

INTRODUCING
CONTAGION DESIGN

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How is contagion designed? How do labour, migration, economies, habits and data configure contagion? Across a program of four weeks of discussion and debate from October to November 2020, the international symposium *Contagion Design: Labour, Economy, Habits, Data* explored the current conjuncture through these vectors to critically address issues of rising unemployment, restricted movement, increasing governance of populations through data systems and the compulsory redesign of habits. Design logics underscore both biological contagion and political technologies. Contagion is redesigning how labour and migration are differentially governed, experienced and indeed produced. Habits generate modes of exposure and protection from contagion and become a resource for managing biological and social life. Data turns contagion into models that make a virus actionable and calculable. New modes of sociality and collaboration provoke forms of contagious mutuality. But can the logic of pre-emption and prediction ever accommodate and control the contingencies of a virus? The essays in this small book explore these issues and their implications for cultural, social and political research of biotechnological conditions. If contagion never abandons the scene of the present, if it persists as a constitutive force in the production of social life, how might we redesign the viral as the friend we love to hate?

Hardwired into genetic code, design enables viral reproduction as life forms with potential to scale as pandemic events. Amplified and accelerated by the rapaciousness of human species-beings, economies of plunder embrace intentional narratives of accumulation while abrogating histories of violence and destruction. Very different but often complementary registers of design inform economic systems as ideological apparatuses,

industrial modes of production, labour regimes, data architectures, the governance of migration and everyday routines. Planning, modelling and topology are just some of the analytical and methodological techniques and approaches enlisted in drawing attention to relations that intersect, interpenetrate and constitute seemingly contained or exclusive things and conditions. Topological connections also generate or produce disconnections, dissonances, exclusions and conflicts. Such tensions instantiate the political as modes of struggle or negotiation and cooperation inherent to the forging of relations. Just as computational systems strive for interoperability designed to enable processes of capital accumulation, frequently the technical organization of relation is visited by inoperability. Similarly, failure and malfunction, dispute and incommensurability unsettle regimes of truth and assertions of authority.

How might these kinds of background conditions and dynamics inform our analyses of contagion? If the temporality of the conjuncture anticipates a futurity in which new modes of habit coalesce, how can we discern the contours of the present pandemic from the so-called 'new normal' that awaits? Certainly we might assume a decline in morbidity and infection rates, but a pervasive anxiety lingers just as a 'recovery economy' limps along in unevenly distributed ways.

The essays collected in this volume probe how labour and migration, alternative economies, practices of habit and data environments manifest in ways that condition and are affected by pandemic outbreaks. In framing the event and subsequent volume in this way, we were especially interested in what the logic, concept and collective practice of design might mean for how contagion is analyzed and understood. There's an inherent organization and

replicant architecture to biological forms of disease that, at the very least, has revealed the power of contagion to adhere in multiple ways to everyday life.

At a certain level the impulse of design is motivated by an intentionality assumed of the plan. One designs to transform. A futurity is built into the logic of design. A kind of positive hopefulness imbues utopian registers of possible worlds. Yet scanning the ruins of industrial modernity and ravages of settler colonialism, which also include the histories of social-political movements and organized labour, it is all too clear that the imperial ambitions of capital more often than not confront contingencies never figured within blueprints of control.

Taking stock of labour, economy, habits and data at the current conjuncture, we set out to collectively forge a design analysis beyond the pervasive force of a coronavirus run amok, albeit in uneven and variable ways. The question of design enabled us to register how biology, technology, economy, culture and governance at the current conjuncture provide occasion to identify and possibly generate temporalities of life not beholden to modes of futurity predicated on capital accumulation, regimes of measure and the nihilistic drive of indifference toward planetary annihilation.

Part 1 on Migration and Labour asks how renationalization in pandemic times partition labour and migration in ways that contest the national as a triumphant project resilient to a virus that demonstrates its power to destroy economy and life, work and society? Rather than affirming some mythic sense of the nation as a homogenized political space, renationalization instead deepens already existing divisions and borders amplified by structural and technical logics of urban space and platform economies. How do the spatialities wrought

by the current pandemic, coupled with the persistent continuum of global heating, transform patterns of migration, work and border politics? Further, can contagion be understood as a structuring force over and above attempts by government authorities to organize the economy and society using policy instruments? Following framing comments by Brett Neilson, the three essays by Anne McNevin, Ritayoti Bandyopadhyay and Joyce Liu address these questions by exploring the connections between migration, labour, contagion and biopolitical techniques for designing worlds.

The 'Covid-pause' has created a new context for calling business as usual into question. In this interregnum of an assumed world, contagious mutuality has gone viral – mutual aid practices large and small are being practiced and shared, the role of care-workers in holding everything together is brought to the fore and how to align thinking about post-covid economic recoveries with a longer term response to climate change has become a central question. Essays and opening comments in *Part 2, Contagious Mutualities*, by Katherine Gibson, Stephen Healy and Declan Kuch, Peter North and Teppo Eskelinen explore what other sort of economies might emerge if we let go of practices and institutions that inhibit 'recovery' for all, human and nonhuman. Scholars and activists investigating new models of production, new forms of mutuality, new roles for the public sector and welfare state and new economic responses to Covid-19 discuss how to rethink and redesign vulnerable economies in ways that anticipate and align with climate emergency, degrowth and new forms of care and wealth redistribution.

Part 3 considers Habits of Contagion. French sociologist Gabriel Tarde was fascinated with the 'suggestive realm', with the power of contagion

and imitation in shaping social life. For Tarde, being open to suggestion was not an indicator of animality or primitiveness, it was evidence of an almost pre-conscious or affective sense of being connected to others. This mode of connection is not based on emotional identification with others; it is more like contagious communication, or a 'group mind'. Following a short framing text by Tony Bennett, essays by Gay Hawkins, Franck Cochoy, Gérald Gaglio and Alexandre Mallard and Ben Dibley explore how biological and social forms of contagion interact. How do suggestion and affective atmospheres shaped by fear of contact, crowds and contamination prompt new habits, how do new devices like facemasks modulate social interactions and how is the governance of populations managed through the prohibition or reform of old habits? What role does suggestibility play in infrastructure redesign focused on the logistics of prevention and safety?

The book closes with *Part 4, Data Contagion*. Computational systems generate data with a viral propensity. Multiplied across platforms, data mutates in recombinatory ways. The mixing of data unsettles order and systems of control. Digital networks provide tools able to measure the spread of contagion across economy, culture and society. But they are less able to register outside forces of politics and history that precondition the speed of distribution and scale of infection. With brief framing remarks by Ned Rossiter, essays by Mark Andrejevic, Rolien Hoyng and Orit Halpern consider the propensity of data to build relations and produce worlds, amplified and accelerated within and across data regimes. What are the protocols of contagion specific to data? How do externalities shape the design of data relations? What is the relation between data and contingency? Can data be asymptomatic?

Taken as a whole, the essays gathered here critically interrogate the interaction between contagion and design. Not beholden to the security of models or assurances of positivistic correlationism targeting post-pandemic recovery and the resumption of business as usual, this book instead asserts the need to attend with care to non-compliant ways of knowing and living in a world compounded by the rule of systemic violence. When contagion is the new normal, and contingency is clawed into the everyday as routines, what does this mean for the security of reason? How, in other words, do we account for the inexplicability of entropic systems that refuse the logic of control and containment? Such conceptual, analytical and indeed political work is a collective endeavour. These essays are our contribution to that effort.