

The
Pandemic
Community

01. Welcome to the pandemic community, a form of social belonging structured by the participatory and prophylactic logic of networked machines. The aim of life in the pandemic community is to be intimately “in touch” yet safely out of reach, to be fully networked in hygienic isolation and thus to be fully isolated by hygienic networks.

02. All life that had been organized at the resolution of the institution—the university, the factory, the office, the hospital, the prison—is now organized at the resolution of network addresses. In the pandemic community, social life, work life, school life, and political life all contract into domestic life before exploding into networked life. Everything that had managed to fugitively escape the digital capture of networks regretfully submits and connects.

03. The abundance of newly unstructured time in the pandemic community rapidly overflows with the abundance of notifications, advertisements, updates, alerts, messages, pings, and invites of network time. If prior to the pandemic a life might pass through various institutions over the course of a day, becoming a worker, a consumer, a patient, and a student in turn, now a life can formally assume all of these positions simultaneously as tabs in browsers, as apps on devices, and as software on networks. Subjectivities algorithmically flicker on and off ceaselessly as database entries.

04. In the pandemic community, the risk of contagion is displaced by networks onto racialized and sexualized others who cannot not work. Warehouse stockers, truck drivers, custodial workers, grocery clerks, hospital staff, garbage collectors, and gig contractors are the material foundation for maximally networked and minimally ambulatory domestic life. What cannot be streamed is compensated for by a mobile class that is as precarious as contact is contagious, as essential as it is expendable.

05. The pandemic community reimagines domesticity as the networked synthesis of safety and efficiency, an integrated and interoperable site where the spatial and temporal division between productive and reproductive labor can be overcome. In confined yet connected homes, lives can sleep, eat, parent, work, drink, cook, fuck, teach, and stream in controlled and disciplined environments. Whether performed at home or performed to sustain the homes of others, all labor is now domestic. Those lives whose homes are themselves hostile due to unaffordable rent, domestic abuse, or overcrowded buildings are abandoned as statistically predictable but ultimately discardable casualties, while those who are homeless never even enter the equation.

06. The pandemic community is not a community of bodies, but of data. As more of life comes to be networked, networks know more about life, and as more of life comes to be known by networks, networks hold more power over life. The reciprocal production of knowledge and power upon which disciplinary institutions were founded is fully automated in the pandemic community. All actions performed on networks produce surplus data which—through its accumulation—ultimately returns as a weapon against life. Politics are dispensed with as another technical problem.

07. Before the pandemic, the privileged cultural form was activity that exceeded networks. All that occurred “in real life” and “away from keyboards” was fetishized, even if eventually it also came to circulate on networks. In the pandemic community, the network itself assumes the place of privilege. Cultural institutions of every kind lay off staff and lease servers, cancel shows and commission content. Social life is translated into network life in a participatory and impromptu fashion. Following from the convergence of aesthetics and cybernetics, the pandemic community remakes culture according to the following truisms: “All that networks is good, and all that is good networks” and “The good life is the networked life.”

08. In the pandemic community, capitalism cannot sustain itself and so it is simulated. A deluge of stimulus packages, zero interest loans, and payment suspensions reanimate the economy in virtual form, where the massive subtraction of global labor is balanced by the massive multiplication of global debt. The political suspension of the capitalist economy and the technical simulation of capitalist relations are undertaken only in preparation for the eventual arrival of a post-pandemic world where the contradictions of capitalism can be made real again. Until then, the pandemic community lives the virtualized precaritization, dispossession, and privation of capitalism as part of a networked rehearsal, where the simulation of capitalist markets also simulates their violence.

09. The language of the pandemic community is the language of protocols. The synchronized and sequenced exchange of data between network addresses, the coordinated cascade of binary flips, is a technical means of rendering life numerically determinate. Language is captured as machine-readable characters in order to analyze and monetize it as communication, while consciousness is captured as clicks and scrolls in order to measure and manipulate it as attention. Even death can only be meaningfully understood numerically in the pandemic community, captured as statistics and then visualized as a pixelated series of graphs, curves, and maps. Living and dying are rendered formally interchangeable to the extent that they are both captured within the abstraction and mediation of networks.

10. The destructive forces of the pandemic community are simultaneously the condition of possibility for immensely productive pandemic processes, and everything produced to defend life from contagion may come to serve as a model for post-pandemic life generally. By the time treatments emerge, herd immunity develops, and a vaccine arrives, the global economy will have been entirely reorganized and the novel infrastructures, apparatuses, and networks constituted for the pandemic will already have been well instantiated. Among the most consequential outcomes of the pandemic will not only be the many lives lost to the virus, but also the total reinvention of the very forms within which lives are lived.

11. Whatever works in the pandemic community ultimately works against life. The idleness that characterizes the potentiality of life is understood by the pandemic community as a potential that, if not made productive, threatens to ultimately destroy the pandemic community. In other words, the pandemic community sees the productive and destructive potentials of life as two expressions of the same potential. The demand that we continue to study without pause, that we virtually rush back to work, that our lives go on(line) in networked form, are articulated so urgently now only because in a pandemic that has deprived life of its social uses, life appears to threaten society totally. The zero point of life beyond the pandemic community thus becomes life itself, life beyond any particular use.

12. In the pandemic community, our capacity to know ourselves and one another—to know our situation—is wholly mediated and structured by networks. The algorithms and protocols which compose networks are not only structured by the thoughts of programmers, but also structure thought that occurs conjunctively with and on networks. In such conditions, the examined life can only take shape as a networked examination which never fails to validate its own assumptions more concretely: life lived on networks will always only rediscover itself as networked life. If the network form is totalizing in this sense, our task changes from knowing what we are to refusing what we are.

13. As the last of these words are being typed, a new activity has begun to emerge in cities across several continents which suggests the existence and endurance of life that exceeds and escapes the pandemic community. Every evening, people outside of windows, on porches, and from rooftops have begun hollering, banging on pots and pans, and playing music to and for one another, an activity that in its own way has become contagious. This collective gesture is intended to celebrate those who risk their lives to sustain us all, but also is a way of sonorously finding one another in the cacophony of a dispersed but assembled crowd. Beyond the death, depression, and desperation that course so thickly through the heart of the pandemic community, people cry out to one another for what cannot be found on their networks at home, for life that does not just simply live, but is worth living.

Nil Mata Reyes is an aesthetic conspiracy in the age of network transparency, a fugitive assemblage in the age of surveilled individualism, a toxic asset in the age of financialized debt.