

I WANT TO TOUCH YOU: TRANSREAL AESTHETICS IN VIRUS.CIRCUS

Micha Cárdenas & Elle Mehrmand

virus.circus follows the viral as a transversal line of inquiry that intersects with the militarization of medical authority, microscopic transnational migrations and global economic inequality. *virus.circus* is an episodic series of performances using wearable electronics, soft sensors and live audio to bridge virtual and physical spaces.



fig 1. virus.circus.breath, performed at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 2010, photo by Ash Smith



fig 2. virus.circus.probe performed at Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica, California, 2011, photo by Frankie Martin

Due to recent viral outbreaks, protective latex barriers must be worn at all times.

Skin to skin contact may result in viral contamination.

Failure to comply will result in a minimum of 10 years in a federal penitentiary.

Touching, and illness, are prohibited by law.

The virus must be contained.

virus.circus follows the viral as a transversal line of inquiry that intersects with the militarization of medical authority, microscopic transnational migrations and global economic inequality. Consisting of an episodic series of performances using wearable electronics, soft sensors and live audio to bridge virtual and physical spaces, the performances explore queer futures of latex sexuality and DIY medicine amidst a speculative world of virus hysteria. The history of queer politics shows that the rhetoric of viruses such as HIV are used to control marginalized populations, while the response to viruses such as H1N1 reproduce these structures of power.

Transnational Inspirations

virus.circus was conceived on our flight back from the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics Encuentro in Bogotá, Colombia, as we reflected on the inspiring performances we saw and the news of President Uribe's infection with H1N1. Deeply inspired by performances by La Pocha Nostra, Nao Bustamante, Tania Bruguera and Danza Contemporánea Integrada ConCuerpos, we decided to create a series of performances focused on an imagined future narrative where the virus hysteria of today and the resulting militarization of medicine in airports, hospitals and other public spaces, was even more omnipresent and legalized.

Living in the US/Mexico borderlands, living in San Diego and collaborating with artists in Tijuana, the effects of H1N1 were perhaps more apparent to us than in many other parts of the country. In April of 2009, the World Health Organization declared an outbreak of a new virus strain, Influenza A (H1N1), which raised great concern for its ability to move from pigs to humans.^[1] On April 30th of 2009, the government of Mexico declared a 5 day shut down of major parts of its economy, and we watched the streets of Tijuana completely empty of people as businesses suffered. ^[2] By June 11th of 2009 over 10,000 cases of H1N1 were identified worldwide and the World Health Organization declared it a global pandemic.^[3]

Our inspiration for *virus.circus* came from witnessing the intersections of the response to the virus with structural racism and control over people's movement. A notice to students sent out campus wide suggested three ways to avoid the H1N1 flu: "1. Use good personal hygiene... 2. Avoid close contact with people who are ill... 3. Avoid non-essential travel to Mexico".

[4]

The notice clearly reinforced structural racism against Mexico by choosing the ability to stay out of Mexico as one of its three main strategies for people to avoid illness, in effect making the students, staff and faculty who attend UCSD and live in Mexico invisible and secondary in efforts to maintain the health of the UCSD population. A second notice, sent only to a single research unit at UCSD said the following “A... researcher has a confirmed case of the H1N1 flu. He came into... to work on his research project yesterday, 10/14. He is now confined to his home until he fully recovers.” The implication here is that employers, in this case Universities, can choose to restrict the movement of their employees based on an evaluation of their health.

The political effects of the H1N1 virus resonate with the ways that the HIV virus was associated with gay men. As the performance “Let the Record Show” by Gran Fury / ACT-UP re-performed and documented in 1987, a disturbing confluence of religion and nationalism with homophobia was prevalent in the US. With *virus.circus*, we sought to revisit and explore the implications of virus politics by imagining a future world in which the precautions against a disease like H1N1, spread much easier than HIV, were a part of daily life.

Erotic Politics, Erotic Affect

virus.circus asks how erotic affect can be a form of resistance to hegemonic narratives of embodiment reproduced by western medicine. Our strategy was to show that the erotic could still be a form of resistance in a world controlled by virus hysteria. As queer erotic practices have been the subject of structural oppression in modern western society, we sought to understand how the energy of erotic affect can be a source of resistance to forms of power which seek to extinguish it and also how erotic practices are shaped by the conditions of power under which they exist. To explore these possibilities, we imagined a world in which skin to skin contact is completely prohibited and, in reference to the condoms used to avoid HIV and the gloves used to avoid H1N1, latex barriers are required to be worn at all times. An initial gesture to create the scenario was to take a number of standard Center for Disease Control posters, which had become very prevalent after H1N1, and to modify them with our imagined future restrictions, including “failure to comply will result in a minimum of 10 years in a federal penitentiary”, pointing to the convergence of medicine with the Prison Industrial Complex. We then distributed these posters throughout San Diego in public spaces and also displayed them throughout the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, where we performed an episode of *virus.circus*.

Through a series of erotic experiments, *virus.circus* explores erotic forms of expression that do not involve touch, or which minimize touch, creating a deterritorialized erotics that appears unfamiliar to the viewer and allows them to imagine new narratives of erotic embodiment and new possibilities of sexuality and gender. In *virus.circus.touch* the two performers first weave throughout the audience and then face each other from across the room. We then walk towards each other slowly, focusing on the erotics of expectation, focusing on trying to arouse each other with eye contact and the way that we are walking. For this performance, an infrared distance sensor was sewn into our costumes, which allowed us to move our Second Life avatars closer to each other as we walked, mirroring our physical distance. Our multiple simultaneous embodiment through our Second Life avatars is a transreal gesture that further deterritorializes our embodiment and adds dimensions of gender including transspecies, cyborg and mythological characteristics.

In *virus.circus.breath*, we focused on three types of breathing. The performance begins with rapid hysterical breathing as we attempt to bring the audience into the alternate reality by telling them, with great distress, “for your protection and the protection of others, please wear your mask” and “the virus must be contained”, and handing them a medical mask commonly used to avoid H1N1. At this point we often faced concerned audience members who demanded to know why they needed to put on their mask and at times left the performance. We then proceeded to erotic breath control, in which Cárdenas wore latex gloves and slowly restricted the amount of air that Mehrmand could breathe. For this segment, we used a hand made pressure sensor constructed from neoprene, conductive thread and conductive fabric that detected the amount of pressure applied to Mehrmand’s neck and changed the quality of the sound of our breathing, amplified with microphones inside of our masks

[6]

. The final part of the performance sees us lying on stage, below the projected image of our avatars having sex, doing tantric breathing to induce simultaneous energy orgasms. Here we are performing as two characters who are living within the restrictions of their society but still find ways of having erotic moments together. We imagine the fear of the rhetoric viruses as a trapping of logic that can be shaken off by the excess of orgasmic affect within the context of resistant practices creating their own new narratives of erotic encounter.

In *virus.circus.probe* we see the characters begin to resist the hegemony of western medicine and the narrative of fear of infection that is so central to it by developing their own Do-It-Yourself (DIY) Medicine and Femme Science. The authority of western medicine is coded into laws preventing acts such as practicing medicine without a license and which threaten years of imprisonment. Yet the amount of medical knowledge available to people is rapidly expanding both with the advent of websites such as Medpedia.org and with the widespread access to personal biometric technologies. The cyberfeminist collective Subrosa has pointed out in their book *Yes Yes* that “the rise of the University-educated male medical doctor” coincided with “the banishing of common (female and people’s) knowledge gained from centuries of inquiry, experimentation, and practice, represents one of the greatest losses to the medical and scientific world in Western history”.

[7]

In *virus.circus* we imagine two queer femmes who resist the system of knowledge known as Western Medicine, a system that their society uses to define their bodies and sexualities, by creating their own medicine.

Performing what we imagine to be Femme Science as proposed by Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh

[8]

, in *virus.circus.probe* Mehrmand uses a metal instrument to test Cardenas' body, learning the contours and limits of her body, violating the hegemony of doctors as the only agents with power of knowledge of the body. Queer femme here is imagined as an affect created through embodied gestures that resist a claim that femininity is passive, and in contrast reflects an intentional construction of gender and forms of pleasure. Using conductive thread, we created a touch sensitive dress that responds to Mehrmand's various touches by changing the pitch of the bass sound emanating from the sound system. Wearing Polar Team 2 heart rate monitors allows us to display on a laptop the R-R interval values for our heart rate, a number representing the number of milliseconds between the R peak of our heart beats which can be analyzed to determine breath rate and which areas of the autonomous or parasympathetic nervous system are in use. Continuing on, Mehrmand tests Cardenas' limits by inserting the testing instrument into her anus. An accelerometer sewn into Mehrmand's glove detects the speed of each thrust, applying a proportional amount of vibration to her vagina with a strap on motor also wired to the glove. As the performance unfolds, the audience stands in a circle around the testing moment, recalling the medical amphitheater and implicating them as voyeurs in a shared intimate erotic moment of medical testing as foreplay and sex. As the scene unfolds, a graph of our heart rates is also drawn in Second Life, above our avatars looping in a sexual penetration animation.

Mixed and Alternate Reality

Wearable electronic garments allow the performers to experiment with transreal embodiment, extending their physical bodies sonically and virtually. *virus.circus* attempts to immerse the audience/participants in an alternate reality by creating a slippage of perception. Code switching between mixed and alternate reality, *virus.circus* asks how we can use reality as a medium, resonating across a number of modes including public space interventions, performances in museums and galleries, and networked performances to create augmented, alternate and mixed reality scenarios.

Conclusions

Across episodes including *virus.circus.touch*, *virus.circus.breath* and *virus.circus.probe*, New possibilities of embodied knowledge unfold through the sonification and visualization of biometric data including heart rate and R-R intervals, as well as data from an ultrasonic rangefinder bra, a pressure sensing choking collar, touch sensitive dress and a motion sensitive glove that controls a strap-on vibrator. We have developed open source hardware and software to facilitate new forms of erotic expression, deterritorializing our everyday erotic practices to make them nearly unrecognizable in order to facilitate imagining them as future narratives of resistance to the confluence of medicine and structural oppression.

Source Code

The following code is an excerpt from a patch for Second Life that reads from a local file and moves two objects in the virtual world of Second Life. We have used this code for numerous performances, including *virus.circus.touch* and drawing a heart rate graph in *virus.circus.probe*. We use Puredata as a bridge to read the data from the arduino and write that to a local file and then we use this code to read that file and move objects in Second Life. The patch applies to llappviewer.cpp in the Second Life 2.0 codebase. The complete patch can be found at <http://transreal.org>

```
// virus.circus patch

...

//set the UUID of the object to move

LLViewerObject *objectFound = gObjectList.findObject(LLUUID("38ee12bb-...-fa23e356e8a2"));

if (objectFound)

{

LLVector3 objectPos = objectFound->getPosition();

objectPos[2] = numFromPd;    //home z - 278.575;

objectFound->setPosition(objectPos);

LLViewerRegion* current_region = objectFound->getRegion();

if (current_region && (! gMessageSystem->isSendFull(NULL)))

{

    U32 update_type = UPD_POSITION | UPD_ROTATION | UPD_LINKED_SETS;

    U32 *type32 = (U32 *)&update_type;

    U8 type = (U8)*type32;

    U8 data[256];
```

```
S32 offset = 0;
```

```
gMessageSystem->newMessage("MultipleObjectUpdate");
```

```
gMessageSystem->nextBlockFast(_PREHASH_AgentData);
```

```
gMessageSystem->addUUIDFast(_PREHASH_AgentID, gAgent.getID());
```

```
gMessageSystem->addUUIDFast(_PREHASH_SessionID, gAgent.getSessionID());
```

```
gMessageSystem->nextBlockFast(_PREHASH_ObjectData);
```

```
gMessageSystem->addU32Fast(_PREHASH_ObjectLocalID, objectFound->getLocalID() );
```

```
gMessageSystem->addU8Fast(_PREHASH_Type, type );
```

```
htonmemcpy(&data[offset], &(objectFound->getPosition().mV), MVT_LLVector3, 12);
```

```
offset += 12;
```

```
LLQuaternion quat = objectFound->getRotation();
```

```
LLVector3 vec = quat.packToVector3();
```

```
htonmemcpy(&data[offset], &(vec.mV), MVT_LLQuaternion, 12);
```

```
offset += 12;
```

```
gMessageSystem->addBinaryDataFast(_PREHASH_Data, data, offset);
```

```
gMessageSystem->sendReliable(current_region->getHost());
```

```
}
```

```
objectFound->setPositionAgent(objectPos);
```

References and Notes:

1. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8016909.stm>
2. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8028169.stm>
3. <http://www.cnn.com/2009/HEALTH/06/11/swine.flu.who/>
4. <http://adminrecords.ucsd.edu/Notices/2009/2009-4-28-3.html>
5. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1470625/>
6. *The pressure sensor was constructed based on documentation from Mika Satomi and Hannah Perner-Wilson, <http://www.kobakant.at/DIY/?p=65>*
7. *Subrosa Collective, Yes Species, p. 53, <http://www.refugia.net/yes/yeschapters.html>*
8. *“A Fem(me)inist Manifesto”, Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh, in Brazen Femme, edited by Chloe Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri*