

List Cultures and the Art of Moderation

Interview with Geert Lovink by Donata Marletta

DM: Hi, I'm Donata, a PhD student from the Centre for Tourism and Cultural Change at Leeds Metropolitan University in the UK. My thesis is about the emergence of new social spaces created by festivals devoted to art and technology, and their link with online networks built around common interest in new media, art and society. First of all I would like to know more about your background and how you got involved in the net culture scene.

GL: From 1977-83 I studied political science at the University of Amsterdam. In this period I was active in anti-nuclear movements, squatting and autonomous student groups. After my graduation I was unemployed and lived in West-Berlin. It was the time of the dark 1980s with lots of budget cuts and gloomy outlooks. I used the dole to dig further into humanities and the arts. After a professional and existential crisis in 1987 I decided to realize my passion and became an independent media theorist and activist. Besides writing and publishing books and journals I got into computers and then, through the scene of bulletin boards, in 1989 got into contact with the Internet. In the early nineties, besides radio, I started organizing festivals and conferences. All these threads came together around 1993 when the World Wide Web emerged and ordinary Dutch people outside of academic got Internet access. Two years later I started the <nettime> list, together with the Berlin artist Pit Schultz, who was one of the first people I met online.

DM: What's the role of a list moderator, and what's the most

terrific memory you have as <nettime> moderator?

GL: Terrific or horrific? That job was a real rollercoaster. Exciting and intense. A fulltime job. For me the highlight was the <nettime> meeting in Slovenia, in May 1997. Not many lists manage to organize their own international gathering. The Beauty and the East was an intense and spaced-out US-Euro/East-West fest, the height of <nettime> as a net cultural avant-garde movement (if you like). Soon after the dotcom hype became serious. In the first years net.artists, tactical media activists, academics, geeks and media theorists mixed; in a way that would be hard and artificial organize these days. The cultural period, the time of “What is it, what you do with it?” (not explained by managers and tech people but by artists and theorists) was about to come to an end.

To answer your question... moderation can be done in so many different ways. After <nettime> became a closed and moderated list (late 1997) I remained involved in the daily operations for another 2-3 years. In that period we produced the Readme! book (published by Autonomedia) and experimented with rotating moderation. I was in favor of that model but the people who took control at some point, around 2001, didn't want to move on and are still there. They pretend not to be visible and do not act as visual hosts in debates. That was an important element for Pit and me. Like Trebor Scholz these days on his iDC list, we actively looked for new voices, new material. On some lists, the moderator is a wise old person that is always there in the background. As you can see, technology alone doesn't tell us how to moderate lists. Technology limits us, guides us and, but also leaves us certain degrees of freedom to bring out these all too human characteristics in us.

DM: Is there a real communication and exchange within the list between critical thinkers and 'normal' contributors?

GL: Lists have their ups and downs. I often compare it to the (Dutch) weather. There are sudden mood swings. Long periods of silence. People that are obsessed with the list—and then suddenly disappear. There are fights (so called flame wars), animated conversations on a high level, followed by tons of dull press releases and newspaper articles. The normal contributor, one could say, is the lurker, the one that remains silent and is absent. I don't see a special role for one particular profession, like artists or thinkers, even though I have to say that geeks, computer programmers have become the most familiar with list communication. After all, it's their medium; they invented and used it, long before the cultural crowds and the general public got aware of electronic mailing lists.

DM: According to your experience, what's the state of the art and future of the lists?

GL: As email is the most-used Internet application, lists are not going to disappear overnight. Worldwide, email use is still exploding. But, as we all know, young people are no longer into it. Email is not cool. The decline of email popularity has been going on for a while and probably started with the rise of blogs around 2003-2004, and then social networking sites. We also should not forget the impact of SMS and hand-held devices, even though you can read email on those PDAs. What we see in general is shift away from office culture (and their stand-alone connected PCs), in which email (and thus lists) have been embedded. This leads to an acceleration of short messages, on any possible platform, from

Facebook to Skype, Twitter, MSN, all of them not intended to be shorted in an archive. Lists depend on their archive, be it on the individual machine of the individual list subscriber, or the web-based text archive. Lists only make sense if you can read back the threads. Because the Internet needs geeks in order to maintain and further develop the IT-infrastructure I do not fear that list and list software will disappear, unless the global hacker class decides to move to another mode of communication.

DM: Do you believe that discussions within the lists and more generally online networks are contributing to the cultivation and dissemination of an open/collaborative culture?

GL: We have to separate here between two ways of using list software: lists as vehicles to create a community that discusses certain topics, and lists as pragmatic tools to fulfill a certain common task. It is only rarely that we encounter a mix of the two. In our circles we would associate lists with the announcement and discussion element. However, most lists are created for teams and have a limited life span. Once the task is done the list is deleted. It is particularly on these short-lived lists that is used to coordinate work that we can be study

DM: Do you visit festivals like Ars Electronica, Transmediale etc.? I would like to know your opinion about the role of these events today.

GL: Sure, I visit a lot of festivals and exhibitions. Maybe not the two you mention here, but I have been to four Transmediales in a

row. The most recent one was early 2007. The last Ars Electronica festival I have been to was perhaps 1997 or 1998. The last ISEA was the one in Helsinki, 2004. These days I see more work in Southern Europe. I have given my opinion on the state of affairs concerning new media arts in my book *Zero Comments*, which I wrote in Berlin, in 2005-2006. It is pity that many of these festivals do not focus on a particular topic. And if they do so it is broad and wildly uncritical, circling around topics like biology and the body. But let's not start some culture of complaint. OK, there is critique, it is negative and clears our visions. But far more important is the primal energy of madness, of gathering together, to do something unheard. It's that energy that brings people together—and we always tap into it. The festivals you mention are just fade shadows, institutional arrangements that last way too long and have forgotten how powerful it is use to master the art of disappearance. The fact that in certain circle management operates on the automatic pilot doesn't mean that elsewhere no new initiatives can unfold. There is massive change, and metamorphosis, in new media. Let's not pretend that we fight over limited resources. There is always space for the Event to occur. I know, that sounds religious, but if you have experienced this a dozen times, there is no longer reason to feel depressed, even though the situation, in objective terms, is pretty depressing.

DM: For many years festivals devoted to art and technology have had the role of gathering like-minded people in a single time/space frame. According to your experience, can we still consider this type of festival a social space?

GL: Sure, let's not make it too dramatic. People who sell vacuum cleaners door to door also hold annual gatherings. The question is, do organizers want to make a critical impact on the scene, or do

they just run a cultural organization? These days, corporate sponsoring and city marketing are becoming serious factors if you organizing a festival or conference. Maybe it's better to shift the focus and start to develop formats that are more informal, like temp medialabs, barcamps and unconferences, but then in the cultural-activist context.

DM: Do you think there is a link between the virtual places represented by lists, networks and communities, and the actual place of the festival for discussions and exchange around net culture?

GL: Rarely. It's a unique exception if the real and virtual are in balance. It is true that many lists go back to an original real-life event but it is hard to keep on meeting each other. With hard I mean expensive.

DM: I enjoyed very much the self-interview in your book 'Uncanny Networks'. What's the question you would like to be asked today?

GL: Are you, are we, fully equipped to deal with the mainstreaming of new media? What does it mean that everyone has a mobile phone? Are we prepared to actively defend our ideals concerning the open, decentralized character of the Internet or do we just let it go down the drain? This is a serious matter. I don't think many of us are well equipped to deal with the scaling-up of the user base and the extensive participation that we have seen over the past years. Internet use here in the Netherland grew from less than 1% in 1993 to over 80% in 2009. Does this force us to go mainstream

or would it rather make sense to start alternative underground initiatives that no longer bother with the institutional reality?