

biennale.py – the return of the media hype

In the Slovenian pavilion at the Venice Biennale a group of artists and hackers, 0100101110101101.ORG and EpidemIC, is exhibiting a new computer virus called ,biennale.py'. The announcement of this piece of net.art has caused a kind of sensation, and a big crowd came to the opening in order to see the virus. Cornelia Sollfrank talked to 0100101110101101.ORG in Venice

1 June 2001

C.S.: Could you please first explain what a virus is?

01: Computer viruses are self-copying programs which behave according to the modus operandi of biological viruses: they attack an ,organism' (a computer) by installing themselves inside and become active when the program is executed.

C.S.: What is special about your virus?

01: ,biennale.py' is the first virus ever written in Python language. Many developers think that Python will be the language of the future. It is multiplatform, but not easy to write. ,biennale.py' is a 47 line program that attaches itself to all files and software which are written in Python language (so ending with .py or .pyw), which means it is only able to survive in Python environments.

C.S.: Is there anything else special except the fact that it is the first .py virus?

01: Yes, it has been made in absolute transparency. We announced beforehand what we were going to do. Our names and domains are written in the code. This is a big difference to the traditional cracking scene. Additionally, before starting to spread the code, we sent it to all anti-virus software houses, together with an explanation of how to erase it. The main goal of our virus is just to survive. And, it can better survive when it doesn't do any harm to the host. If it would kill its host, it would die itself, too. So, it sucks energy, but tries to stay invisible as much as possible. It is only safe as long as nobody discovers it. ,biennale.py' is completely invisible. It just installs itself in the background.

C.S.: You have mentioned before that Python is not widely spread. This also means that your virus is not very viable and quite harmless. It doesn't have many potential hosts.

01: Of course adding a piece of new code to a software might always damage it, but this is not its main purpose. Additionally, Python is only useful on servers, which are usually run by professionals who know how to trace and treat a virus.

C.S.: That means ,biennale.py' would never infect personal/ private/ home computers?

01.: Probably not, at least not this version. Maybe in future when the language will be also used on PCs, there might be a danger. As we have already said, its main goal is not to damage computers, otherwise we wouldn't be here talking about it publicly.

C.S.: So, basically, ,biennale.py' is a very peaceful virus, and exactly the opposite of what has been announced in your press release where it has been called "evil" and capable of "causing chaos"?

01.: The press release was not written by us, and anyway it said that "A virus is usually considered evil, causing chaos...", not referring to ,biennale.py', but to the usual hysteria that spreads among computer users. We are not interested in damaging a computer, but more on the media effect viruses have. You often have these virus warnings on the net which mostly turn out to be pranks. People are hysterically spreading these messages without verifying them, and we simply work with the hysteria, with the media attention a virus automatically gets. ***

Additionally, by showing the code in the pavilion, by printing it on t-shirts and post cards, we want people to come close to it, and so to demystify the aura of a virus. They can find out what it looks like, and that it works exactly as any other software.

C.S.: I think it is part of the hysteria that most people do not know how computers function beyond the graphical interface. In this sense, it doesn't make much sense to show the code, because not many people will be able to read it, and to make sense out of it. Probably, you could show any piece of software, and make most people believe, that it was a virus! Isn't this just another step of mystification, to pretend transparency, but in fact confront people with code they cannot decipher?

01.: The idea was to let people get the hang of viruses. And even this interview is part of the mystification. Everybody who is reading it will automatically be part of it, but mystification is always better than didactics.

C.S.: Actually, I am hoping that my interview will contribute to filtering out your strategies, intentions, and motivations, instead of stupidly reproducing any hype or hysteria. That is why

I would like to continue talking about the code. Let's keep the question of whether or not your work demystifies viruses open...

The code appears in three different versions in the pavilion: It is printed in large letters on a banner (3:4m), it is to be seen on a computer-monitor (the computer cannot be operated), and, interestingly there is 10 golden CD-ROMs hanging framed on the wall, which also contain the virus. Why did you choose these forms of aestheticization for the virus?

01.: It's a matter of visibility. To reach more people, you need more means: websites, t-shirts, postcards, canvases, articles, tv shows, any medium is effective to reach our goals.

C.S.: In the press release you say that 'biennale.py' has especially been conceived for the Biennale. Was it a commissioned work?

01.: Not directly, but we spent part of the money we got as our fee from the Biennale on the project. In addition, this year's Biennale is sponsored, amongst others, by Microsoft. Therefore, we could conclude that our virus has been sponsored by Microsoft.

We were interested in checking out how free we were regarding the work we wanted to present here. Writing a virus is not illegal, but spreading it is illegal. The author is not responsible for what other people do with it. We gave our virus to the Biennale and asked them to put the code on their website. And they did it. Technically, they are spreading the virus as much as we are. We are interested in the conflict that evolves when we offer a piece of work which is illegal to a big institution which has invited us. They have to accept it and at the same time they have to take the responsibility for it. Furthermore, the virus is being spread by the people who wear the t-shirts with the code. Theoretically, they could also be sued, as well as all the magazines and websites such as 'Domus', 'Mute', or 'Wired' which are going to print the code of the virus.

C.S.: That means you yourself try to stay on the safe side, and make mostly others do the dirty work for you?

01.: Exactly.

C.S.: But, you are just playing with the notion of crime. Taking a closer look shows that you are doing nothing illegal. You just let other people spread your harmless virus! That's it.

01.: Yes.

C.S.: I would like to compare your work to an action of the German artist Ulay, who had announced in the 70s in an art magazine that he was going to steal a painting from a museum. Nobody had taken him serious until he had, in fact, stolen a 19th century painting from the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. He had brought it to a Turkish family in Berlin Kreuzberg where they hung it on their living room wall. In terms of transparency and crime this action has parallels to yours, but the difference is that Ulay actually committed a crime, and that he personally has been made responsible and sued for this 'art crime'.

01: Even if we have always considered this action as one of the most interesting ever, we definitely prefer Erik Hobijn's theft of a drawing by Keith Haring from the Stedelijk Museum in 1983: not only he didn't go to prison, but he even got a ransom.

C.S.: What would your exact goal be? You're doing nothing criminal, and you are making your action explicitly as artists in an artcontext. That's why nobody would sue you in the end, and if, you would even profit from it for your own propaganda. Furthermore, your action here will not have any influence on further criminalization of hackers and crackers. And honestly, don't you think that the art system lives on the production and celebration of taboo breaking? The more radical art seems to be the better for the institution, at least, as long as it does not cause real trouble—like your virus.

01: This is the same old excuse that mediocre artists use to justify their arty-farty work. Our action could set a precedent, so that in future cases viruses could be declared as works of art.

C.S.: Do you mean that any programmers who cause troubles and serious damage with viruses etc. should refer to your action and call themselves artists in order not to be made responsible for what they were doing?

01: Yes.

C.S.: Sorry, but this sounds naive to me. Who defines that somebody is an artist? It is a complex process of self-proclamation, acting, reference, and acceptance by a system. I would doubt that a judge would be willing to accept that a dangerous virus-programmer suddenly has turned into an artist, referring to your precedent. Maybe, the only way would be, if you are really serious with that concern, that you declare future virus writers, who are sued for what they're doing, as members of your group, i.e. the guy who has recently been sentenced in Bologna. You already have the legitimation of the art system, so it might turn into a really interesting case in terms of checking the limits of art conception.

01: Thanks, we'll keep this for the next Biennale.

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(In) | Of_#??oubt that the people you pretend to work for find out at all about your action.
Although there are national differences, the worlds of hackers, artists and political activists
are pretty much separated. There is not just different motivations behind these different
activities, but often fundamentally different strategies in following goals, which seem not to
go together very well. For example, political activists often tend to understand art as a source
to deliver mere illustrations of their goals, or they are afraid that their political credibility
might be reduced when their battle is related to art.

01: While most people think in watertight compartments, some of the most interesting and
succesful actions are produced by the combination of different knowledges. Have a look at
Mongrel, I/O/D/, Electronic Disturbance Theatre, Rtmark, Surveillance Camera Players,
Negativland, just to mention a few examples. Making the hacking, art and activist scene join,
you obtain a bomb. This is necessary not only for technical reasons, but also for marketing
and selling. One of our goals at the Biennale is to sell the virus, to make money out of it.

C.S.: How much are the CD-ROMs?

01.: 1.500 USD each.

C.S.: It is now one week after the opening. Have you already sold any copies?

01.: We have already sold two of them to private collectors.

C.S: Is this what you mean by having/placing a bomb? Creating and selling a product which
generates money?

01: A bad idea perfected is better than a good idea attempted.

C.S.: Thank you for the conversation. I am looking forward to your future bombings;-)

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*** Subject: help

Date: Wed, 13 Jun 2001 11:07:43 +0200

From: "Carolyn R. Miller"

To: biennale.py@0100101110101101.ORG

I think I may have gotten the biennale.py virus from the website of your collaborator, 0100101110101101.ORG. I read the press release, which was circulated on AIR-L and visited both websites, but at the

0100101110101101.ORG website I got caught in an approval loop that seemed to tell me that "now we're in your computer." I certainly did NOT know when I went to the site that this would happen and I did not voluntarily download any virus.

48 hours later or so I started having major problems. I run a MacG3, OS 8.6. I can't find any information on an internet search about how to get rid of the virus, so I hope you can tell me what to do.

Thanks,

Carolyn Miller

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quote from the hacker dictionary (jargon file):

virus /n./

[from the obvious analogy with biological viruses, via SF] A cracker program that searches out other programs and `infects' them by embedding a copy of itself in them, so that they become Trojan horses. When these programs are executed, the embedded virus is executed too, thus propagating the `infection'. This normally happens invisibly to the user. Unlike a worm, a virus cannot infect other computers without assistance. It is propagated by vectors such as humans trading programs with their friends (see SEX). The virus may do nothing but propagate itself and then allow the program to run normally. Usually, however, after propagating silently for a while, it starts doing things like writing cute messages on the terminal or playing strange tricks with the display (some viruses include nice display hacks). Many nasty viruses, written by particularly perversely minded crackers, do irreversible damage, like nuking all the user's files.

In the 1990s, viruses have become a serious problem, especially among IBM PC and Macintosh users (the lack of security on these machines enables viruses to spread easily, even infecting the operating system). The production of special anti-virus software has become an industry, and a number of exaggerated media reports have caused outbreaks of near hysteria among users; many users tend to blame everything that doesn't work as they had expected on virus attacks.

Accordingly, this sense of 'virus' has passed not only into techspeak but into also popular usage (where it is often incorrectly used to denote a worm or even a Trojan horse). See phage; compare back door; see also Unix conspiracy.