

Autoimmune: Media, Computation, and the AIDS Crisis

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Characterized by distortions of fact and truth, the AIDS crisis points to the existence of a necropolitical engine supported by media and technology, which continues to kill underrepresented populations despite the latest achievements of LGBTI+ politics. The historical mishandling of the AIDS crisis in the United States influences our existing experience of it worldwide; revisiting the broad range of images that helped generate conflicts of meaning in the American response to the crisis can shed light on the formation of historical, exported misconceptions, and put into question hegemonical media and history-making technologies. Including news and commercial media, public statements by politicians in charge, and the entertainment industry, American images helped shape this crisis around the world through acts of misrepresentation and fact distortion. Distorted knowledge is essential to the existence of current power structures; control over information lies in the hands of those with access to computing technology that can shape it. This same technology enables a massive manipulation of affects that deploys misrepresentation, distortion, and corruption as principal tools. Thus, technological misuse and illiteracy are structural elements in this necropolitical scenario, helping reproduce settler colonialism at an infrastructural level.

Autoimmune explores the legacy of the initial, pre-ART (antiretroviral therapy) crisis by focusing on the truth of its disorder. It presents a speculative, non-linear narrative in which the replicating virus is a character, a non-human intelligence, delivering rogue proteins with little protection and no antibodies provided. It speaks to the viewer, manipulating the archives and complicating already distorted understandings. With agency over data, it alters appropriated images and animates archival figures to speak. Photorealistic lies and abstract compositions are created from archeological media objects including commercials, war imagery, and other AIDS-related materials found on the internet (see fig. 1). As abstraction intensifies, the video assimilates the machine-virus' complexity and becomes the truth of its opacity.



Fig. 1. *Autoimmune* (2020). Installation view, Broad Art Museum at MSU, East Lansing-MI.

Both image and audio are created with generative processes that utilize artificial intelligence—more specifically, machine learning, a computational approach to solving

problems that provides systems the ability to automatically learn and improve from experience based on sample/training data. The archive is utilized in two distinct ways: first, archival imagery is upscaled with AI techniques and assembled in a flow of random associations; second, archival images are utilized in datasets for machine training, serving as the basis of the information utilized by the machine to generate new content. In the edit, these strategies are not easily distinguished, as they are woven into a flow of discontinuity. This confusion contributes to the work's narrative, which privileges sensory blending, affectionate strategies, and a sense of ineffability.

Historically, there has been an effort to put a face to the disease and to blame the victim. In the video, Ronald Reagan's, George H. W. Bush's, Rock Hudson's, Magic Johnson's and Essex Hemphill's faces are recreated in imperfect deepfakes. The term merges the concepts of fakery and deep learning, a machine learning method based on artificial neural networks. The machine is trained on video from speeches, movies, anything that documents the targeted person's face entirely and without obstructions to its identification, to recreate their faces and apply them to the performers, generating new, synthetic data that can pass for real data. The ideal result is a perfect illusion, but *Autoimmune's* photorealistic lies are never complete. Although our deepfakes seem to stay within the human realm in terms of figuration, pixel quality, texture, and facial features work in another form of indexicality, one that points to the characteristics of the generative, computational process and its non-human vision. The computer-generated faces are never clean or fully merged with the performers' bodies.

We created obstacles for the machine learning process, training the machine on datasets with imperfect conditions for computer visibility such as non-conventional camera angles and obfuscating lighting. This strategy created abstract compositions and glitches, all of which

index the technology and its process in its artificial reality. The process is also directly referenced with the utilization of the FaceSwap interface as a structural, narrative tool. FaceSwap is the current, most accessible application for the creation of deepfakes available in online coding libraries. Its interface shows the machine learning process as it is visible to us, hiding beneath the surface the non-human process of identifying how photorealistic image data is written and recreated. The flatness, opaqueness, and inaccessibility of the process are the truths *Autoimmune* wants to make sensible, contributing to a realism of the ontological fakeness of contemporary digital photographic processes.

Powerful tools for digital imaging are each time more present in our daily lives. Paradoxically, their political utilization and implications are not, and neither is literacy. For artist and researcher James Bridle, as the world around us increases in technological complexity, our understanding of it diminishes. In Bridle's metaphor, we are lost in a sea of information, each time more segregated by fundamentalism, simplistic narratives, and conspiracy theories, despite the apparent accessibility to information provided by the internet and other technologies. Bridle asserts that there is one single idea underlying this trend: the belief that our existence is understandable through computation and more data is enough to help us build a better world. Alongside an enormous body of literature on the bias and oppressive structures of algorithmic technologies, Bridle reminds us of the fact that we are building expert systems based on our knowledge and history, which is massively unequal, racist, and prejudiced. Rather than being built by technologists with particular expert skills, but not social and historical knowledge, technologies should be opened up to wider access so they are more representative of diverse populations and interests (Bridle).

Autoimmune explores the naming of the AIDS crisis as *genocide* and misunderstandings of sexuality that derived from the crisis, both of which have been exploited and reduced by media with unquestionably material implications in the lives of people living with AIDS (PLWA). With intense fragmentation and manipulation of image, sound, and fact, this assemblage proposes a sensorial experience suited for post-factual times. The distortion of signals, both digital signals and signs of representation, stands for a historical and material problem. The non-fixity of video elides the constructs of “virus,” “disease,” and “computation” as established categories, puzzling them instead through technical features as an aesthetic strategy. The main intention is to explore this mediatized public health crisis not only as a crisis of representation but as a crisis of colonial capital, which is tied to distorted representations and vilifications of the “other.”

War and military metaphors are present throughout mediatic, cultural, and artistic production during the pre-ART days of the AIDS epidemic in the United States. As media tropes, they helped establish terror and potentially contributed to a turn from the status of a patient to that of a criminal for those living with HIV. Still, the framing of the AIDS epidemic as a form of genocide helped activists and artists to productively organize their emotions. In “Revisiting AIDS and Its Metaphors,” Ryan Conrad demonstrates how common the analogies between warfare, genocide, the Holocaust, and the AIDS epidemic were amongst queer cultural producers at the time. Conrad considers how the word *genocide* acts as a generative naming and performative framing of the crisis. In *Autoimmune*, the metaphorization of war is directly touched upon by the words of American poet and activist Essex Hemphill (16 April 1957 - 4 November 1995). The piece presents a deepfake of Hemphill (see fig. 2), in which a fragment from his poem “Vital Signs” is recited. In the poem, he provides visceral images of

the AIDS crisis' immanent intersections of class, race, sexuality, death, and politics: "My erections are SCUD Missiles / aimed at the suburbs, the pulpits, / the shopping malls ..." (31). Hemphill's presence in the piece is representative of many other artists and activists who radically pointed out the gravity of the situation while unveiling structural and societal wars that were already in place at the time.



Fig. 2. Still from *Autoimmune* (2020). Jadrian Tarver as Essex Hemphill in deepfake.

Ideals of sexual liberation have also been largely abandoned by present-day gay and lesbian politics and visual representations. Douglas Crimp warned about this movement in 1987 in his text "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic." What once promised a collective turn toward a freer, more comprehensive, and radical understanding of our bodies and desires is now restricted to the individualistic and commodified experience of algorithm mediated matchmaking, sex apps, bots, and virtual reality, amidst others. Powerful images of pleasure and experimentation that celebrate queer bodies in the 1970s, such as the work of queer

experimental filmmaker Fred Halsted, help us remember that gay sex was political and a source of political debate.

Classically, the purpose of images, narratives, metaphors, etc., has been to make sense out of sensibility by selecting among the chaos of lived experience a simplification that can be understood and communicated. This process always involves abstracting some essence out of a multitude of possible inputs, which is where aesthetic choice comes into play. This is even true of artificial intelligence systems in which the data must be cleaned before it will yield anything comprehensible to the human mind. What *Autoimmune* does is to reverse the usual logic. Instead of trying to clean up experience by finding narrative threads, metaphors, and iconic images, we tried to recreate a lived chaotic experience by feeding an AI system with not just unselected images but more importantly an entire range of images that bombarded a pre-ART person with AIDS and that can still be found on the internet. The identity of a PLWA is here configured through discontinuous fluctuations of digital information, underscored by glitches and uncanny digital textures made of unquiet pixels, visibly vulnerable to a machine and programmer's neglect or amplification (see fig. 3). By refusing to select a narrative line, one type of metaphor, a cleaned set of images—indeed by reversing the process to mix metaphors, take out the narrative line, and dirty the images—the work recaptures the confusion, distress, fear, anger, and incomprehensibility of lived experience. This messy, contradictory, insane, problematic, dirty experience yields a completely different aesthetic that is illustrated in the project's most abstract results. This aesthetic is much more difficult to comprehend, unfamiliar, disconcerting, and thus much more real than photorealism. How can we try to make sense of what the mind (and body) are doing when it is impossible to comprehend what is happening to it? Should one feel “dirty” for living with HIV? If our knowledge is designed by

corporate machines while politics of death are enabled by misinformation, how can we “clean” the data and shape information for ourselves?

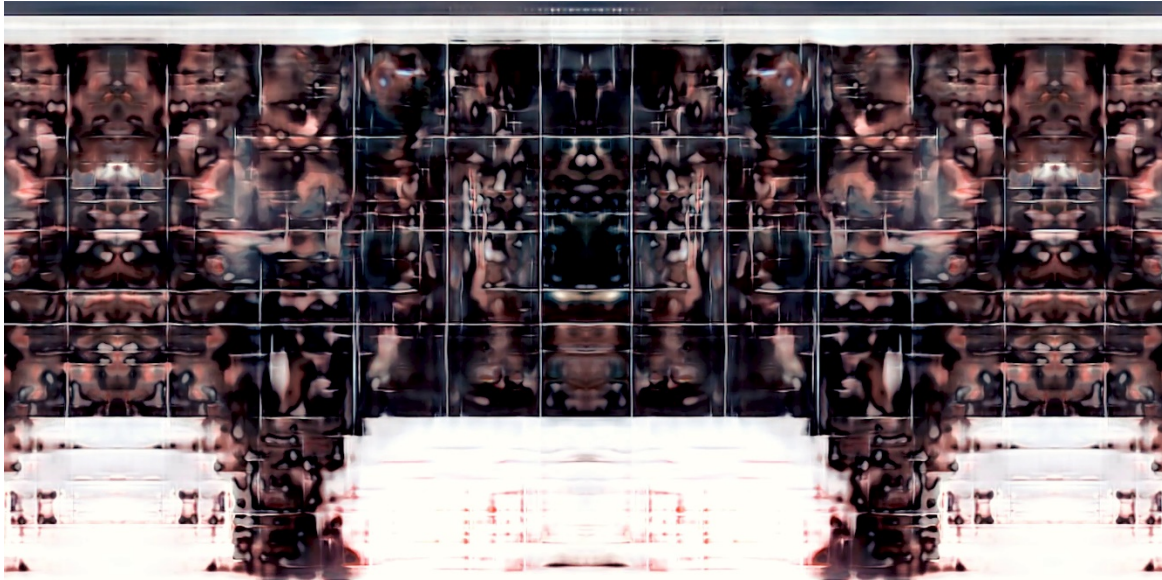


Fig. 3. Still from *Autoimmune* (2020). FaceSwap interface abstracted by a GAN.

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Marcos Serafim is a Brazilian artist and researcher working with video and sound across theatrical exhibition, installation, and performance. Harnessing documental, sensorial, and generative strategies, he investigates social identity, media, and technology. He has exhibited work at the 5th and 6th Ghetto Bienalle in Haiti; the Oscar Niemeyer Museum in Brazil; the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC), the Queens Museum, and Flux Factory in New York. His work has been screened in film festivals in multiple countries, including Israel's Horn Festival for Experimental Films (Jury's Second Prize), Northampton Film Festival in Massachusetts (Jury's Honorable Mention for Short Experimental) and Fauto Doc Festival in Italy (Young Jury's Honorable Mention for Short Documentary). Serafim holds a BA in Film and Video from Parana State University in Brazil, an MA in Studio Art from Eastern Illinois University, and an MFA in Studio Art from Michigan State University. Email: mjsn.marcos@gmail.com.