https://www.kulturpunkt.hr/content/vulnerability-networked-generation

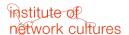For Kulturpunkt.hr, recorded in Zagreb on March 29, 2019

According to the classical definition, melancholy is similar to sadness, at least in its manifestation of loss of interest for the external world. But, while in the traditional sense we associate it with retreatment and introspection, in the contemporary world sadness has become an integral part of the hectic social media interactions. We are connected, but alone – in a collectively shared feeling of emptiness.

Geert Lovink, media theorist and founder of the Amsterdam based Institute of Networked Cultures, talks about contemporary melancholy and sadness as a design problem – programmed emotional oscillations that we pass through by scrolling, swiping and liking on social media networks. Following the publication of his new book, *Sad by Design*, we talked with the author about the causes of technological sadness, performative cages and the possibility of offline romanticism.

KP: Before departing to sadness let's talk about the rebellious spirit of tactical media. It's more than 20 years ago since you published the manifesto "ABC of Tactical Media" that heavily influenced activists across the world. How do you reflect on those experiences today, in the age of passive consumption and platform nihilism when poke doesn't go far beyond simple click?

Tactical media were meant as a way to reconstruct tactics of artists and activists who were overwhelmed by all the possibilities of the "new media" at the time. In the 80s and 90s this meant a lot of new possibilities to express yourself and connect with others. It was relevant from a point of aesthetics and even in terms of potential protocols, standards and user cultures that were defined in an early stage, and this is what tactical media did. It was also a playful exploration of possibilities to combine means of expression and freely choose between radio, performance, multimedia, video, internet, pamphlets, computer networks etc. The fun part of tactical media was that you could put them altogether and make something out of it yourself, no matter your background or discipline. This liberation when dealing with the media itself was an important starting point. Look down on all that self-importance and tech and start doing it yourself.

KP: How were you connected to Croatian context in this earlier stage

of your career?

First and foremost, through Arkzin and the anti-war campaign. Since 1992 I was involved in the Dutch support campaign for independent media in former Yugoslavia called *Press Now* which operated from the cultural center in Amsterdam called De Balie. In the same building we organized *Next 5 Minutes*, tactical media festivals, but also the *Digital City*, the internet-based local community for people living in Amsterdam. De Balie served as debating centre – and still does.

KP: In the golden age of net art, back in 2000s, Italian [duo](#) Eva and Franco Mates started a three year long performance project called *Life sharing*, claiming that "privacy is stupid". They allowed visitors full access to the content of their computer through website. Curator Domenico Quaranta in his essay *Art and the internet 1994-2014* emphasizes how it was remarkable that 14 years later we all live in the same glass cage – like the Italian duo predicted – where our content is being shared and GPS locations attached to every image we post online. If we add five years to the date of this essay being published, we are still stuck in the same situation. In what ways is the world we are experiencing today a designed cage?

You can blame my generation for building the cage. Okay, one could say the dotcom generation was younger than I am since I am too old for being a yuppie and internet venture capitalist types, yet, nonetheless, this happened under my eyes. From the late 1980s onwards, I have tried to steer all these changes, to shape the indy field and make a difference. This cage I am talking about is a performative cage, maybe we can compare it to some kind of a night club, where inside we see the dancers, they look very cool and attractive. Inside the cage it might even be quite sexy and intimate but what is really happening is that the self is made vulnerable, on permanent display. It became a cage in a real sense somewhere between 2012-2014, the **Snowden** years, when people started to discover the so called lock-in effect of social media after they migrated from other social networks onto the monopoly platforms.

KP: In my case, it was the transfer from Myspace to Facebook.

Yes, Myspace is still the one that most people remember. We more or less unconsciously migrated to Facebook, not knowing that for one or maybe two, hopefully not three generations, we would get stuck there. So, we moved in

that space still with a dose of playful naivety. What came after is the lock-in effect which is well known in the network theory. Once you reached a critical mass the network effects start to kick in. Until recently I was optimistic myself, very hopeful that young people would get bored. This is important because the boredom could then become a productive moment. The problem is that boredom indeed happened but after that everything stayed the same. It is in a way a big mystery, maybe for this generation as well, that once they were in the cage performing themselves there was no way out.

KP: In *Sad by design* you focus on the millennial generation, youngsters that are brutally open in their online correspondence, which makes them even more exposed and vulnerable than previous generations. When did they (or we) started feeling sad?

That's a recent phenomenon. Although I've said that sadness and a lot of the mental problems that occur have been with us for some decades, the techno-sadness I am talking about cannot be qualified as medical. Depression and more recent severe forms of burn-outs in young age became almost like an epidemic but this form of sadness is not a decease. "We are not sick." You know you are not an anomaly when you're "on social" all the time, you are not an exception but still you are the one who is depressed and suffers from all this pressure to perform, be present. It maybe is a mass disease but you don't experience it as such because it is quite difficult to understand these things from the perspective of a medical epidemic. Maybe social media are epidemic but we don't experience it as such because everything is so hyper-personalized.

Sadness is something else, it is similar to boredom. The sadness is much more looking inward and like boredom quite thin and flat. Think of it as a plain, the flatness that can reach quite far. It can be brought on in any situation. With the sadness it is quite important to acknowledge what I call a moment of "almost reflection" (similar to the almost accident), where you start to become aware of it. What I describe as "sad by design" is something that occurs briefly, however the system itself immediately overrules it. Many people recognize it (the gesture of throwing or putting the phone aside) but also understand it as some sort of build-in experience. Although you had enough, nothing works, out in your life, the other is not answering, you still go back to the pone, leave another message while waiting for the Other. Chronos hurts.

KP: It is interesting how you define sadness. In my case, I would primarily describe it as a state of perpetual anxiety – trying to stay in the game, relevant for my followers and in the end not to feel excluded.

It is very much connected to anxiety. People I work with added the element of a gender specific response to this condition. They say that there is no separation in an absolute sense. However, the anger is something that has been traditionally prescribed to the male side whereas the more introspective form of sadness (as anxiety relief or expression) is sensed and described by women. Now, this could also be case – you can go both ways. Either the men are not willing to admit those moments of sadness or they are indeed responding in a more gender specific way.

KP: The year 2018 was a year dedicated to the concept of self-care, monopolized by the corporate giants and numerous care apps making *#selfcare* one of the most popular hash tags. Forbes estimated that the meditation app *Headspace* was valued at more than 250 million $. Looking after yourself is an idea that contradictorily emerged from the ones that are making us sad in a first place? How do you comment on this?

We first need to understand that the very classic continental European scheme is a different one. On the continent, people would usually advise you to go offline, go for a walk in the park or the forest, do some sports, and leave your phone at home. This is what I call European offline romanticism. However, the young generation very often doesn't subscribe to that. They do yoga with the phone next to them. Even if they want to experience offline leisure activities their phone stays with them. Here emerges a possibility for new market of apps that intend to control and regulate the time you spend offline which is in a way a funny contradiction. Why would you need an app for meditation?

KP: Or an app to remind you to drink water.

Exactly. We all know too well what it means. For the problem that has been created, Silicon Valley itself, already provides the answer, the remedy which is an element I describe in *Sad by design*. It's the self-reflective aspect that I am interested in.

KP: You say on social media we are never alone, and as you acknowledge – we are alone together, as part of an imaginary crowd. Do you believe we have empathy for each other?

I believe there is a lot of empathy online, perhaps even too much. I would never say there is not enough empathy in the world, that is why I am a little bit cautious about campaigns that say we have to be nicer to each other. This is not the point. We do not need more moral campaigns that want to "civilize cyberspace." Even if you are angry at someone, it's a form of empathy in contrast to indifference that is absolutely the worst. It is the silence that kills (think of the nasty stalkerware). I would never say there is

too much public anger, the question is what we do with this energy. We have to learn how to deal with it ourselves, with our own anger but also with the anger of others. There are of course celebrities and influencers, politicians and sport people who are exposed to a lot – massive trolling, organized campaigns and well orchestrated fake-news. These tactics prove you can elaborate anger in a very systematic way but then you are coming almost very close to cyber warfare where disagreement takes on a very organized form. However, I am looking more in grey tones. The fifty shades of gray in the interpersonal experiences of people. I am not talking about global cyberwarfare, which is exactly on the other side of the spectrum. My current interests revolve around ordinary young users and what they experience on a daily basis.

KP: Our everyday experience is definitely marked by endless flow of information and images that can easily be recontextualized in the hands of others. Memes present ideal genre for this kind of reproduction and remix. How do you predict the future of meme culture?

The year 2016 marked a big change in the field. Before that you had people in early 2000s who were in their very own way preparing the ground, as well as European origins such as the 'memetics' topic at Ars Electronica 1996, the Technoviking and Memefest in Ljubljana which I describe in *Sad by Design*. With the development of participatory culture and web 2.0, we witnessed the rise of image boards like *4chan* and *Reddit*. This is well covered by **Gabrielle Coleman** in her book on the Anonymous movement. Through time a specific culture emerged which is part hacker culture, part pop culture that combines music, films, fashion, lifestyle with regressive politics. Around 2016 a shift came with visible with the rise of alt-right when meme culture got really important political expression. This change can be traced in the rhetoric of popular YouTubers such as **PewDiePie**. Many people found out about this cultural shift later on. In 2016 internet culture lost its innocence for good. It started to become black magick, well described by **Gary Lachman** in his *Dark Star Rising*. Cambridge Analytica showed us that there are quantified ways of influencing large amounts of people. What we now see is that a lot of people who were actively involved with it and studying it, start to understand the "meme" dynamics, and hopefully even start to bring back the tactical playful elements again. Meme culture won't go away any time soon. Maybe the gifs are going to take on another type of appearance, perhaps it will have another name but it the ironic approaches will remains an important aspect of our visual culture. Meme culture has so far been focused very much on the photographic still
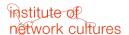
image. We can easily imagine that in five years from now it will be animated
3D images, combined with more closed forms of interpersonal
communication.

**KP: In multiple interviews you mention how "offline romanticism",
going offline and deleting accounts on social networks is not a
solution. How can we overcome sadness?**

It is important that we politicize the apps and we migrate to more
distributed exchanges that are no longer based on the centralized platform
logic. We need to develop new cultural techniques of collective migration so
that we move around more easily. Let's see how the next generation will do
this. Youngsters are already bored with Facebook. It would be wonderful if
we would rediscover, collectively, how to move on.