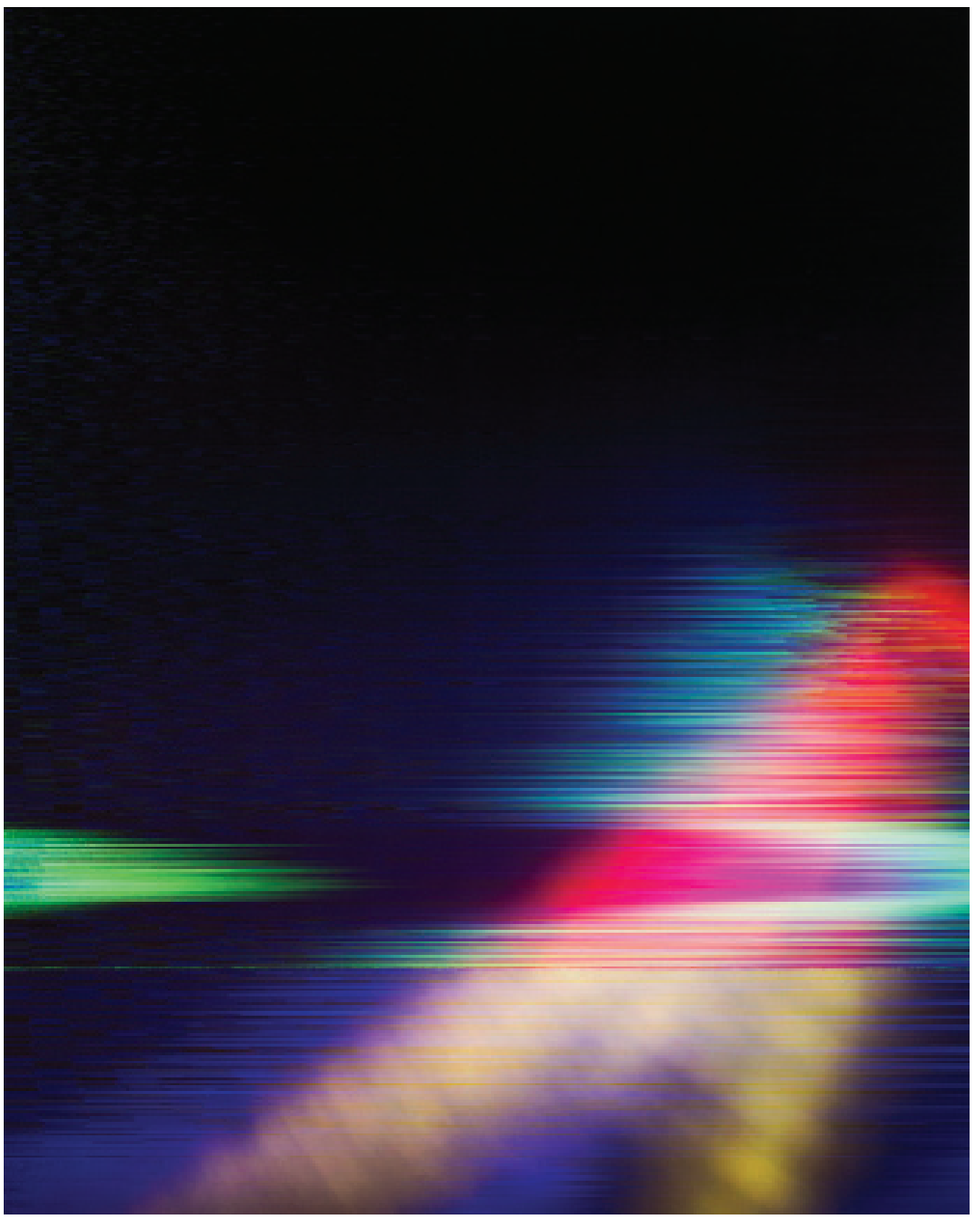

Stuxnet No. 1
2014

All images courtesy
the artist and Callicoon Fine
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Music

Andy Battaglia

James Hoff's music goes viral

To infect, contaminate and corrupt – the language of the virus is unstinting and severe. Viruses attack or bind or otherwise besiege their targets, which stand little chance of going unharmed. Even as a metaphor, the virus screams of wreckage and ruination: it has destruction written into its code; it is an exterminating agent.

New York-based artist and musician James Hoff sees the virus as something less frightful. *Blaster* (2014), Hoff's latest LP for the enterprising electronic music label PAN, is a radical incursion into, and a tribute of sorts to, the culture of dance music. Dance music demands innovation, or at least likes to think it does, and Hoff's work serves as both a challenge and an offering to a movement anxious for mutation by whatever means. The album begins with a blast of noise, a static-slathered howl. Thirty seconds is a long spell to endure with sound operating at such extremes. But then beats begin, reminiscent of the so-called 'glitch' aesthetic of machines on the fritz, but more frenetic and fully formed. Fans of the heady intelligent dance music (IDM) of the late 1990s and early 2000s will hear much to appreciate, but *Blaster* is less fussy and preoccupied with the mastery of craft; rather, it's conceptual and curious in terms of its execution.

There's no extracting the concept from the commodity in any of Hoff's many strands of work. The seven main tracks of *Blaster* were all created by subjecting samples to computer viruses. From hackers and shadowy online archives – most of them 'found surreptitiously', in his words – Hoff has amassed a store of operational viruses with names such as Stuxnet, ILOVEYOU and Anna Kournikova. (He is particularly fond of the 'Morris Worm' for its evocation, for him at least, of the artist Robert Morris.) Using Hex Editor software, Hoff distills his sound files down to their arcane source codes and positions the letters and numbers of virus codes at various junctures throughout – a sort of subtextual punctuation of destruction.

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But 'destruction' puts too fine a point on music that proves, if not pleasurable, at least very enticing for the strangeness of its effects. On *Blaster*, rhythms move and progress with a recognizable suggestion of dance music, even as they splay apart and explode. Dance floors at the most hardline techno clubs in Berlin could be made to move with certain of its patterns, but then, just as the movement starts to coalesce, it might fall into states of utter confusion.

The same effect finds form in another of Hoff's viral sound works, a free downloadable collection of mangled telephone ringtones assembled under the title *I Just Called to Say ILOVEYOU* (2013). Using stock ringtone sounds from Apple's hack-averse iPhone, he infected all the old familiars (the 'marimba', for instance, or the vintage one that sounds like a telephone bell) so that they detonate into brusque ruptures of digital noise. Take a call in a public place on a phone with one of Hoff's ringtones installed, and you'll be stared at with wide eyes.

Hoff's viral experiments are not confined to sound. He has applied a similar process to painting, in a series of striking works that strive to further abstract the notion of abstraction itself. The earliest of them, from his 'Concept' series, which he began last year, enlist a rudimentary virus known as Concept that feasted on software for Microsoft Word. 'Everyone kept calling me a conceptual painter,' Hoff says, 'so I decided to make what I considered a conceptual painting.' His 'Stuxnet' series (2013–ongoing), numbering around a dozen paintings so far, uses the more imposing virus of the same name to transform monochromatic images into fields of streaking colour, with an effect pitched peculiarly between hi-tech spectacle and Gerhard Richter-esque meditation.

This process also figured in *Morris Worm No. 1* (2013), an architectural intervention for which Hoff removed pieces of a wall at Kunsthall Oslo. Coordinates for the cutting were arrived at by infecting the source code of a photograph of the wall with Hoff's beloved Morris Worm, and then carving into the wall according to the corrupted result.

In addition to the virus works and related syndrome paintings (spare abstractions labelled with maladies like *Alien Hand Syndrome, Shrinking Penis Syndrome* and *Photographing the Ruins of Detroit Syndrome*, all 2013), Hoff is also a poet and a champion of the artist book – an interest he maintains with his publishing project Primary Information. The imprint, which Hoff co-directs with Miriam Katzeff, has reproduced the fabled 1970s run of *Avalanche* magazine and issued books by Carl Andre, Destroy All Monsters, Genesis P-Orridge, Dan Graham, Florian Hecker, Lee Lozano, Aram Saroyan and others.

Books are versatile instruments for Hoff, who recently made a new volume of his own: *Everybody's Pixelated*, published in an edition of 250 by Printed Matter. The book is two things at once: firstly, a facsimile of a formative 1937 study of the art of doodling by Russell M. Arandel, called *Everybody's Pixillated*, and secondly, what Hoff himself calls 'a carrying device' for a covert digital memory card hidden in the back, stuck beneath the price tag and filled with three gigabytes of text that hackers use for cracking passwords online.

The idea of the carrying device circulates within Hoff's many different modes of work, which centre on parasites in search of a home. All media are hosts, in the end, and the end is only the beginning of the next phase of transformation.

Andy Battaglia is a writer based in New York, USA. His work has appeared in The Wall Street Journal, The Paris Review *and* The National, *among others.*

James Hoff's solo exhibition at Callicoon Fine Arts, New York, runs from 2 November to 21 December 2014.

Morris Worm No. 1, 2013, installation view at Kunsthall Oslo