



Joseph Nechvatal (1951)

This viral interview is the result of an email conversation between Joseph Nechvatal & Alonso Cedillo.
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I've recently been thinking that the time has come to turn the page on the idea of the rhizome, because the 21st century is the age of the virus. The Deleuzian thought points towards the understanding of a schizoid nature in all concepts. However, I believe than more than a schizoid nature, our thought works like a virus. Writing is the virus of language, and thinking is the virus of cognition. Concepts copy themselves and mutate from mind to mind, changing to become stronger or weaker, just as virus do. Your work has pioneered the use of the viral form to develop itself. How did you first approach the idea of the virus, and how does it define your practice and process?

In the early '80s Foreign Agents Series book from Semiotext(e) entitled *On The Line*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari wrote that "We form a rhizome with our viruses, or rather, our viruses make us form a rhizome with other creatures" and I think that still holds. I do agree with you that we are now in a Viral Epoch, because as Jussi Parikka wrote in his CTHEORY 2005 essay, *The Universal Viral Machine*, "we cannot be done with viruses as long as the ontology of network culture is viral-like" ~so that cannot mean turning the page on the rhizome. The viral-rhizome represents the environment in which we live.

My first approach the idea of the viral art began during the AIDS virus epidemic in 1991, when I began working as artist-in-resident at the Louis Pasteur Atelier in Arbois, France, and developed in 1992 nearby at the Saline Royale d'Arc-et-Senans in the Ledoux Foundation's Apple computer lab. That was my *Computer Virus Project I*, my first experiment with computer viruses as a creative stratagem. In 2002, I extended that viral artistic research into the field of artificial life through my collaboration with the C++ programmer Stéphane Sikora. That is ongoing.

What I find interesting is that an actual virus is neither alive nor not-alive: it is simply parasitic. The attraction to the virus ~ both as form and content for my art ~ was primarily a result of my working with ideologies of power ~ specifically the power of the media ~ in shaping our consciousness. I already was working on this theme ~ beginning around 1980

~ in my drawings and photomechanical blow-ups. When the computer in the mid-80s came on the corporate-governmental-military scene, it became clear to me that it was how power was to be administrated and enforced thereafter. Of course this is a few years prior to the personal computer revolution.

The texts *The Electronic Revolution* by William S. Burroughs ~ from 1970 ~ was key here for me as was Richard Dawkins's 1991 *Viruses of the Mind*, about mental memes.

The unpredictable emergent aspect of the virus is what fascinates me as an artist, because in many ways it advances the chance-based Duchampian-Cageian proposition for art.

An aesthetic algorithmic viral logic is non-linear and so facilitates our desires to transcend the boundaries of our normal human cognition. Viral disembodied dispersion implies a diaphanous metaphysics constructed around an enhanced identity as host. By the psyche taking up with algorithmic viral art ~ an anti-position of circuitousness ~ I can say that the viral sensibility is essentially non-hierarchical and excessive.

Despite being invisible to the human eye, we can feel viruses as they start transforming our experiences. It doesn't matter if it's flu or a computer worm; there is something extremely sensorial in them, however we can only witness the symptoms. Can we talk of an aesthetic of the virus, and thus an aesthetic of infection and change?

To arrive at something of an answer, you must probe into obscurity ~ for the virus shrouds. Today your perception of viruses probably stems from the way you consider the coronavirus pandemic from the standpoint of having your body invaded by an efficient viral program. That is why the algorithmic exponential pulse of the virus can feel as if it is lurking in the shadows, stalking you. In that sense, viruses parallel the ubiquitous surveillance you associate with networked electronic information, and the flickering

of its translucent forms. Indeed, you may feel that the principles of algorithmic viruses ~ semi-autonomous machine-vampire pieces of digital code ~ are an essential transformational trait of techno-cultural logic. Like them, actual deadly viruses can transform narratives precipitously ~ hence their beguiling, almost magical, powers.

Viruses are the completing culmination of postmodernism, as they, by definition, are merger machines based on parasitism and acculturation. So it is not only their symbolic or metaphoric power that places them firmly in a wider perspective of cultural importance; it is their formal structure. As Jean Baudrillard said in *Cool Memories*, a virus is an ultra-modern form of communication which does not distinguish between information and its carrier.

But leaving aside our current issues with Covid-19, viruses are beautiful. Not only physically and for the way in which they have pushed our evolution and technology, but also because of their capabilities. Present day technology is what it is today thanks to the cyber viral warfare, and science is using them to kill cancer. How do you understand the viral behavior, and how is it reshaping our world?

Right. The first thing to remember is that a virus is both medium and message. Viral code, now the central trope of our world, is usually read as a script dedicated to producing humiliating death. Which it can achieve by killing the host. Indeed, most people assume that viruses work towards disease and death. But, although actual viruses were originally discovered and characterized on the basis of the disease and death they cause, most viruses are helpful to life in that they rapidly transfer genetic information from one bacterium to another, helping their hosts survive in hostile environments.

Viral-contextualized culture provides the chance for moving the mind in a counter-fearful direction, by inviting it to look lovingly at what is normally dreaded, so as to release cultural consciousness from the airy irrationality of viral fear. This is the explicit function of beauty in my art, for example [Viral Venture](#), a projection of my artificial-life computer virus art paired with the electric guitar music of Rhys Chatham that was recorded live at La basilique du Sacré-Coeur in Paris, where we both now live.

I have come to believe that knowledge is the accumulation of unique strains of different concepts. That these strains exist because ideas copy themselves into hosts and mutate from one head to another, changing but remaining the same, reprogramming or being reprogrammed by our minds. If we agree that we live in a Viral Epoch, how should we understand it? I think your work has established a kinship with viruses. Do you think it's important for people to look at these coexistence points, in which viruses and humans mix ourselves in different ways?

Yes, indeed, very important, indeed. We can understand our time of virulence better through art by remembering that viruses, like art, manifests adaptive behavior. Viruses are self-reproductive evolutionary programs that can be seen, at least in part, as something alive ~ even if not artificial life in the strongest sense of the word. The artistic benefits of developing a viral culture is in allowing thought and vision to rupture cultural habit and bypass object-subject dichotomies by emphasizing bottom-up self-organization, hidden distributed activities, and ethereal mesh-works that engage our viral-network ecology as both actual and virtual ~ what I have elsewhere called the viractual. (Briefly, the viractual is the stratum of activity where distinct actualizations/individuations are materialized out of the flow of virtuality.) Key is that some viruses do not simply yield copies of themselves, they also engage in a process of self-reproducing autopoiesis: they are copying themselves over and over again but they can also mutate and change.

This involves notions of retroviruses ~ sometimes known as anti-anti-viruses. The basic principle here is that the virus must somehow hinder the operation of an anti-virus program in such a way that the virus itself benefits from it. Anti-anti-viruses should not be confused with anti-virus-viruses, which are viruses that will disable or disinfect other viruses. A heuristic virus cleaner works by loading an infected file up to memory and emulating the program code. It uses a combination of disassembly, emulation and sometimes execution to trace the flow of the virus and to emulate what the virus is normally doing. The risk in heuristic cleaning is that if the cleaner tries to emulate everything, the virus might get control inside the emulated environment and escape, after which it can propagate further or trigger a destructive retaliation reflex.

Our prior epoch was a world where the individual was pitted against ~ and thoroughly processed by ~ post-human semi-autonomous software programs. Emotionally, this often ferments jarring feelings of being eaten alive by some great indifferent artificiality that apparently functioned semi-independently. That is why many felt impregnated with fear and suspicion of technological modernization, in general. What the new epoch of virulence means is an embryonic redemption achieved through a vaccination-like turning of tables on machinic operations. (Machinic here refers to the production of consistencies between heterogeneous elements based in particular technological and human strings that have attained viractual consistency.) Our current viral-network ecology of virulence is a combination of top-down host arrangements wedded to bottom-up micro self-organization where invariable configurations and states of entanglement co-evolve in an active, mutually beneficial, process. To do that, cultural players must place as central the significant role of the virus in no uncertain terms ~ because it is not only their symbolic/metaphoric power that places them firmly in a wider perspective of cultural infection ~ it is their formal structure that procures their actuality from the encircling environment to which they are receptively coupled.

Joseph Nechvatal (1951) is an American post-conceptual digital artist and art theoretician who creates computer-assisted paintings and computer animations, often using custom-created computer viruses.

He studied fine art and philosophy at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Cornell University and Columbia University, where he studied with Arthur Danto while serving as the archivist to the minimalist composer La Monte Young. He was associated with the artist group Colab and helped establish the non-profit cultural space ABC No Rio. In 1983 he co-founded the avant-garde electronic art music audio project Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine. In 1984, he began working on an opera called XS: The Opera Opus (1984-6) with the no wave musical composer Rhys Chatham.

He began using computers to make “paintings” in 1986 and later, in his signature work, began to employ computer viruses. These “collaborations” with viral systems positioned his work as an early contribution to what is increasingly referred to as a post-human aesthetic.

His work has been shown at Documenta 8, the 55th Venice Biennale, and The Museum of Modern Art in NY among many other venues.

Alonso Cedillo (1988) is a postinternet artist that lives and works in Mexico City. His work has been exhibited at the donaufestival (2013), Transitio MX (2015), and NRML Festival (2013).

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Cover image:

Joseph Nechvatal 2013 projection of *Viral Venture* (2009) at the exhibition *Oltre il sublime: Nuove frontiere della (de)figurazione estetica*, curated by Maria Campitelli & GianCarlo Pagliasso, at Trieste Luisi S.P.A. ArtSpace in Trieste, Italy.