

(Extended version of the text printed in the newspaper of the [Truth is Concrete Steierischer Herbst 2012 project](#) on art and activism today).

Oliver Leistert: What is it that started around 20 years ago and is called “net activism”?

Geert Lovink: Internet activism emerged in the eighties when PCs and modems became available. We do not have to repeat the history of APC [1] and other bulletin board system pioneers, which is all well documented. NGOs and social movements were—and still are—early adopters. At first these computer technologies were not used to reach and convince the general audience but for internal coordination purposes. This is why the scene has been rather inward looking, slightly dogmatic or, let’s say, self-referential. It is only with the arrival of the World Wide Web around 1993-95 that this situation changes. New actors enter the stage such as the hacktivists, a group of people who no longer saw the computer as a tool but as theatre stage. They were no longer concerned with the ‘correct’ line that global NGOs embodied, and were not local either. They were annoying and that was precisely what they wanted to achieve. Much like Wikileaks later on the idea wasn’t to please the (online) audience but to seek confrontation and to politicize the internet as a space of contestation.

OL: If we speak about ‘net activism’, we usually refer to the internet as the place or medium of activism. This somewhat implies a genuine sort of activism that could only develop within the net. But if we look at present examples of net activism, there are many forms that developed somewhere else, from print, radio to television and video. What are the differences between earlier media forms of activism and the current ones? What are genuine forms of net activism?

GL: The unique feature of the net is that it thrives on user user involvement. The watershed would be the year 2000. The mistake late 90s dotcom entrepreneurs made was their emphasis on e-commerce; users were seen as consumers. Bloggers, Google and then Web 2.0 start-ups were more clever in that respect. Their question became how users could be seduced to upload something, to say something about themselves. Participation as feedback is the essence of the Net, not some extra feature. Previous media were more focused on content and affect. Cyberspace, to use an old term, has been deeply social from early on. Yes, finding information needs to be efficient. But what users are really looking for is to communicate with others. This is not the case with TV. We did not read a book because of our

desire to talk to the author or discuss other readers. Yet, these days that's that very design principle of all interactive media applications.

OL: Please tell us your favorite recent project, idea or materialization that you consider net activistic.

GL: It is appealing to mention Kony 2012 [2] because this biggest viral video campaign ever, aimed to catch the Ugandan war criminal Joseph Kony is so huge, dramatic and politically incorrect (because they are US-Christian right-wing). Its founder literary went nuts. He got too excited about the overwhelming success of their video (100 million views). This is what we could call the cost of the virtual. Others would say it is the revenge of the real. I still follow Kony 2012, also because of my interest in Uganda (five of my students did research there in 2009, which we put together in a publication). It is interesting to see that the movements that had a real impact have moved away from this level of 'public relations'. Even the online petition campaign Avaaz [3] is careful not to come up with topics that are 'internet-only'. We have reached a stage now in which well-designed online campaigns can easily scale up in no time, very different from 10-20 years ago. Of course I am a fan of The Yesman [4]. They are no doubt the most successful examples of what we in Amsterdam coined 'tactical media'. But I like Uebermorgen [5] as well. They are more dark in an Austrian style, disturbing and, no doubt, better understood within the art context. The more hardcore aesthetic a net art project is, the more political.

OL: Net activism nowadays appears to be rather blurred. From huge NGOs to Anonymous to hackers, political parties and entrepreneurs, many agents try to act as net activists. Where would you say are the boundaries here? Why has it become such a beaten track? How would you differentiate between net activism, advocacy, hacking, online campaigning and other activities that use the net or rely on the internet?

GL: Interactivity has become the leading paradigm. This means that we cannot imagine a website that is not 'activist' in nature. All information has to come alive. Something needs to happen on the screen, otherwise users do not 'stick'. In the past it used to be animated gifs (Olia Lialina's studies on that are fascinating [6]). These days it is the social media add-ons for Facebook and Twitter that turn the 'dead' websites alive. All data has to be part of a project, needs to be visualized and cannot exist on its own. Even the dullest database has to be 'animated'. The thought of the pure raw data *an sich* is unbearable. This has now extended to text in general. We need icons

visuals, moving images, sound bytes. Activists, in close collaboration with artists and designers are leading us into the multi-media age. This has been going on for decades but it is only now that this is becoming mainstream. This is why we witness the crisis of new media arts. The question that fascinates me here is not this mainstreaming as some form of betrayal of originally subversive ideas but why all these media artists and activists are not the heroes of our time. They are sidelined in such a massive way that you have to start thinking about a conspiracy. Is this really their own mistake? How did they become so marginalized? We can't even say they are forgotten. People didn't even know them in the first place. How did this self-marginalization happen? It is not as if no one is using computers, the internet, mobile phones or video.

OL: By saying that interactivity is the common grounds you are pointing out a paradigm of media development. I think this is an interesting answer, but I would like to learn more about the differences within the bouquet of flowers of net activism.

GL: In the late nineties we had this big debate about 'hacktivism', which was about the Denial of Service attacks. Old school hackers objected and said they were destructive for the internet at large and didn't necessarily hurt the target websites because they 'sprayed' in all directions. The collective protest element of hacktivism was important here: let's attack together, at the same time. It was a good example of 'collective intelligence', if you like that term. In certain Anonymous actions late 2010, staged in defense of Wikileaks, you see this element coming back. It is this strange, exciting feeling to sit at home, realizing that you are part of that virtual crowd. The use of chats, to give you an idea of the collective spirit and the overall mood, is important at such a moment. Hacking into a site and change its content I thought was a bit childish. As some of you know I have myself always been interested how free and pirate radio emerges. I am not interested only in internet, which I more see as a meta or *übermedium*. I have fond memory of the golden days of Indymedia when it was wild and out-of-control. In general, I do not like if computer networks display the sadness of everyday life of insulated activism. I love campaigns where infrastructures and expertise of a wide variety of strangers get connected. In my case that was Press Now in early 1999 during the Kosovo crisis and the bombing of Ex-Yugoslavia and more recently the radio stuff we do with Migrant-to-Migrant radio [7].

OL: Another possibility is to relate net activism to neo-liberal style of work, where you are always part of projects and be flexible. The immaterial labour debate and how netactivism plays a double sided role there.

GL: I do not think of net activism as 'digital labour'. Maybe that's romantic of me but I see as part of life, civil society, as a common desire, something that is inevitably a fun thing to do. It is not a duty, let alone a punishment. If activism becomes an obligation it is time to quit. Net activism is all about experimentation: what is public space today, how can we organize ourselves, how can we share and distribute our efforts?

OL: Until the late 1990s net activism wasn't part of popular culture. It remained inside specialized communities, for example hackers or art projects, such as the events that accompanied the Zapatistas' call for an 'intergalactical campaign' leading to online demonstrations co-organized by the Electronic Disturbance Theater [8]. My impression is that back then net activism came out of a precise analysis of specific societal issues like the deportations of refugees. Net activists developed tools to address these issues in the digital domain. These days, as the net has become a more integral part of our life, you find net campaigns for anything imaginable. Is this a shift in the nature of net activism?

GL: Internet itself has become mainstream, used by a vast majority of the population, at least in North-Western Europe. It is neither 'virtual' nor 'cyber' anymore. This might be disappointing but there really is no 'other' world out there anymore. It is as banal and extreme and boring as anything else. At the same time, internet is still new for most users and is still in progress, or, let's say, it is 'changing'—albeit not always in the preferred direction. In my view net activism can only become more interesting because the medium itself is moving into the stage of conflict. Think of Wikileaks, 'cyberwar' with Chinese and Russian hackers, but also aspects of the Arab Spring, hacking drones, tensions over 'intellectual property', the rise of pirate parties and so on. It is a good thing that internet is moving away from the consensus-driven 'governance' model towards a more confrontational form of development in which users, politicians and IT corporations have to take sides. This doesn't mean that I support attacks on the root.

OL: Electronic Disturbance Theater and deportations class campaigns clearly also were pointing to nothing than the real, so to say. The idea then was to provoke a shift in the discourse and to achieve that online demonstrations are considered to fall under the general right of assembly.

GL: The conceptual refinements of the early 2000 no longer exist. We need to first define our attitude towards social media, YouTube and so on before we can move on. To ignore Facebook is, unfortunately, not possible. What we can do is delve into the dark nets of Anonymous, which is a world apart from scenes such as Global Voices [9]. Not so many actors can move between these worlds. That was a problem 20-25 years ago and still remains.

OL: Ever since the success of 'social media' such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, net activism manifests itself inside a commercial zone, whose business model is the surveillance, aggregation, data mining and sales of user's data to anyone interested. This goes hand in hand with a booming advertisement industry which dreams of the perfect targeted advertisement and, even further, a constant digital observation of the user over time by sophisticated tracking algorithms, resulting in surprisingly precise knowledge of friends, habits, choices, preferences, wealth and so forth. On the other hand, for net activists it has maybe never been so easy to reach people. How do 'social media' affect net activism? Who gets empowered here? What new dynamics occur? What is the relation between convenience and net activism? Does it make sense to differentiate between slacktivism and activism?

GL: Slacktivism might be on the rise but so is the more dangerous stuff. Let's not play them out against each other. Like others in my generation I am concerned about the lack of security awareness amongst young people. It was one thing to look down on the 'script kiddies' a decade or so ago but the implications of political hacking these days are of a different order. The betrayal case of the so-called leader of Lulzsec, Hector Xavier Monsegur, should be a clear sign of all of us that can never know who or what is behind some Anonymous cells. I do not believe that net activism has invested too much in social media. We know that traditionally programmers shy away from services such as Facebook and Twitter. It is not cool—we all know that. Just stick to Slashdot, Reddit, Techcrunch. For activists who are into tech it is not much different. In the case of campaigners and NGO folk it might be different. Artists, designers and curators might feel the pressure to represent themselves out there but I wonder how much they have invested in Facebook. Twitter is only used by those who are into journalism and news. The willingness to discuss social media alternatives is there, we clearly see that in the case of the Unlike Us initiative [10].

OL: With the massification of the net and the shift of net activism into

popular culture, governments and institutions invented tools and laws to “civilize” mass net activism and defined legal forms, e.g. online petitions, and illegal forms e.g. the recent DDoS attacks on the German GEMA site by Anonymous. With this, bourgeois concepts of law are transposed to the net ignoring the net’s specific nature such as immateriality or the choice to be anonymous. How does this affect net activists? What core principles of net activism have come under pressure here?

GL: I wouldn’t put it like that. Let’s talk about the unresolved issues, and how the involvement of many more who are now on board can help us to tackle those. Let me begin by saying that all core internet values need to be defended such as the distributed nature of net, resulting in anti-censorship and anti-ACTA campaigns. I have learned to live with the fact that there will not be some heroic anti-capitalist uprising against the monopolistic giants. What we can achieve though is a shift in the mentality how to deal with the ‘free’. We can see this in the positive uptake of crowd funding, but maybe also in the interest in the alternative currency Bitcoin and the rise of micro-payment systems and mobile money outside of the mainstream banking (credit card) system.

What we know from the Unlike Us initiative is that there is a growing interest in collaborative software. Working together, getting things done, together, with a dedicated group, is a great promise of the net, which is going way beyond today’s offline-online dialectics. Many people think this is the next big thing after social media. Facebook might not disappear but will diminish to the level of class mates reunion, dating sites and porn (all reasonable businesses, by the way). I really hope that both users, businesses and governments will undermine Facebook in its efforts to become the default global ID provider because this is a particularly sick business model. Like Google, Facebook will branch out into other directions and might be successful, but that’s something else. Until now, if people talk about Facebook they only refer to their social networking site. With Google that’s no longer the case. But now everyone knows they are doing more than just search. I am saying this because it is slightly confusing the overall situation if we’re talking about the future of ‘social media’.

The other unresolved issue, which I have already mentioned, is ‘alternative revenue models’, the integration of Bitcoin into blogs and social media (not just e-commerce and webshops) and the further development of crowd sourcing a la Kickstarter, also in conceptual terms. The key here is the



discussion where the limit should be of user monetary involvement. What role will there be for local, regional and national governments, banks, pension funds, NGOs, and even venture capitalists (even though I hate their business approach)? Is it too utopian to think that micro-payment systems can play a leading role in a few decades?

OL: Anonymous are recently getting huge mass media attention and appear to be the current pop-cultural common denominator of net activism. How do you see this phenomena?

GL: As you know I am a defender of the anonymous communication culture on the internet (and this is my main objection to Facebook, not so much the privacy aspect). I might even call myself a fan of most Anonymous actions. I hesitate to go for it 100% because of the specific sub-cultural agenda of the image board 4chan, which is so far removed from my own world of critical theory, visual arts and media activism. Don't get me wrong, I do not condemn it. For instance, lolcats are funny. What I dislike is the right-wing populism and resentment culture on websites such as Geen Stijl (NL), one of the most visited sites here in NL. They also do 4chan-type of acts and their cynical humor can be attractive but on the whole I find them really racist, sexist and disgusting. What does it mean if you say that you're a nihilist? It cannot turn into a religion, right? Either you don't believe in anything, and that would include Anonymous itself, or you don't. Anon is the school of activism of our age, beyond left and right, a post-Coldwar product of the neo-liberal post-ideological condition. It is no longer an expression of ignorance and indifference. I like that. At least something happens. I just finished working with Daniel de Zeeuw who wrote his MA thesis with me on this issue. Gabriel Coleman works on it as well, but more from a geek-programmers perspective. We can't expect the Zizeks and Rancieres to say anything about it. They are perhaps too old for this male adolescent material, it is not on their radar, the major thinkers of today are still busy with books and films (which is fine with me, I respect that). It will be up to us to make a cultural analysis of the online reality. Let's take up that challenge. I don't believe it is part of a move towards contemporary fascism but it's not progressive either. Is it justified to speak about a Third Way here? Probably not in the way Tony Blair once did. It is more like a cultural desert. Such environments are no longer moderate and reasonable. You have to let go of the consensus cult and go underground if you want to understand the cynical, paradoxical culture of young people who grow up with all this stuff.

OL: Has Wikileaks changed the way we understand net activism? What will be the long-term effects of Wikileaks?

GL: It is hard to measure the impact of Wikileaks because Julian Assange's extradition out of the UK is still ongoing. Instead of trying to historicize Wikileaks let's talk about the role of whistleblowers and what they can do with the information they want to share with the public at large. I believe it still makes sense to work on a secure website where people can anonymously upload digital files. We should not mix up feature that press agencies and news organizations could provide to the general public with the peculiar faith of Wikileaks with the destiny of its main actors such as Assange, Manning, Domscheit-Berg and Applebaum.

OL: Internet low-cost connectivity is in the hands of roughly 30% of the world population. On the other hand, China nowadays has the largest number of internet users. Additionally, in many countries mobile phones provide connectivity for very large parts of the populations. It seems to have become of huge importance to reflect these shifts. In China net activism is powerful and develops within its own modalities under a censored net. What are your observations of the de-westernization of net activism? What can European net activists learn from countries such as China, India and Brazil?

GL: To be modest, open up to world, learn other languages, develop cultural awareness and be amazed and encouraged by multitude of stories and strategies coming from elsewhere. Go there, invite people from these countries over to your place and collaborate on what you have in common. And that's a lot. The three countries that you list here are quite different. Include Russia and they have zero in common. They are all big and that's relevant from a perspective of access. Just think of the large educational programs that will utilize tablets. They all have economies of scale. However, from a perspective of developing new strategies for net activism that's not necessarily interesting.

Amsterdam/Hamburg, July 2012

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(In 2012 Oliver Leistert finished his thesis on the political rationality of mobile media. He has been a research fellow at the Central European University, Budapest. Currently he works as a mobile media security consultant for NGOs. Together with Theo Röhle he co-edited the book



Generation Facebook, Über das Leben im Social Net, Transcript Verlag, 2011)

- [1] APC: Association for Progressive Communications, <https://apc.org>
- [2] Kony 2012: <http://kony2012.com>
- [3] Avaaz: an online campaigning site, <https://secure.avaaz.org/en/>
- [4] The Yes Men: <http://theyesmen.org/>
- [5] Uebermorgen: <http://www.ubermorgen.com/2010/index.html>
- [6] Olia Lialina: <http://art.teleportacia.org/>
- [7] Migrant-to-Migrant radio: <http://m2m.streamtime.org/>
- [8] EDT: <http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/ecd.html>
- [9] Global Voices: <http://globalvoicesonline.org/>
- [10] Unlike Us: <http://networkcultures.org/unlikeus/>