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Queer Technologies - Toward a Viral Aesthetics

I would like to begin with a generation explication of Queer Technologies, outlining its theoretical framework and praxis. I will follow this with a discussion focused around its newest project GRID in relation to viral aesthetics.

What is Queer Technologies?

Queer Technologies is a company, an art collective, and an activist group that produces a product line for queer technological agency, interventions, and social formation.

QT products include transCoder, a queer programming anti-language; ENgenderingGenderChangers, a “solution” to Gender Adapters’ male/female binary; and Gay Bombs, a technical manual manifesto that outlines a “how to” of queer networked activism. QT products are often displayed and deployed at the Disingenuous Bar, which offers a heterotopic space for political support for “technical” problems. QT products are also shop-dropped in various consumer electronics stores, such as Best Buy, Circuit City, Radio Shack, and Target.

This work attempts to understand and explore—in the queer style of “strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices”¹—the effects of queer life on technology and technology on the queer way of life. Queer Technologies produces flows of resistance within larger spheres of capitalist structurations, “identifying” and “disidentifying” with these spheres in tandem. All pieces

¹ Judith Halberstam. In a Queer Time and Place. New York: NYU Press, 2005), 1.

are designed as product, artwork, and political tool, materialized through an industrial manufacturing process so that they may be disseminated widely.

Queer Technologies is currently developing a mapping application and data visualization named GRID—a play on Gay Related Immuno Deficiency (the name previously held by HIV/AIDS) and digital grids of communication, capital, and transmission—that tracks the dissemination of QT products and map the “battle plans” for Queer Technologies to more thoroughly infect networks of global capital.

Queer Technologies identifies its larger discursive practices as a viral aesthetics, in that it encrypts itself within flows of capital to replicate / permeate itself in relation / tension to capital’s own modulating, viral structure.

Component Theory, or Disidentifying with Theory

Queer Technologies works from a theoretical structure as a material practice.

Galloway and Thacker write, “Today, to write theory means writing code.”² Any investigation of queerness and technology requires divergent approaches that include an amalgamation of technical and theoretical knowledge: critical theory, political theory, media theory, queer theory, science studies in collaboration with digital logic, computer programming, electronics, design software, operating systems—a potentially never-ending list. As Deleuze said, “No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall, and practice is necessary for piercing this wall.”³

² Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker. *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 129.

³ Donald F. Bouchard, ed. “Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation Between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze.” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 206.

Queer Technologies builds new circuits, constructions, and mutations— theoretically, artistically, formally—that reside within Deleuze’s notion of “a system of relays [. . . containing] a multiplicity of parts that are both theoretical and practical.”⁴ Queer Technologies calls this methodology Component Theory, as it takes pieces from a variety of methods and styles to generate something “new.” Component Theory builds a new code to work from, yet a code continuously in flux and redefinition, just as power and control are never fixed but always in flux. Component Theory builds queer life: the disidentifying subject becomes a nexus of erratic cultural components that generate an entire cultural existence bound within materialized existence. The cultural networks of Component Theory that run through queer bodies and life instigate the initiation of biological mutation—new components of flesh. Component Theory builds a topological strategy for political action. Combining various modes of knowledge production, Component Theory produces iterations of knowledge, fully embracing interdisciplinary tactics that relay between theory and practice. In response to Deleuze, Foucault says theory is practice. Component Theory is practice as a struggle against forms of power.

Working with Consumerism

We begin with Galloway and Thacker’s statement: “counterprotocol practices can capitalize on the homogeneity found in networks to resonate far and wide with little effort.”⁵ In the battle for queer technical agency, the network of war is consumerism. Any technological intervention into the social must recognize that

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Galloway and Thacker. *The Exploit*, 47.

the majority of people in the world encounter a majority of technology as a consumable good. An absolute blurring exists between the need for technology as endemic to western survival and the desire for technology as consumable of excess. Technology flatlines at consumer capital, where politics become pure aesthetic. Think back to Benjamin: fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life.

Queer Technologies propogates itself through the networks of consumerism. This is the primary point of engagement, hypertrophy. As life has now arranged itself completely around flows of capital, biopolitical stakes are the highest with these actions of infection, introjection.

Desiring Product

In capital, the limits of desire are capsized by the price tag. The reconfiguration of product thus reconfigures desire. A reconstitution of desire at odds with the logic of capital breaks down aesthetics to reveal political engagements and urgencies. We turn back to Benjamin again: art in the age of mechanical reproduction concerns itself with the political rather than the aura.

Queer Technologies circulates as political products to displace desire so that it may reform as queer.

Queer Capitalism

To name this strategy, Queer Technologies practices Queer Capitalism. As Muñoz has carefully explicated, acts of disidentification are not characterized by a dialectical positioning. These acts move between the normative and non-normative through a complex web of interconnections. The act is never an argument of x counter y. Queer

Capitalism buys itself political power, in part, through exploiting the capitalist system for the fastest means of replicating itself widely with minimal effort.

The products of Queer Capitalism—Queer Technologies—operate under the aegis of a layered visuality. The design of Queer Capitalism can locate itself easily within the company of other consumables in varieties of shops, stores, outlets. The first reading—of the outmost surface—is one of Benjamin’s fascism. Yet, the tension of the design resides within closer readings—layers of depth—that render visible from closer inspection or the point when the product moves from the shelf to the consumer’s inquiring hand. Design as performative contradiction. Design as disidentification. Design is the fundamental praxis of Queer Capitalism. Design instigates the restructuring of buying, selling, and using.

Buying, Selling

Monetary values can always operate as an exploit. The importance of this exploit concerns itself with how the exploit is directed / targeted. In Queer Capitalism, buying and selling Queer Technologies must exploit capital. Strategies: shop dropping, barcode manipulation, price based on cultural institute of dissemination, e-business scams, free giveaways at rallies, fake tech support centers, and various other performative platforms. Queer Capitalism should not be limited to these strategies but start from them and expand as necessary. No matter what tactic is employed, Queer Capitalism is the circulation of a discourse of biopolitics, not consumables. The consumables of Queer Capitalism are viruses that spread its discourse to the masses.

Using

After dissemination, at the moment of full possibility, use becomes the unknown

remainder in the equation of capitalist exchange. Use will ultimately be decided outside of Queer Technologies, but this use will still constitute QT's existence, functionality, materiality.

Queer Technologies complicates the relationship of content to functionality. Wendy Chun's provocative statement that there can never be a purely technological solution to a political problem powerfully resonates here. This is not to reduce Chun's claim only to the realm of the functional but to point toward the suggestion that technology might have to break in order to operate in certain political realms. Users of Queer Technologies must find primarily political ways—rather than technological—to use its products. The practice of use, therefore, becomes an interrogation into discourse. It is at the point of engagement with discourse when perhaps the technological and the political can realign—or the definition of the technological expands. Whether or not a technological material instantiation “works,” technologies of discourse flow at constant runtime. The technologies of the self mutate with these technologies of discourse. Use is always the use of knowledge, and knowledge is “made for cutting.” To cut is to locate the interstice. This use of knowledge cuts networks into technotopias and determines flows of life and death. Use situates biopower anywhere between the queer body and the product.

GRID

The design, fabrication, production, dissemination, and use of Queer Technologies operates on a grid.

Today, two grids can be identified that mutually shape and define the biosocialities of homosexuality: Firstly, a history of viral contagion and disease sutures itself

perpetually to the conception and representation of the homosexual. G.R.I.D., or Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, the identifier briefly given to AIDS until 1982, is a locus of this infectious rhetoric. The term, as words that explicitly order the homosexual into the marker of sickness from health, captures the homosexual in perpetually modulating representations of disease and sickness. Secondly, contemporary grids of digital communication and capital generate a formation of the homosexual that is complicit within flows of consumption and nationalism. As Jasbir Puar has suggested, homonationalism enfolds the homosexual into these machinations, visually projecting an inclusion of homosexuality within the nation-state and mass culture, while simultaneously excluding those homosexuals who reside outside of these homonormative representations. These two grids are collapsed into one another, interlocked in a viral logic that always already casts the homosexual body out as diseased, infected, dying, dead while generating representations of homosexuality as anything but an other to heterosexuality and the nation. Queer Technologies refers to this larger grid as GRID. GRID, a structure of viral capitalism, infects the multiplicitous biosocialities of homosexuality as tyranny of representation; yet, QT argues that through an exploitation of the viralities at work here, another grid can be replicated--a queer grid that provides viral tactics of infection and escape from the representations of GRID.

First, I would like to discuss the qualities of viruses and build from that framework into an examination of the viralities of GRID. Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker succinctly define the virus as “life exploiting life,” that is, viruses, as beings, take advantage of their host entities and/or systems to generate more copies of themselves.⁶

⁶ Ibid., 83.

The virus succeeds in producing its copies through a process Galloway and Thacker refer to as “never-being-the-same.”⁷ Maintaining within itself the ability to continuously mutate its code with each reproduction, the virus propagates itself. Therefore, replication and cryptography become the two actions that define the virus. What astounds Galloway and Thacker--and also myself--is that the virus reveals a life in an “illegible and incalculable manner.”⁸ They suggest that the virus’ ability to mutate and modulate itself is an example of artificial life.⁹

If the virus is an artificial life, what is the potential of such a life? Hardt and Negri hint at such an answer when they write on the monstrosity of the flesh. For them, all flesh is pure potential, and it is the social forces that give form to this fullness of possibility. All flesh, then, is monstrous, in that all life (constituted by flesh) is an artificial life, a social life.¹⁰ So we are all monsters, but here, the virus is a particularly fascinating monster: our socialities have made it extremely monstrous to most of the world, while its own monstrous flesh inflects and shapes the host systems it infects. Importantly, Hardt and Negri note that there are some monsters we should work against but others are just fine. Thus, the virus, as a mutating artificial life form, is politically ambiguous. That is, if something is said to be viral, it is not necessarily a bad monster. Interestingly, this viral flesh of potential opens the possibilities for resistant practices, in that viralities can be used to infect dominant systems--but more on this later.

⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 85.

¹⁰ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Multitude*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 190 - 193.

Now, I'll consider how dominant systems themselves are becoming viral. These traits of the virus have recently been discovered in larger dynamic structures of contemporary life and society. In their writings on global capital and the new world order, Hardt and Negri argue that "Empire's institutional structure is like a software program that carries a virus along with it, so that it is continually modulating and corrupting the institutional forms around it."¹¹ Jussi Parikka has taken this claim further in his writings on viral capitalism. He notes that capitalism is viral in that it is now capable of continuous modulation and heterogenesis.¹² Parikka identifies this viral mode of operation organized around contagion, mutation, and colonization. "The commodity," he writes, "works as a virus--and the virus part of the commodity circuit."¹³ The flows of these commodity circuits is a structure to examine capitalism topologically: the connections they foster, enable, and forbid, the relationalities produced as results of these connections between things, the forms these processes give rise to, as well as the constant mutation of all present a grid (or diagram) of flows operating under a viral logic. Viral capitalism, as an artificial life form, replicates itself through a mutating act of never-being-the-sameness, that is, it continuously modulates to infect the outside (a host) and reproduce it on the inside (including it in itself); this is the logic of its propagation. By this viral replication of difference, capitalism generates an image (face) of inclusion that is actually a representation of falsity. Parikka points out that "viruses,

¹¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 197 – 198.

¹² Jussi Parikka. *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 96.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 97.

too, have faces.”¹⁴ To work against viral capitalism, it would seem one must first identify the face (coded representation)--and then escape it, as Deleuze has called for.

The question becomes: How do we escape GRID? Can we escape GRID?

Queer Technologies proposes a queer grid. If the virus is life exploiting life, Queer Technologies’ formation of a grid calls for an exploitation of the queer self to manufacture difference, that is, to combat the dominant viral GRID of homosexuality, a queer grid must replicate and mutate the dominant never-being-the-sameness to produce its own queer never-being-the sameness. Queer Technologies aligns with Alan Liu’s notion of “destructive creativity”—a creativity that goes “beyond the new picturesque of mutation and mixing to the ultimate form of such mutation and mixing: what may be called the new sublime of ‘destruction.’ [. . .] the critical inverse of the mainstream ideology of creative destruction [. . . a] viral aesthetics.”¹⁵ This aesthetics becomes like a repetitive stream of disidentifications—disidentifying as queer cryptography, repetitively infecting the infections of mainstream ideology at the risk of obliterating one’s own “hygiene.” Queer Technologies locates the potential of such an aesthetic viral infection in queer affect. Queer affect as a type of cryptography--nonhygienic ways of being, living, experiencing--generates a life-resistance that, in its contingencies, mutations, and infections with global capital, produces another queer, viral grid that is an “illegible and incalculable” artificial life to GRID, as it is always forming its life in relation/exploitation to this dominant GRID. A queer GRID is established through the relationalities generated from specific materialized instantiations

¹⁴ Ibid., 144.

¹⁵ Alan Liu. *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 325.

of queer affect infecting the GRID of global capital. To diagram these queer materialisms reveals the topological possibilities for queer world-making on and off GRID.

These queer material practices are queer capitalism. If, in viral capitalism, the commodity is the virus, Queer Technologies' commodities as political products infect the desiring-product logic of GRID that constitutes the biosocialities of homosexuality.

Queer Technologies refers to its products as gay bombs. Playing off of and appropriating the mid-90s US Air Force proposal for the development of a biochemical weapon that would turn combatants of war gay, gay bombs, as queer political products circulating in GRID, explodes and infects GRID's viral logic.

Queer Technologies has commenced producing a set of maps and battle plans that they refer to as GRID. QT uses the same name for its own queer grids as well as the dominant GRID to virally bind them linguistically and etymologically, in that Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (G.R.I.D.) is always left as a trace (an infection) within GRID. As Queer Technologies circulates within various cities and geographical areas, QT diagrams and situates these products--gay bombs--within a grided structure. These queer grids, once mapped out, are distributed all over the areas they correlate to: on billboards, sidewalks, signposts, websites, store fronts, etc. Akin to a Situationist *dérive*, these queer grids attempt to restructure the replications of homosexuality virally produced by GRID.

Queer Technologies' grid project fashions a new topology: their circulated diagrams and their situated products in various consumer outlets work toward producing another type of virality that emerges from the fusion of map and materiality--viral in that it uses the same logic of viral capitalism: the queer grid allows itself to constantly

change and mutate with the dominant GRID to continuously infect capital; it is its own mutation engine that proffers queer never-being-the-sameness. The queer grid will crash, succeed, re-chart, change always, replicate always. Its value lies within the fact that each node in the topology--as a gay bomb--has the potential to explode into a queer relationality, encrypted by another grid, that can generate a whole new set of infections against GRID.

Queer Technologies, through all its various tactics--broadly defined as viral aesthetics, infects GRID with another grid. Perhaps these escapings from GRID are momentary, fleeting, but they continue undoubtedly. Escaping the face, the representation, the image that infects the biosocialities of homosexuality generates the potential for a new viral logic of new queer biosocial formations, new monstrosity of the homosexual flesh. Queer Technologies calls this flesh theSoftQueerBody--a social, artificial flesh, a materialism of everything, infected into queerness.