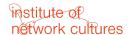Email Exchange between Geert Lovink and Miles Englezou

I received an email with the following request from Miles Englezou:

"Your concept of 'organised networks' reminded me of what I have learned about the brain. I'm currently at the end of a neuroscience master's degree. Incidentally I studied at Vrije Univeriteit Amsterdam, although now I am back home in London. In neuroscience, current thought tends to conceptualise the brain as a hierarchically ordered network which self-organizes into the structure that it is (via a 'push-and-pull' of opposing tendencies towards ordered [inhibited] and disordered [excited] brain dynamics). The end product of this is a fractal-like organisation, where, at the lowest level, you have individual neurons connecting to other neurons to form neuronal groups, which in turn form meta-groups between themselves, which then form meta-meta-groups, etc., with the 'nature' of the function changing (relative to its constituents) and emerging at each level of description.

It seems to me that the internet at the moment does not have a robust or explicit structure. And this seems to be because it does not self-organize. We have to apply 'network organisation' principles ourselves. Do you envisage the organised net having this fractal-like structure? I suppose individuals would form small groups with others based on specific interests or skills, and then meta-groups would form with a new, singular function emerging at each level because of the way the groups are organised. Very large high-level groups would become the net equivalent of the institutions we have today.

I'm looking at how brain organisation changes across different conscious states. Under certain psychedelic drugs, for example, the brain loses its robust structure and becomes more 'random' (everything connects to everything), and as we get closer to normal consciousness you get the appearance of these 'small-world' structures, i.e. the fractal-organisation. The state of the net now is comparable to the 'random' brain state. But the way in which the brain becomes more 'normal' is in a sense just by pruning the long connections and keeping the local connections –

is this how you think, practically, the organised net would be
created, through a sort of 'disconnection' of the excess, 'long-
range' connections we have today (such as the case of mass-
friending on Facebook)?"

And so on. Just brilliant. What to do? I proposed to turn it into a dialogue.
This is what we came up with.

Miles Englezou: What type of network structure do you envisage the
organised net having?

Geert Lovink: We can agree easily that the net is developing in a wrong
direction. Why should the current centralization be inevitable? Let's
presume that we steer the development in a more interesting direction that
caters for diversity and all the terms that you bring in. In our idea what we
go for is social density design. Like in a group or tribe, but different from the
traditional structures. The claustrophobic closeness of the group is more or
less a romantic notion these days. It is something we're longing for but in
reality an unrealistic construct in our busy adult lives. The danger today is
not a fallback into some ancestral destiny. Close ties and intense
relationships still happen, for a variety of reasons but they are accidental,
not technological. Often today we think that the issue is trust. We need to
design trust. But my issue is somewhat different: we need to design
commitment. The trust can follow from there.

ME: Practically, how do you think an organised net will be created? (e.g., by
forming social networks with only 'essential' connections?)

GL: It will be an interplay between software and Zeitgeist. The essential
should come naturally, not as a restriction, let alone a punishment and
should be experienced as a new service layer that empowers us. The current
flatness and bland approach will not last. The like economy has run its
course and too many start to understand its economic logic. The current idea
is still that humanity is stupid and simply deserves Facebook. Right now we
only see 'national' exemptions inside the Great Firewall of China, inside
Russia and Iran but even their alternatives are not based on an alternative
logic. With the slow desintegration of the US-American hegemony and
related globalization models we might see a rise of local and regional
technologies, including different models of social networking. That's the real
potential of the organised network concept: it is practical and beneficial to

many.

I am not thinking about fractal structures, nor of rhizomes. It is much more basic and down to earth. To organise, to get organised means a lot of internal coordination, fast decision making (very likely not through voting) and repetitive work. Organisations are not created out of the blue, they need to be build up, step by step, this takes time but organisations also last, much unlike crowds and network that tend to fall apart so easily.

ME: There is an argument put forward by Bernard Stiegler that manipulation of new media by corporations (such as mass-marketing of personal data, targeted advertising, 'Googlization' of knowledge) has a direct and negative effect on our perception and behaviour. He sees the 'Googlization-effect' being very real and quite dangerous if it continues, insofar as we will become reliant on the network technology, leading to, as he predicts, a loss of individuality. He likens our current state to that of an anthill, where everyone becomes more and more regimented in their behaviours. Do you think the current net is misused by corporations to our psychological detriment? Do you see anything like Nietzsche's 'last man' being realised?

GL: Loss of individuality is something that's easy to spot. I agree with Bernard Stiegler's analysis. But we're not becoming ants, or some bee-hive workers that do what's being told, at least in the West. Let's look at this danger as a potential. New circumstance will bring on new critical potentials. The old culture of 'criticism' fades away and others will emerge. The issue for me is that we're losing track of what we want–and how to express this (in what language). We're not becoming cold, anonymous machines. We're still super human yet confronted with new forms of 'sweet distraction'. The classic 'Bildung' values of the upper classes can no longer be maintained and can only be embodied by a tiny part of a fading aristocracy (most likely NOT the children of the 1%). Reading the same old books, playing classical music instruments, knowing Latin and Greek, knowing poems by heart, discussing Goethe and Voltaire, they are all atavistic hobbies of an elite that is still well off but no longer in charge of the real wealth creation. The 'nouveau riche' simply no longer cares about these outdated 19th century values. Maybe they will play golf one day but that's about it. The problem is not the 'canon' but their true lack of education: the poor technical knowledge.

Nietzsche's Over Man has got nothing to do with Google, nor with our

concerns. Our times are too boring and soft for Nietzsche, too flat, weak and comfortable, as his prediction about the Last Man stated. We are neither going in a solitary direction, nor are we resisting it. This age of warm indifference provokes a state of engaged nihilism. We want something, but what? There is discontent, but what's causing it? The situation is diffused. The Uebermensch would instantly get confused—and irritated, in such a situation. Where is the heroic moment? In the suicide bomb? What is this relaxed catastrophe we're in? There's so much progess, yet so much stagnation. The same with all our networking technologies. Look at our Facebook and what percentage we're using of the internet's potential. Previous generations would have been stunned. So much magic, so much empowerment, and rational power, used for so much garbage, noise, rubbish, nonsense. And all so wonderfully designed. So carefully edited. With so many likes. Drifting nowhere with so much care. We can make instant phone calls to literally all human on this planet, even to those who are drifting on the seas, about to get drawn. Maybe it just take a few generations to explore the true potentials?

ME: A couple of times, you call on artists to "invent new forms appropriate to our information-rich world". Could you elaborate on what you mean by 'forms', and what you expect the artist's role to be in this creation process? Do you mean envisioning new societal structures based on the net, or something more similar to creating traditional visual art to promote ideas? Or perhaps both?

GL: The challenge here is pretty old school. New interfaces, to be used in yet unknown derives, that will create both a new aesthetics and new forms of the social. I am a child of the 1960s in this respect. I believe in the creation of new pathways through a dialectical process in which use hardcore material insights to gain new forms of consciousness. The first artists who get hold of new tools have the unique privilege to use the true potential of a medium in an unbiased matter (because there is no aesthetic language yet). However, not everyone needs to experiment with new forms and new materials. It is not an obligation but an invitation.

I am not concerned about the lack of interest of the global elite in digital arts. We've passed the point of 'new media'. Let them invest all their money in old paintings. In the end, art is an investment for them. Of course they are not interested in the works of today's techno avant-garde and withdraw in conservative options. The arts market looks backward, this is a given. What

is perhaps more surprising is that there is almost no philanthropy that is reaching the arts and theory circles. Artists no longer embody the future. The artistic experimentation is now drying up because there are less and less niches. Everyone and everything is subjected to the same old neo-liberal logic of high rents, gentrification, precarity and an events-based culture that needs to take of its own finances.

ME: If you are willing to speculate, how do you envisage a world that is structured (i.e., socio-politically) on the net first, and then actualised in the real-world second?

GL: We're not born into the net, at least not yet, but I like the thought experiment. Data capturing starts well before we're born. I would rather change the perspective approach it from the code production level and look at it from a Bauhaus angle. I am fascinated by the idea that with a Bauhaus approach one could go back to the drawing board and redesign the internet. Imagine Freudian engineers, the Frankfurt School computer science. Of course, Reich UX. Bauhaus is one of the few currents that was able to bring together an artistic avant-garde approach with the emphasis of usability. Usually they are seen as opposites. Same with critical and speculative. Or business-driven vs. radical-alternative. What's a Brechtian version of Ethereum, a Zizekian YouTube channel, a pharmacological Bitcoin? Right now we can only respond to conservative 'solutionist' values of the techno-libertarian class and spend decades trying to correct their short-sided premisses. This is a pitty and a profound waste of time. Ultimately we need to create our own army of coders that have the sovereign attitude and can come up with a different social media architecture.