Interview with Geert Lovink, Prague, late October 2009

By Magdalena Kobzova, for A2 Magazine

(I was in Prague to give a master class at the new media dept. of the FAMU film school, invited by Milos Vojtechovsky where the PhD worker and cultural theorist Magda Kobzova made the following interview with me. /geert)

MK: Looking back at the 1990s, when you developed the concept of tactical media, what possibilities of activism do you see today compared with that period? There seemed to have been a lot of euphoria regarding the tools the internet provides – small online communities, forums and mailing lists. Now these seem to have lost a lot of their power and inspiration.

GL: That's true, the euphoria was there. Today it has moved to social networking websites and web 2.0. These are more tool-like in comparison to the internet of the 90s. They are used by way more people, with fewer clues about the social-technical conditions that give shape to these tools. In the 1990s there was more euphoria, but there was also more awareness about what the tools implied and what they could and could not do. These days the internet can no longer be separated or distinguished from society. The internet has become as messy as society, with all the problems attached to it, but also all the incredible potential it has to disturb, to create something beautiful, to disperse energies and organize them at the same time. The network is becoming the dominant social form of organzation and can be understood in a way as a follow-up of the political party, the church, the family – the stable social structures that we have known in the 19th and 20th century. But today we can no longer say if it is the internet or the society that is creating the network. It will take a little bit of time to fully understand that the media are just mirroring the potentialities that are in society itself.

MK: One could also argue that the big social networking sites are not designed for socially or politically engaged activities, but rather for self-presentation and PR purposes.

GL: Yes, but you could also say that this is just a social technique. And social techniques can easily move in other directions. That's why I'm pretty optimistic about Facebook and so on. Who talks about Second Life these days? Can anyone remember Friendster or Napster? They vanished, and were forgotten. But the social techniques that people learned there, the

skills and capacities didn't go away. What stays with the users is this 'slight awareness' of other people around them. This vague noise. That little bit of social noise. And it's this sort of quality that will linger on once Facebook has become just another piece of data trash, sidelined by the ever predictable network culture desire for the next killer app.

MK: The noise seems to be rather a nuisance – there is so much noise, it is difficult to have an engaged or ecological attitude toward the use of these technologies.

GL: That's true. Only the ones that are determined to address a social, political or even technical cause know what they are doing, and generally speaking they will succeed. For the others, they're lost. And that is a problem. If you don't know what the heck you're doing out there, you're drowned in the noise, in the same way you cannot decide which television channel to watch or which aisle to walk down in a library, not knowing which book to borrow. You browse and surf and this is becoming an unconcious activity. Being on the Web is the new form of our collective unconcious.

MK: What do you think are today's possible places where critique and activism can happen? Where, or better, how can it be fostered? If it's not institutions or social networks, then where else?

GL: There are certainly few exercises possible about how to become invisible. Invisible activities are still a good exercise – good luck with it, go ahead and try. Obviously there is the other approach, which a lot of young people choose. A kind of over-exposure, over-visibility. To be worse than the system. To be more social than social. More transparent than transparent. That seems to work quite well, in fact. But it's not really an activist agenda. These are more cultural conditions we find ourselves in that we have to discuss because if we don't, we might repeat them in what amounts to the reproduction of stupidity.

In terms of activism, I'm mostly interested in conflicts as they manifest across the culture of networks but also in the world at large. There's a lot of conflict happening these days that is not labelled activism. We could say that conflict is on the rise and activism is on the retreat. You can see it very clearly throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America. Whereas social tension is on the rise, movements and NGOs are becoming more and more bureaucratized, and caught up in both the media work and lobbying enterprise. We can read the gender aspects that characterize these

unorganized outbursts, and there's also quite often ethnic and economic dimensions to such conflicts, but we cannot really understand them. Take China. It's a place full of contradictions and rising class conflicts, where the types of political representations that we are familiar with are simply absent. At the same time it's a place saturated with new media. That's a new challenge if we want to think what 'new media activism' means today.

MK: Activism as a luxury phenomenon of Western societies?

GL: Yes, and I believe there are other forms of political and social organization that go way beyond what we classify as 'activism'. A more just and socially engaged world is a world with an incredible richness of social and institutional forms. But it is very hard, look at the internet – it sets the international standards under which a diversity of communication forms takes place. The infrastructure needs some form of global exchange. Many people talk about the so-called 'balkanisation' of the internet, the fragmentation of tools and protocols and languages. All this fuss over a global medium of communication and exchange that will maybe no longer be with us in 10 or 20 years. Despite this pessimistic trend I believe there will be some form of global consensus and through that we'll see more and more divisions arising. The world will be not more united but increasingly divided, even with the internet.

Nonetheless, it's interesting to pretend that artists, activists and scholars can be players in this big game. We know that artists can make a difference, they can create images that are very compelling, and they can create concepts that can shape a society. Of course, they have less and less economic power to do so. Mediatisation and the virtualisation of life also means that their capacity to make interventions doesn't necessarily decrease. How to define the symbolic in these circumstances? What is the symbolic and how can we intervene at that level? In the fifties it might have been some compelling French film that would shape the collective imagination through the disorienting camera and editing technique of a series of jump-cuts coupled with some kind of outrageous content. But what is it today? When the vast majority of the world lives elsewhere and starts to make politics elsewhere – that's to say beyond the borders of Europe and media imaginaries of Hollywood – we have to seriously consider that we're living in Museum Europe and this is our destiny and our fate. We could develop interesting concepts but we're no longer the primary site, the theatre, of 'global' culture and change.

MK: What sort of activism is possible in the reified space of the museum?

GL: That question is not asked very often. Let's look at theatre, because theatre people have thought about this for long time. Theatre is confined, limited and symbolic. It understands its limitations and maximises its potential to interfere in how people metaphorically deal with the world. Theatre obviously lost its central position as the site where social and moral contradictions and negotiations were played out. That might have been the case in the 18th or maybe 19th century. But in the 20th century the theatre was fully aware of its position in society, and I admire that. We could say the same about the position of the museum in the 21stBut new media is not there yet. It's neither a genre nor a discipline–at least, not yet. And why should it go that path? That's the big debate at the moment. century. The fact that it has lost its central organizing role with regard to contemporary arts doesn't mean it is insignificant. What does happen, though, is that we can only read the manifestations of 'activism' inside the theatre and the museum if we are equipped with deep insight knowledge of the institutional politics of these places and have a sense of the history of the genres inside the specific disciplines.

(Edited by Ned Rossiter)