

Blood Money:

Paul D. Miller on REPOhistory's *Circulation*—Art Aimed at the Heart of the World Market for Blood



In *Blood: An Epic History of Medicine and Commerce*, Douglas Starr's classic collection of essays on the history of blood, Starr claims that "The story of blood is one of metamorphosis, of a liquid that became symbolically transformed as society learned how to deconstruct and manage it . . ."

As a substance that lies at the heart of all that we consider human, blood is a fascinating metaphor for how much we are alienated from our technologically mediated selves in the Information Age. Starr's history of blood as commodity and human essence weaves a telling tale of how we have changed under the impact of technology. Picking up where Starr leaves off, blood can be seen as a metaphor for the symbolic exchanges that underlie contemporary culture's exponential abstraction of individuality and personal identity.

REPOhistory <www.repohistory.org> is a collective of theoreticians and digital artists who work within the conceptual framework of the urban semiotic landscape, using materials such as signs and mass mailings. However, in a project aptly titled *Circulation*, they attempt to bring back some degree of physicality to the exchange of art as a commodity in the world of international finance, with a Net-based critique of the market forces at work in the flow of blood through Manhattan.

Conceived and directed by Greg Sholette, *Circulation* embraces everything from student tales of blood being sold for yarn and thread to determining the price of blood in comparison with oil. On the open market in Manhattan, for example, blood retails for somewhere between \$150–200 per unit, and in 1998, the combined value of whole blood products and plasma was

Meryl Meisler's *Blood Flows Like Water*. From the online zine *The Bleeding Edge*. Meryl Meisler, © 2000.

in the range of \$18.5 billion.

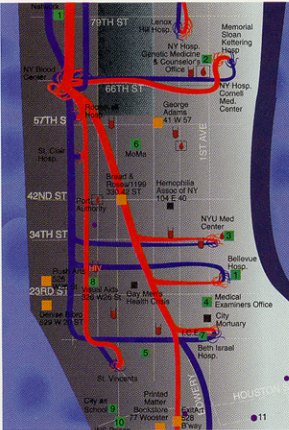
The historic precedents are just as intriguing. In 1776, in his groundbreaking book *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith presented the notion of money as an abstraction of blood flowing through the arterial circuits of the nations of the world. Even earlier, David Harvey described the flow of blood as a mechanical process in his 1628 tome *Anatomical Essay on the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals*. If the way commodities flow through contemporary culture is any indication, the routes money moves through as it pumps its way around the body electric are almost parallel to the processes Harvey described so long ago.

Utilizing story elements culled from the traffic on their website, REPOhistory weaves a series of haunting resonances between blood and commerce, mapping a new way to look at the human condition <www.thebleedingedge.org>. As an art project, *Circulation* is an open system that can absorb almost any offering, and many artists have added their voices to the project.

The recombinant nature of *Circulation* mirrors digital culture at large. In a world where genetically engineered cross-species organ transplants have become the experimental playground for the "recombinant body," a new kind of exchange is at hand. Imagine waking up one day in the middle of a scene from Jean Cocteau's 1930 film *Blood of a Poet*, and seeing the number of stories in the blood banks of Manhattan, and you might have a better picture of the REPOhistory view of contemporary artistic production. In Cocteau's film, the protagonist sees a Venus-like statue that is simultaneously both flesh and marble. The statue speaks to the film's hero, and instructs him to make a leap through a looking glass into a strange, surreal world where the laws of probability are suspended and the visionary reigns supreme. On the other side of the mirror, the images are made of "elements" that are transposable—echoes of De Sade, Dalí, Ernst, Picasso, and others all blur together to form a river of images in the young poet's mind. The main char-

acter's reverie is made up of a whirling cyclone of disturbing scenes that derive their basis from Cocteau's drug-addled visions. In the film, actor and director, real and unreal—all certainty, all distinctions between borders—are a blur, an all-encompassing techno-hallucination.

For us—living in a world of *Circulation*—numbers are no longer abstract. For REPOhistory, as for Cocteau's poet, ideas are in the blood—the *Circulation* project remixes the way we think about how numbers and bodies relate to one another. Communion without communication; transubstantiation without transit; circulation without circuits; human beings meshed in a strange web of thoughts and actions divorced from anything remotely human—to improve the flow, perhaps we could all learn a thing



Circulation <www.repohistory.org>.

from REPOhistory's art borne of collective enterprise.

Who is who in a world where almost all aspects of human existence can be sampled and redistributed? This is what REPOhistory asks us with *Circulation*. As with the character in *Blood of a Poet*, the information is in our minds—human essence is what holds it all together: roots and routes, stories and storage, codes and modes, in the world of numbers, it all just flows . . .

—Paul D. Miller

DJ Spooky's Top 11:

Discs in Serious Rotation

1	Freddie Foxxx, <i>Bumpy Knuckles: "Industry Shakedown,"</i> Landspeed Records
2	Divine Styler, <i>WordPower 2: Directrix</i> , Mo'Wax
3	Walter Ruttmann, <i>Weekend Remix</i> , Strunz Records
4	Busta Rhymes, <i>Anarchy</i> , Elektra
5	Kronos Quartet, <i>Caravan</i> , Nonesuch
6	Etoy, <i>Toywar Lullabies</i> , www.toywar.com
7	Toru Takemitsu, <i>Quotation of a Dream</i> , Deutsche Grammophon
8	Spragga Benz, "Fully Loaded," VP Records
9	George Antheil, <i>Antheil Plays Antheil: The Rare SPA Recordings and Audio Documents</i> , Other Minds
10	De La Soul, <i>Art Official Intelligence: Mosaic Thump</i> , Tommy Boy Records
Bonus Beat:	Harry Smith's <i>Anthology of American Folk Music</i> , Volume 4, Revenant Records

URLs

<www.global-vision.org/popex/index.html>
Michael O'Callaghan's "Population Explosion" is a time sculpture: 500 hundred years of increased humanity's numbers, done as a 60-second cycle based on Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion Maps.

<www.stelarc.va.com.au>
Stelarc's critique of the "distributed body" and its interaction with Web culture.

<www.peeps.com/methodmanredman/game>
When it comes to hip hop, there's always a video game aspect to life and death in the new world order. For those with a bizarre sense of humor, there's the online game "Nasty Habits" featuring Redman and Method Man in drag as two nuns seeking to get into the studio for blood therapy. To access the "Nasty Habits" game, you might have to go through the Tupac/Biggie portal.

<www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Location/6102/bigvspacdownload.htm>
Check out Biggie Versus Tupac for the blood game equation.

<www.chocclair.net/arcade/choclatron>
On the exchange of bodily fluids, the game between ladies and gents will never cease, so you might want to check out the infinite levels of "Choclatron," a game where records and sounds are exchanged for sexual favors. Homies beware!

<www.bloodnet.org>
The gateway for all things related to blood online.

<www.memecentral.com>, <www.spacelab.net/~catalj/virus.htm>
Richard Dawkins' landmark essay "Viruses of the Mind"—an intriguing and controversial discussion of how ideas flow through culture.

And last but not least, what discussion of mathematics, numbers, and ideas would be complete without a foray to the Oulipo Workshop for Potential Literature—folks who play games with mathematics, language, and ideas.
<www2.ec-lille.fr/~book/oulipo>