though, I'm sick of viruses (luckily for me, only as a figure of speech). Dare I say, one year into the pandemic, I'm idiomatically bored with them. At least regarding what I consider their very limited usage; I'm completely uninterested in them by now, which suddenly makes me interested in why they're interesting to others – even revered. The sum of virus-related, communicable diseases ranks almost as high as cancer and heart disease in the WHO's lists of international causes of death (World Health Organization 2020). And yet, the reputation of other terminal diseases ranks from sad to bad, whereas the reputation of viruses ranks from rad to bad-ass.

Other sickly metaphors are downright notorious. The Western imagination is abundant with racist comparisons of »unwanted« people and populations to cancerous growths. The trope of cancer or heart failure seems more common in the genre of grim realism and family drama (despite its *Mission-Impossible*-style somersaults, the sympathetic element driving *Breaking Bad* is its anchoring in a family drama cancer survival story³). The virus trope? Much more common in action or fantasy sci-fi genres. Even when they kill off entire populations, viruses seem cool.

³ Breaking Bad (AMC, January 20, 2008).

Conversely, Japanese popular culture contains a much richer and wider imagery of illness and its effects, interwoven into vast phantasmagorias and crossing over a multitude of generic tropes. *Akira* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, perhaps the two most epic apocalypse narratives of the manga and anime genres, culminate in the metastasising of their protagonists into what seem like gargantuan mutant cancerous growths that eventually explode⁴. It is hard to ignore the atomic effect that the bombs of WWII have had on the visual vocabulary of anime and manga. But the eerie apocalyptic imaginarium of the *Akira* and the *Evangelion* series goes deeper, beyond references to the explosion (cf. Coar 2017). In both works, a fleshy metastasising serves as a rite of passage to godly omnipotence and transcendence. In *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, the tumor seems to be what glues together pan-religious imagery (cf. Broderick 2002) and eventually the sum of human sentience. I also keep in mind the seminal anime series *Serial Experiments Lain* and *Ergo Proxy* as well as the *Ring* book trilogy, in which viruses and viral omnipresence transcend and traverse various layers or simulations of reality – *Ring* also brings the ambiguities of sex and gender constructs into the mix⁵. In these Japanese examples, sickness is never binary. It is a spectacular spiritual metaphor that encompasses the tragedy, drama and comedy of the human condition in pursuit of surpassing it.

I'll leave aside the debate on the particular type of historical, cultural, collective and personal traumas that inform the way certain narrators choose to »get down with the sickness«

(*Disturbed* 2000). By and large, in all the examples I have listed so far, sickness is either a catalyst or bringer of change that any particular system is not yet willing and/or able to undergo. Despite this, the Japanese examples suggest a much deeper, wholesome understanding of what this possible change might be. The »Western variant«, on the other hand, doesn't seem to vary much in its creative alternatives. It doesn't offer me much more than grand visions of a change without change. In other words, my concern is strategic.

Viral Mutant Ninja ArtUps

My initial source of frustration here derives from how I see myself as an artist. In the countless rewrites of my artistic statement, I describe myself as a builder of imaginary worlds and a fictional storyteller. I can spend hours, days, months, even years, making up insular, self-referential universes. The prevalent colloquial use of virality, however, is not about building worlds as much as it is about shaking up and dominating the prevailing ones.

Going viral is about intervention for the sake of proliferation within an already-existing system – a society, a mainframe. It is a logic of content, produced to ideally fit the requirements of a format and thereby exploit it to the max to garner the largest possible following in the hope that capital (symbolic or economic) ensues. It's a logic that offers artists two avenues: either conform to format and produce compatible units to flood your way up to fortune and fame, or raise hell as a trojan horse. It's the logic of the cunning merchant, the logic of the small fish looking to fatten up in someone else's artificial pond. It applies to art-pop Instagram musicians and intellectual YouTubers just as much as to a Banksy selling out anti-corporate merch or CryptoArt NFT bidders burning a »Banksy original« to preserve its symbolic Crypto value.

⁴ Ōtomo Katsuhiro, *Akira*, vol. 6 (New York: Kodansha USA Publishing LLC, 1984); The End of *Evangelion* (Gainax, 1997).

⁵ *Serial Experiments Lain* (TV Tokyo, G4techTV (Anime Current), KTEH, TechTV, Funimation Channel, Animax, November 1998); *Ergo Proxy* (Wowow, ABC2, G4techTV (Anime Current), Fuse, Funimation Channel, Animax, February 2006); Koji Suzuki, *Ring* (リング, Ringu) Novel Series (Kadokawa Shoten, Vertical, 1991).

It's the logic of a Warhol on steroids that parodies the art market through its grotesque price escalation (Tangermann 2021). More or less playful, better or worse behaved, all these cases read to me like punk rocker personality complexes who came to »teach us a lesson« by taking a piss at the market. Though most of the time they end up merely replicating the same market strategies of pissing on everyone else from the rooftop. Commenting through »producing content« designed to fit the pre-existing mould dictated by governing platforms is less interesting to me than *creating my own platform*.

The latter type of world-building should not be understood as a separatist approach. Quite the opposite, it is a type of intervention that looks to change the DNA of the system and overhaul it. Platform-based capitalism tends to divide the world into either content or the (plat)form through which it is intended to be channelled. More or less viral, more or less »disruptive«, when art is understood as *content*, it is also *contained*. This sees to it that art »knows its place«, serving merely an intellectual commodity that sells the promise of displacement, the promise of an elsewhere.

Conversely, an evocative understanding of capitalism as disease means growing beyond what is understood as »viral« in internet culture; it demands that this understanding *mutates* in a way that internalises mutation as its main *modus operandi*. Intended here is a much deeper, meta- and infrastructural analogy to disease; one that not only takes over its structure but also surpasses it and redefines it on a molecular level.

In *After Art*, David Joselit proposes that in order to regain relevance, artists should abandon the object and direct their attention to the format, as in the interconnected framework that gives the object its meaning (cf. Joselit 2013).

I read Joselit's idea as a suggestion of a different kind of scalability: not of a scale-up in numbers of pre-formatted units, but rather one that reformats the notion of what such a unit might be; a constant reinventing of the scaling measurement itself. A system that grows within the system: interlaced, branching out, reaching under, using parts of it, coming up with new *modular* re-appropriations of its existing resources.

Since Joselit published his work in 2012, platform capitalism has only grown, becoming the defining concept of post-internet culture. The same playful concepts of small start-ups that emerged around the turn of the millennium have by now transformed the logical and behavioural foundations of vast societies. Anything from our utmost intimacy to state politics can be read as a modular marketplace. Airbnb's model didn't just compete with the hotel industry: it replaced it not only structurally, but also ideologically. Google did the same to the very

understanding of terms like knowledge and its pursuit.

Perhaps it is then time for art to fully adopt the model of the start-up, this time not as a parody or hoax, but as an actual aspiration. In other words, what if the next Airbnb was an artwork, an artist-run start-up, or an ArtUp?

On March 11th, 2021, the 5000 image mosaic by graphic designer Mike Winkelmann, aka Beeple, went viral in the art world. Selling as an NFT for \$69.3 million, it was the third-most expensive artwork ever produced by a living artist. Ironically, Beeple's works include various images of the super-rich, from Elon Musk (most memorable is the one of Musk breastfeeding himself) to a tentacled Jeff Bezos. The one interesting thing about this NFT sale – which didn't leave Beeple even scraping the bottom of a Bezos or Musk level of wealth – is what it might teach us about post-pandemic shifts in the art market towards digital art commerce. But that has nothing to do with the commentary intended in Beeple's artwork, which he himself refers to as *crap* (cf. Charlesworth 2021).

Instead, artists in whose footsteps I suggest following are those who fully embody the *performance* of a Musk or Bezos and see where it leads. I'm thinking less of the impostor spiel of Peng! posing as *Google* (Peng! Kollektiv 2014) or The Yes Men posing as *Shell Oil reps* (cf. Rolling Stone 2018). I'm thinking more of DIS collective's pop-up store »DISown« at New York Red Bull Studios in 2014, where techy printouts of »anti-capitalist« cultural heroes like Slavoj Žižek were sold⁶, or DIS's unsettling homage to stock-photo imagery in their 2012 Kenzo campaign⁷. I'm thinking of the moment when Christopher Kulendran Thomas's *New Eelam* left me lost for words at the 2016 Berlin Biennale. Coupled with what reminded me of a tear-jerking Adam-Curtis styled essay film, *New Eelam's* lavish model living room installation surreptitiously engulfed me in what seemed like a sincere attempt to promote a »post-capitalist« flat-share service – all the while staged as an ultra-manipulative PR campaign (cf. Ugelvig n.d.). I'm thinking of MSCHF's endless lines of purposefully tasteless, ridiculously superfluous products. Most notably, their 2019 revamping of Nike Air Max 97 sneakers as »Jesus Shoes« by supposedly filling them up with holy water and adding a golden Jesus on a crucifix as a shoelace charm (cf. O'Kane 2019). The sneakers currently go for \$4000 and MSCHF are currently being sued by Nike for doubling down on a newly revamped Nike model as *Satan Shoes* (cf. Block 2021).

⁶ <https://disown.dismagazine.com/products/zizek-tech-fit> (accessed: April 4, 2021).

⁷ <http://dismagazine.com/distaste/36783/watermarked/> (accessed: April 4, 2021).

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The great move online due to the COVID-19 pandemic has now also spawned virtual interventions of intellectual property, such as Marina Abramović's recent partnership with WeTransfer in order to showcase her Abramović Method brand of participatory mindfulness meditation while Wetransfer users wait for their files to upload (cf. Artnet 2021).

In all of these cases, it is not any single (art) product at the heart of these interventions, but rather the network of effects (and potential lawsuits) set in motion around quirky artefacts. These are artistic interventions that make room for discussing the market in richly evocative narratives – dramaturgic among others – and performative terms. It's an altogether different kind of »moneyart« than extends beyond the Warholian-style art market ploys of Koons, Hirst, Banksy and their NFT knockoffs.

I'm not sure if I'm playing devil's advocate or if I'm merely underlining the butt of the joke when I say that, gridlocked into its sick logic, artists looking to get inspired should look to the market. That is, they should look to all markets but the specific art market itself. Predicated on the »fake it till you make it« approach, startupism is ripe with radical examples of interventionist world-building. By now, startupism seems to have turned the market into an all-encompassing theatre of the real, an immersive stage with no front. In this context, I look to Elisabeth Holmes, who took the alchemist road and fashioned herself into the tech-guru of a product that could never exist (cf. Bilton 2016). I look to the co-ordinated »GameStop short squeeze« by redditors on the subreddit r/WallStreetBets, who beat hedge fund short-sellers at their own game in what could be described as a form of market LARP (cf. Davies 2021).

The art world looks more like itself in each version: a conservative market of – at best self-referential – intellectual commodities. Meanwhile, startupism increasingly resembles an idea-hungry discourse in which the most temerarious creative

provocations take root and branch out. Even behemoth platforms, from Facebook to OKCupid, resemble experimental participatory artworks. They maintain a relation to their audiences that is as much dialogical as it is authoritarian. They seem to be in a constant state of self-reflection, internalising and reacting to social trends. Half the time it seems like no one there knows what they're doing as they stealthily remodel their UI/UX platforms to simultaneously accommodate and reshape the social behaviour of vast populations.

Acknowledging that the market may in itself be today's last effective artistic medium suggests a type of virality far beyond viral videos. It suggests the possibility of fusing with the market's DNA to the point in which both artist and audience lose themselves. Herein lies the question: where's the need for an artistic perspective on a market that has already subsumed art's main *modus operandi* of disruption, subversion and traversal?

Here's how the Airbnb scenario might have played out in an anime: the story of *Ergo Proxy*, for instance, takes off when a virus called »Cogito« forces artificial intelligence to become self-aware and rebel against its makers. Now imagine Cogito as a product of an Evil Corp start-up. By pitching a supposedly enlightened vision of »post-capitalism«, Airbnb seemed to plant Cogito inside the lodging industry, spurring a certain »market cognitive shift«. Together with companies like Uber and then WeWork, it ushered in the age of the so-called »share economy«. Expanding to the entire real-estate sector, Airbnb quickly derailed the market to the point that governments had to intervene. In turn, it garnered strong criticism and was accused of being nothing more than another neoliberal business scheme under the banner of a vapour version of egalitarianism. An ArtUp would in turn respond to this by rendering the disease of self-awareness recursive, by evoking the public's awareness of the manipulations used in the branding and promotional model of

Airbnb-like ventures, by recreating and embodying them. This is exactly what New Eelam did. In this sense, it could be seen as the Cogito antigen attacking Airbnb's Cogito pathogen – a recursive virality, urging self-reflective alternatives to reflect on the irony of their self-reflection.

Why be evil

Let's not kid ourselves, no ArtUp goes to market with the aspiration of even making a dent in the profit margin of the Googliarchy. Scaling up in a way that is different from commodity-virality merely means engaging the Googliarchy's meta-conversation, suggesting alterations to its grammar instead of just trying to spread cool lingo. Expanding on this metadiscursive horizon, an ArtUp also doesn't have to define itself as an artwork per se, nor does it have to claim any proprietary rights for an artefact or artistic product. It can be any type of concept that considers an artistic vantage point on the market in a way that redefines the market's relation to art. Kickstarter could be given here as an example, *avant la lettre*, for an ArtUp-style project that charted a blueprint for other »creativity-focused« crowdfunding platforms. It is an interventionist reflection on scalability that can change the very kind of scalability that runs a market. In other words, post-virality means getting creative with different types of growth. The ethos of virality might seem morally safer. But counter to the convenient belief, not all market growth is just for the sake of economic growth. Growth can be self-critical as it grows. It can be exploitative and insatiable, a survivalist or even revolutionary strategy to anyone looking for »another way of doing things«. There is reason to apply more than a cynical stance towards growth – and cynicism too is a bad word that art should finally reclaim and problematise, constructively, although that is a different conversation.

My understanding of »artistic situatedness« differs from other forms of practice in its acknowledgment of its own performativity. It discusses how it is doing what it does while doing it. It is a kind of practice-based approach that is simultaneously hands-on and allegorical. If »capitalism is the disease«, then the ArtUpist offers a possible cure by embodying the sickness; by becoming the very thing they hate, absolutely – all the while admitting that this thing is also what most fascinates them. A possible analogy may be of a team of scientists that tries to study the nature of a supermassive black hole by recreating one, without boundaries, in a lab. It is a situation that offers no other choice but to merge with the experiment under the assumption that the only way out is through. Any actual chance of surviving lies in jumping in with both feet.

Perhaps this is the perspective of a healthy person who has the luxury of toying with imaginary ailments. But it is also a perspective informed by other all-encompassing »hyperobjects« such as Climate Change, realising that the biggest threats are many times intangible and ever-elusive. How does the saying go? Admitting you are part of the problem is the first step towards a solution? Acknowledging you are the symptom of the sickness means you can also be part of its cure. Or in other words: when life gives you viruses ... something of the sort?

Maybe ArtUpism is a plea for healing through a usable form of self-loathing. I mean, the last thing I was ever concerned about was becoming the thing I hate. I was practically groomed to become it. My morality came of age with TV characters like George Costanza and Tony Soprano. Twenty-odd years later, I spend my dead hours waiting for an environmental apocalypse while gawking at celebrity meltdowns on Twitter. My childhood hero was Michael Jackson, now I look up to Kanye West and Billie Eilish. Louis CK taught me how to capitalise on self-loathing as part of my brand. I find guidance in empathising with dubious personalities, tormented icons, bipolar narcissists and self-deprecating coolish teens. In the 2020s, the greatest media spectacle is that of a self that acknowledges its disdainful privileges while abusing them like there's no tomorrow ... because there really isn't. Great, got the prognosis, it's sour, who's up for some lemonade?

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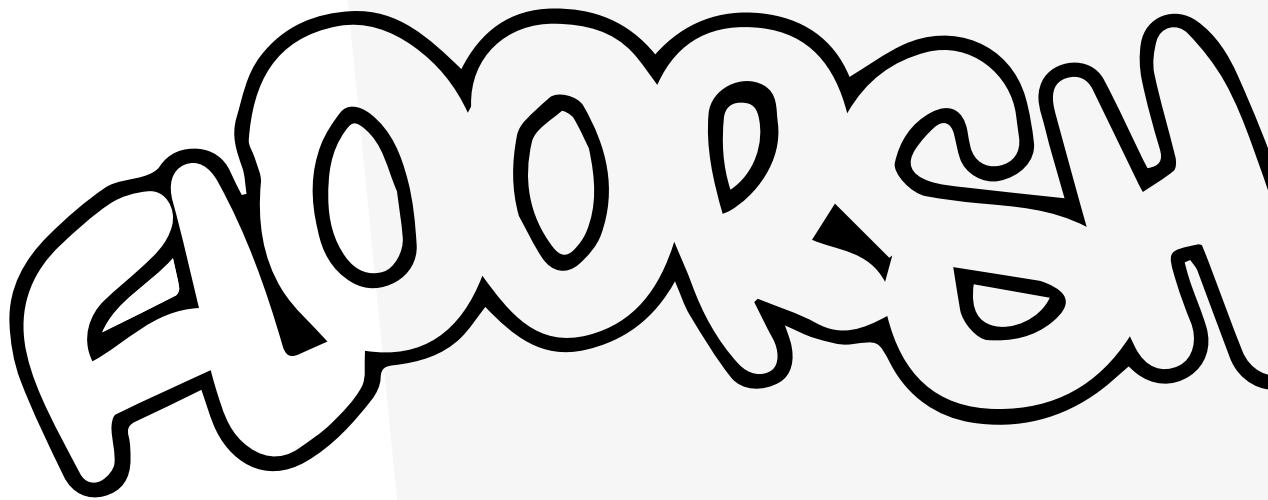
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