

Interview with Geert Lovink for Digital Manifesto Archive by Matt Applegate & Izzy To

This email interview was conducted for The Digital Manifesto Archive (<http://digitalmanifesto.omeka.net>). The idea was to talk about the (digital) manifesto genre and tactical media. The questions were raised by Matt Applegate, the archive's creator and Assistant Professor of English and Director of the Writing Concentration at Molloy College on Long Island and Yu Yin (Izzy) To, the archive's coordinator, who's a Ph.D. Candidate at Binghamton University in the Department of Comparative Literature.

**Matt Applegate & Izzy To:** Intellectually and politically, we are interested in two of your coauthored manifestos: The ABC of Tactical Media and your Workspace Manifesto. The ABC of Tactical Media focuses on the nomadic and experimental use of visual and digital media technologies, while your Workspace Manifesto focuses on the manifesto genre—particularly what you call the digital manifesto. We want to ask, is there a bridge between these two manifestos? We wonder if a concern for the manifesto genre emerges from the history and practice of tactical media and prefigures the genre's transformation.

**Geert Lovink:** Historically speaking these two texts we're written in a turbulent and exciting period, in Spring-Summer 1997. This period is considered by some as the 'short summer of internet criticism'. I believe we already used that term at the time as we were acutely aware of the commercial title wave that was ahead of us. Dotcommania was unfolding before our very eyes, resulting in the monopolies we're still dealing with today: Microsoft, Apple, Google, Facebook and Amazon. The two manifestos do not contain a warning as much as they celebrate the flash of 'cultural hegemony' we felt in the mid 1990s when the internet was no longer academic but not yet 100% hyper-commercial. In this in-between period a lot of cultural initiative and networks were created. Coming from media activism, video art, community radio, documentary film, visual arts, you name it, many of us, both in the USA, Europe and a few other countries such as Australia, saw a field opening up, no matter how briefly that aimed to define and defend the Net as a public sphere. We experienced internet as a public utility, somewhat similar to what we now call 'the common', knowing that it would soon be taken away from us by the neo-liberal market policies that were reaching the height of their seductive power. Late 1990s were disastrous in this respect, with so many fatal privatizations (like the selling of the Amsterdam public TV cable network as a concrete example). Already

at the time there were many protest against neo-liberalism. We're talking about 2 ½ years before 'Seattle'.

The two manifestos stress the desire to freely move around. The roaming, nomadic aspect is the 'gay' part of 90s culture, with its rave parties, in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall (but in the midst of the wars in former Yugoslavia). At the time we were not looking for fixed solutions. We enjoyed the 'temporary autonomous zone' in which we were able to play, knowing well that this techno-utopia would be taken away from us, very soon. This freedom was not only in the choice of our means of expression: cable TV, print, CD-ROMs, pirate radios, websites, list serves, parties, debates in real life, etc. but also in terms of the multiple identities that were used and the range of organizational forms we had at display: from virtual campaigns to NGOs, new cultural initiatives, social movements, individual hacks and start-ups to distributed manifestations. And should we mention the avant-garde here, for the art lovers amongst us? Already at the time it was highly disputed if avant-garde movements were able to come into being in the first space, and if so, whether 'net.art' would be one of them—it certainly had some of its characteristics but it was also clear that this was a construct in the first place (but that must always have been the case).

**MA & IT:** As co-creators of the digital manifesto archive, we are particularly interested in your Workspace Manifesto's reflection of the genre, especially in the transition from printed to digital manifestos. You write that the digital manifesto is a hybrid genre (it deploys multiple media at a time), compressed (text demands shortening, cutting selecting), and struggles for attention (exposure). Could you say more about the the features of the digital manifesto, especially how it is the "opposite of the self-referential contemplation from within the system"?

**GL:** The roaring nineties were the multi-media age, in that sense it wasn't all that utopian to make those claims. To practice it was a different matter altogether. How many people write a manifesto together, let's say with Google Docs, put in the effort to include a lot of links in it, promote it through social media, open up the comment space and facilitate an in-depth discussion with the readership/community and on top of that produce a video clip and audio piece to present at the launch? Much more is possible, just think what people a decade later were doing, at the height of the blogosphere. At the time a text would be distributed through RSS feeds, linked to in blog rolls and given further airtime through Digg, Reddit,

Slashdot, Hacker News and you name it. Just look at how much progress we've made in terms of a better understanding what you can and cannot do, given the optimal 100 characters of tweets, the 'ideal' length of blog postings (1,500 words) and the closely monitored frequency of Facebook updates. That the natural eco-system of today's digital manifestos. The popularity of the manifesto-as-form goes back to short attention span of users and the need to communicate in an advertisement-style. I do not see this as a loss, it just requires other skills, how to design zipped thinking. In the past, people indulged in the never-ending rhetorics of gifted speakers who knew how to build up an argumentation. These days the aphorism is making a come-back. What's also necessary is visual literacy. We need to compress complex material and longish trains of thoughts into one multi-layered image. In order to do that we still need the same old critical reflection. In the past there was agit-prop and manipulation everywhere. That's no different today.

**MA & IT:** As an author, how does the legacy of the manifesto inform your decision to author WorkSpace Manifesto? If writing a manifesto, as Janet Lyon states, is to announce one's participation in a history of struggle against oppressive forces, how does the digital manifesto participate in a "convention laden" and "ideologically inflected" genre? You wrote, "[The digital manifesto] creates an ambiguous mode between visibility and virtuality which makes it useless to serious forms of executing power by virtue of its very absence. Paradoxically, only through the fact of its powerlessness and marginality the digital manifesto can claim to speak in the name of superhuman forces." Will you speak more about this paradoxical position? We are thinking about your suggestion that the manifesto claims the impossible, which is "deserving the full field of pragmatic possibilities to the limit where they become truly speculative." How does this limit reveal the virtual, futural quality of the manifesto?

**GL:** Also today, in this very busy age of social media, the manifesto remains a statement, a claim. It is a gesture that something will happen-change is on the horizon. Otherwise, why bother? But obviously something has happened. The paradox of the attention-seeking manifesto embedded in a stream of networks with so many different voices is only becoming more pronounced. This is also known in the digital economy where decentralized networks have led to monopolies such as Google and Facebook. In the blogs era we discussed this as the power law, the unequal distribution of, for instance, attention. Internet culture has yet to deal with this.

**MA & IT:** In recent scholarship, the manifesto genre is characterized as an ineffective and anachronistic mode of political articulation. For instance, in their coauthored Declaration, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri claim that “Manifestos provide a glimpse of a world to come and also call into being the subject, who although now only a specter must materialize to become the agent of change . . . Today’s social movements have reversed the order, making manifestos and prophets obsolete.” Do you think contemporary political movements render the manifesto genre obsolete, or is the digital manifesto perhaps better aligned to address contemporary political issues, upsetting this characterization of the genre?

**GL:** The manifesto gives us a glimpse of the future and points at parallel potentials. It is a proclamation. Hardt and Negri themselves would have loved to be prophets, but their hardcore autonomist audience would not appreciate that. During the sixties people dared to be utopian, but soon after the totalitarian roots of utopia were uncovered and this made it impossible for the following generations to dream. They either became negative (punk) and cynical, or pragmatist and realistic: rage versus boredom. The imagination provides with a third way to open up a temporary space of possibilities.

**MA & IT:** Finally, we would like to take a step back and reflect on both *The ABC of Tactical Media* and the *Workspace Manifesto*. Both manifestos were published about 18 years ago, and while these manifestos are bound to their historical moment, they certainly influence contemporary scholarship and political practice. The Internet has changed significantly since the publication of both manifestos, and emerging concerns for privacy, encryption, and anonymity drive political debates about the Internet’s future. Are there portions of either manifesto that you would update or revise for the present, or do you think the present calls for modes of political articulation and action that stand beyond the scope of *The ABC of Tactical Media* and *Workspace Manifesto*?

**GL:** A lot of work is done to historicize and update the notion of tactical media. The term is still used widely for the simple fact that there are a lot of choices to be made in activist strategies. It is not hard to see why political activities have a visual culture agenda. In 2016 Eric Kluitenberg and David Garcia will bring out a thick and comprehensive anthology on art and activism, to be published by MIT Press. Needless to say that a lot has happened since the turbulent year 2011... If I would update or upgrade one

of them, it would be the Workspace Manifesto. I am still into it. Only recently Sebastian Olma, Ned Rossiter and me wrote On the Creative Question, a manifesto against the 'creative industries' agenda. Even though this was a short text, it was super large in comparison with the micro statements of Twitter. I would update the manifesto with parts on the speed of real-time collaborative writing, antagonistic discourse production and the seductive quality of sloganism, a practice that I still love doing with Dutch designer and director of the MOTI Museum in Breda (NL), having collaborated now for 25 years, and also present at the Hybrid Workspace (Documenta X) in Kassel in 1997 where she was involved in the We Want Bandwidth campaign.

URL: <http://digitalmanifesto.net/LovinkDMAinterview.pdf>

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Links:

*The ABC of Tactical Media*: <http://digitalmanifesto.omeka.net/items/show/42>

*Workspace Manifesto*: <http://digitalmanifesto.omeka.net/items/show/134>