

# Virus Matter

Covit-19 Spatial Politics of *Body World Ecology*

**Lina Stergiou**

---

## Online Contribution

in *CAFAM Beijing Techne Triennial: Topologies of the Real and Art in Motion*, CAFA Art Museum Beijing and ZKM - *We=Link: Ten Easy Pieces* online exhibition response to the postponed Triennial due to Covit-19 (from 30 March 2020, [www.chronusartcenter.org/en/welink-ten-easy-pieces](http://www.chronusartcenter.org/en/welink-ten-easy-pieces)). Invited in one of the five commissioned projects, JODI's ICTI.ME.

---

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.12118638>

ORCID ID:

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4398-7824>

Abstract:

Taking into account scientific research and facts up to the date this essay was written (20 March 2020), the terms 'SARS-CoV-2,' 'Covit-19,' 'Virus,' and 'Computer Virus' are here examined, their properties, and the bodily and global effects of the first two, for suggesting that Covit-19 phenomenon is enacted by a cut-together apart between in/human/in/organic entities producing radical un/boundaries that sweep the body. Indeed, it is here argued, the unit of transfigurations *is* the body, turning a phenomenon into a dynamic interiorized world view departure point. The essay shows why and how Covit-19 is a de/stabilizing, creative, liberating, collective site of integral dynamics in/towards a new body world ecology.

Keywords: Cultural Studies; Cultural Activism; Covit-19 pandemic

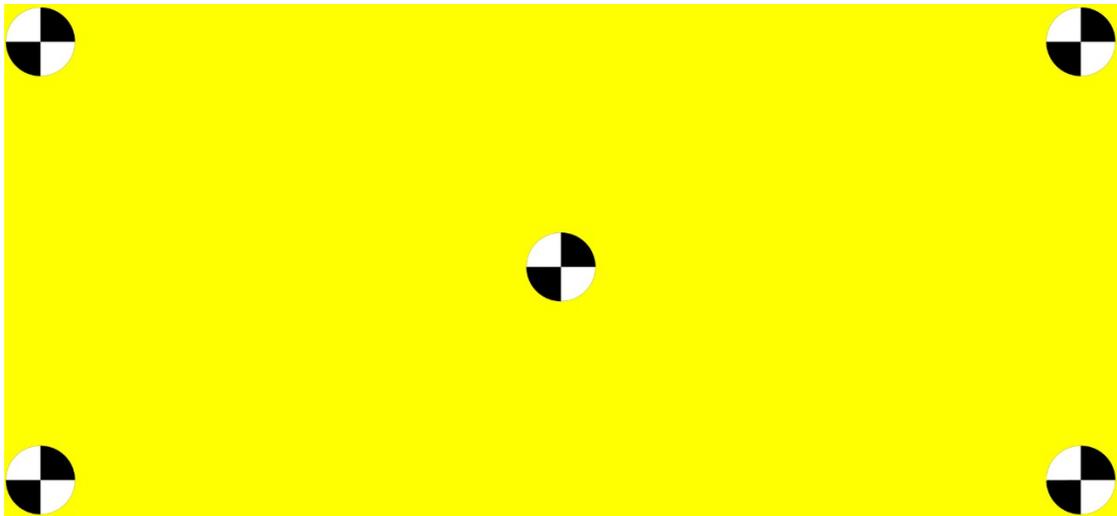
© 2020 Lina Stergiou

Lina Stergiou

# Virus Matter

## Covit-19 Spatial Politics of *Body World Ecology*

20 March, 2020



JODI's ICTI.ME, [www.ICTI.ME](http://www.ICTI.ME), in *CAFAM Beijing Techne Triennial: Topologies of the Real and Art in Motion*, CAFA Art Museum Beijing and ZKM - *We=Link: Ten Easy Pieces* online exhibition response to the postponed Triennial due to Covit-19 (from 30 March, 2020, [www.chronusartcenter.org/en/welink-ten-easy-pieces](http://www.chronusartcenter.org/en/welink-ten-easy-pieces))

Results obtained from our analyses suggest that the 2019-nCoV appears to be a recombinant virus between the bat coronavirus and an origin-unknown coronavirus.

*Journal of Medical Virology* 92, no.4, 22 January 2020<sup>1</sup>

It is indeed in the nature of laboring to bring [wo/]men together in the form of a labor gang where any number of individuals labor together as though there were one, and in this sense, togetherness may permeate laboring even more intimately than any other activity. But this collective nature of labor, far from establishing a recognizable, identifiable reality for each member of the labor gang, requires on the contrary the actual loss of all awareness of individuality and identity; and it is for this reason that all those values which derive from laboring, beyond its obvious function in the life process, are entirely social.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*<sup>2</sup>

A 'virus' is defined in the *Oxford Dictionary* as an infectious, often pathogenic agent or biological entity which is typically smaller than a bacterium. It is able to multiply only within the living cells of a host animal, plant, or microorganism. Colloquially: a virus infection.<sup>3</sup> 'Coronavirus' is described as the genus of enveloped, single-stranded RNA viruses which have prominent projections from the envelope, and are pathogens of humans, other mammals, and birds. They typically cause gastrointestinal, respiratory, or neurological disease.<sup>4</sup>

SARS-CoV-2 is a coronavirus with the inherent feature of mutation, recombining and changing surfaces, thus adapting efficiently and spreading from animal-to-animal-to-person-to-person in its cross-species transmission route.<sup>5</sup> Having at present been transmitted to and within 146 countries, areas or territories, the Covid-19 pandemic disease essentially changes the becoming processes a self has already undergone, the flexible positions it has already assumed.<sup>6</sup> Shifting a-self to there, everywhere, the pandemic disturbs, and suggests an already intermediate, non-identificatory site of the/this self towards new sequential boundary un/makings. From a differential beginning position, this essay discusses the reconfigurings, reality-making possibilities, that Covid-19 brings about.

Covid-19 is an unembellished agential cut enacted by intra-actions, a cut-together apart between in/human/in/organic entities producing temporal boundaries and properties of its components. Decomposing/recomposing, it enacts local resolutions within phenomena, through which a temporal separability of exteriority emerges.<sup>7</sup> Intra-actions do not exist apart from intra-active performances, and Covid-19 phenomenon is here suggested to be considered as an agential cut enacted by various intra-actions and performances.

An intra-action still takes place and unfolds, termed Covid-19. The SARS-CoV-2 properties and mutative paths, the what *is/will become*, are to a degree obscure, partly recognized by its effects in the body. The virus's features are not yet conclusive, and its mutative processes continue to produce new formative outcomes, as it spreads from human to human. 'Covid-19' does not denote a settled known territory, but the boundary setting of a disease phenomenon; or otherwise, an agential cut's inauguration from the scientific world, and acknowledgement of its reality-re/making dynamics. The medical community discusses its properties, and how SARS-CoV-2 appears to belong to the Betacoronavirus family, which the evidence shows are bat viruses. It transformed into new configurations through an intermediate host, perhaps a pangolin, and then spilled over to a human. The new virus within the human cell, known as a zoonotic virus, quickly invaded/es the human immune system but also mutates rapidly, changes surfaces, for its effective, contagious human-to-human course of infection.

Enacted by SARS-CoV-2, an intra-action between bat and intermediate host viruses, and human cells, 'Covit-19' denotes a pause in a viral mutating cross-species process; a designation for a virologic content and its effects under scientific examination; the delineation of a boundary setting to what probably *is/may become*. This encryption of/between the virologic community assists laboratory research, probability models in the search for identification/treatment/vaccination as well as a commonality among members of the medical field. 'Covit-19' though is a highly negotiated, flexible boundary of a complex mutating viral journey and its effects, as zoonotic coronaviruses consist of enduring un/doings in new cell grounds and genius re/configurations.

In contrast to it, 'virus' in its colloquial use delineates harder territories, patterning an inside and an outside. In the common sense of the word, a biological entity is transformed into a boundary production/re-definition agent that temporarily demarcates an infectious biological outsider, and an inside, the body and its organic parts. Alternatively, it inscribes an act of invasion which itself recalls/produces boundaries, implying an attacking other and an assaulted self – a hostile agent of nature and a human body. Boundary production effects are enacted at the exact moment when this body *is/may become* infected; when the fantasy of a healthy human body re/vitalizes through its un/real reckoning with a bioterrorist stranger. Cultural imaginaries of ongoing/historical accounts of biopolitics mechanically re/surface when one thinks about/through it. Yet viruses attach, multiply, mutate and behave queerly within the body; being hostile or symbiotic, they obtain highly complex physical non/borders in the un/invaded body entity/ies.<sup>8</sup>

The Covit-19 phenomenon includes a high percentage of human animals that are/will potentially be hosting SARS-CoV-2, living in areas with positively tested cases but also in the global everywhere. Functioning in living cells, this virus-stranger may now be enjoying jumping into us, attaching/mutating on/in cells in the mouth and throat topographies of our interior, without doing any harm. Some SARS-CoV-2 may not be so ravaging; they may not attack cells or may find our immune system, alarm system, in/accommodative. Alternatively, they may be moving freely towards the south, our respiratory system topography, hijacking a local receptor, multiplying/mutating in the local cells, and spreading as multiple/diverse entities in the host area. Medically identified symptoms will then appear in the lungs.<sup>9</sup>

A secret conspiracy may take place inside the body, and the virus's invasive performance, if any, will only be exposed within the un/defined incubation period; how long do fifteen days, a month or a 'perhaps' last? A test cannot safeguard an either/or physical state; Covit-19 is an accelerating phenomenon at present and the body may be visited immediately after. A clear physical condition is the perverse privilege of bodies with severe symptoms. Until then/when,

the any-self becomes an un/recognized territory; a strange site, like this virus; re/adjusting self/present/past/futures from a pulverized in-between position, of healthy/unhealthy. While this agent may already reside within - it may be a friend/foe, a now friend/a terrorist after, but now and then is when - it provokes and invites a process of re/naturalizing, materializing, sensing the borderless-ness of space/time/matter and of the complex ecology of the body world besides or because of its fragility. The body's real or sensed fragility intra-acts with viral contagiousness, the increase of the positively tested and death cases, and the present/future cooccurring hospitalizations of citizens, to which the national health care systems have been/are/will be unable to respond. All of them are part of what Covit-19 space/time/matter entails.

An ambiguous assemblage of living and non-living microscopic entities is already part of the interior body world. The world that the Covit-19 creates is comprised of un/living particles that continuously and radically un/do their boundaries: from the self/me, to the accumulative territorial us, to a global we; along with performances in the national and global social, political and economic domains that intra-act with each other and with the self/us/we. The above performances indicate actions in the inter/national health system/s, organizations, governments, economic model, practices and policies; they intra-act with/are filtered by intermediate media, social and news agents, and the official agents of the afore-mentioned domains.

Covit-19's force of destabilizing/redefining space/matter re/activates relational cognitive faculties about the invisible to the eye bodily interior and its transformations; about the dynamics of an un/defined inner/constituency of our body; about its distance or proximity to other matter (that may be part of the inside). Decomposing/recomposing territorial un/boundaries and their integral ideas, it urges the reprocessing of what living and non-living thingness is, blurring the distinction between coronavirus and computer virus.

Indeed, the corona- and the computer virus - defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as a program or piece of code which when executed causes itself to be copied into other locations and typically has a detrimental effect, such as corrupting the system or destroying data - have identical effects.<sup>10</sup> They both disrupt our mental system with its rational understanding of naturality and artificiality, of any inner/outer limits of some invading/invaded matter, of the borders between natural, social and computer sciences, and of our shared conventions. In the Covit-19 cut, frenzied, concurrent un/doings change the inside/outside/micro/macro landscape dynamics towards coexistence/exchange/multiplicity/overlap; Covit-19 produces time.

Enacted by cross-species viral intra-actions, and again by intra-active performances, the Covid-19 sweeps the body world. Its unit of transfigurations *is* the *body*, turning this phenomenon into a dynamic interiorized world view departure point. It swings the self in a sequential boundary un/making process, towards the queerness of the ultramicroscopic un/living components of the un/infected bodily interior. It relies on the body's indeterminate fragility and hybrid composition as our interior landscape is simultaneously strange and familiar, human and inhuman, un/living, indefinite in its component's boundaries and properties. It enables bodily relating to other, near and distant, strange and familiar entities, and wholeness, due to the ecosystem's common properties. From that internalized body world ecology position, the Covid-19 highlights the body world ecology system as a field of un/does for wholeness to become. An alarming and creative agency of what it is/was/will be, Covid-19 tears down the walls that contain disciplinary thought and action, and forces into hybrid intermediate positions of self-identifications with all entities. This de/stabilizing creative force is the most promising, collective, and liberating site of integral dynamics that the new Covid-19 body world ecology entails.

---

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wei Ji, Wei Wang, Xiaofang Zhao, Junjie Zai and Xingguang Li, "Cross-species transmission of the newly identified coronavirus 2019-nCoV," *Journal of Medical Virology* 92, no.4 (April 2020), first published: 22 January 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmv.25682>.

On 11 February 2020 the World Health Organization named the new virus 'SARS-CoV-2' (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2) and the disease that it causes 'COVID-19' (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2), herein 'Covid-19.'

[https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-2019\)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it).

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p.213.

<sup>3</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223861?redirectedFrom=virus&>.

<sup>4</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/266178#eid42789677>.

<sup>5</sup> Chen Wang, Peter W Horby, Frederick G Hayden and George F Gao, "A novel coronavirus outbreak of global health concern," *The Lancet* 395, no.10223 (February 2020), first published: 24 January, 2020, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30185-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30185-9); Kristian G. Andersen, Andrew Rambaut, W. Ian Lipkin, Edward C. Holmes and Robert F. Garry, "The proximal origin of SARS-CoV-2," *Natural Medicine* (2020), first published: 17 March, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-0820-9>.

<sup>6</sup> "World Health Organization, Esri | WHO,"

<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/685d0ace521648f8a5beeeee1b9125cd>;

"WHO/ World Health Organization Emergency Dashboard,"

<https://extranet.who.int/publicemergency>;

<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus>.

---

<sup>7</sup> Karen Barad, "Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart," *Parallax* 20, no.3 (2014): 168-187, 168. Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no.3 (2003): 801-832, 815. Karen Barad, *Meeting The Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and The Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2007). "Three Minute Theory: What is Intra-Action?" (available online: 19 November 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0SnstJoEe>. For a synoptic account of performative materialism (in correlation to the vibrant and negative new materialism, and for materialism's historical traces), see Christopher N. Gamble, Joshua S. Hanan and Thomas Nail, "What is New Materialism?", *Angelaki* 24, no.6 (2019): 111-134, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anpedi.2020.02.001>.

<sup>8</sup> "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), latest information from the World Health Organization about coronavirus" – "The Science Behind the Coronavirus, the complete series," (available online: 18 March 2020), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddlRvqhGdPk&feature=emb\\_rel\\_pause](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddlRvqhGdPk&feature=emb_rel_pause).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, "COVID-19 | Corona Virus: Epidemiology, Pathophysiology, Diagnostics," (available online: 15 March 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWzbArPgo-o>; Viola Vogel, "Reducing the risk of infection," [https://ethz.ch/en/news-and-events/eth-news/news/2020/03/zukunftsblog-viola-vogel-reducing-the-risk-of-infection.html?fbclid=IwAR3eXSm3-uQg6UmE\\_cGqScsUB0\\_NBqpUH3Vj2KUM2--bfv\\_1mhKuRSS6DjA](https://ethz.ch/en/news-and-events/eth-news/news/2020/03/zukunftsblog-viola-vogel-reducing-the-risk-of-infection.html?fbclid=IwAR3eXSm3-uQg6UmE_cGqScsUB0_NBqpUH3Vj2KUM2--bfv_1mhKuRSS6DjA).

<sup>10</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223861?redirectedFrom=virus&>.

Thanks to Angie Biba, Molecular Biology, D.Phil. for useful comments, and to Blanka Amezkua for reading thoughtfulness.