

Email interview with Geert Lovink, by Rasa Smite (February 2, 2010)

Q1. What was your motivation to found Nettime mailinglist back in 1995?

The background story can be found in the nettime chapter of my book Dark Fiber. I don't have much to add to the story that wrote back in 2001.

Q2. How you would define Nettime - is it 'only' a mailinglist, or a 'network', or a 'community'?

That changed over time. It was very much a movement in its early days. Then it became a scene and very briefly, around May 1997, even a group-like thing, but that didn't last long and then it fell apart, step by step. I personally do not like the term community because of its religious connotation, it suggests unity and harmony, which, back then, wasn't the aim. Slowly it turned into a loose collection of mailinglists. I doubt if nettime ever was a network in the way we use the term right now. It's a loose connection of people that share a common history, that's for sure. A lot happened in that 15 years.

Q3. Nettime is running different language speaking communities (and there mostly is mixed content), but referring to English-list - how important do you think it was for successful network communication, to separate 'discussion-list' from 'announcements-list'?

FibreCulture has done the same. iDC is keeping a strict 'no announcement' policy. Nettime-nl is mixed, like Rohrpost, but I can't say that's much of a success. People do not like mixed lists and tend to respond less. Many have the feeling that if a list carries a lot of announcements the community is dead. That's proven not to be the case but if people have that feeling then it may as well be true. This is all very subjective. For some announcements are very useful.

Q4. How Nettime has succeeded to keep dynamic of the list, to balance number of postings and number of subscribers, and to keep it active today, 15 years later since it was established?

I do not share this opinion. Nettime has been more or less dead for a long, long time. Just compare it to the neighboring iDC list, which has de facto taken over the role of nettime with pretty much the same people and topics. The problem is that the current moderators have refused to move on. This is

what was agreed in 1998-2000: moderation would rotate in order to prevent happening what we see right now: the hijacking of a collective initiative by one or two people. The moderators have been in charge for a decade now and I don't think they have been doing a good job. There is frustration visible on the list, which puts people down. They don't want to be treated like that and sign off. Instead of organizing debates, involving new people and making bridges to real-world events and publications, The current moderators spend most of their time approving messages and clearing up the mess. That's good work, and necessary, but not enough to keep a list interesting. The potential of Nettime was-and still is-obviously much higher.

Q5. What are most essential differences and what - similarities, if you would compare networks that emerged in 90ties (and that are based around mailinglists: e.g. Nettime, Syndicate, xchange, 7-11, etc.) with social networks of today that are situated in social software platforms of Web2.0 (twitter, facebook, around blogs, etc.)?

First of all, there isn't much to compare. Where are the 2.0 equivalents? They rarely exist. What's going on is a lot of invisible people-to-people exchanges. I am not suggesting there should be net art groups on Facebook... Maybe it is good that there is no xchange on Twitter... Social networking site are not ideal community tools, and do not constitute counter public spheres. They are good to expand your social horizon but not if you want to organize a field. They are good for promotion and (viral) campaigns, but they are less suitable as mediators between the real and the virtual. That's what lists do best: they are bridges between events and the net.

Q6. What are the most crucial issues that the networks have to face in order to survive its various growing up and going down stages?

The ability to grow, transform, and move on. This would also imply the art of disappearance. The problem with a lot of the above mentioned initiatives is that they get stuck. The frequency of postings decreases, the dialogue has stopped long time ago, but the moderators do not have the courage to pull the plug. In an electronic environment like this it also doesn't matter. Lists can be brain dead for years on end. A critical issue therefore would be: how to stop? We know how to initiate new projects, but no one advises us when it is time to leave the stage.

Q7. What do you think, makes networks sustainable?

Sustainability is no goal in itself. One could use this term in this way: how can an initiative maintain momentum, grow and either create common Events where they derive their energies from, or mutate into other organizational forms that make it possible to attract (and redistribute) money and other resources? Organised networks are only one of many possible forms in which this can be played out. Networks are embedded in the social, cultural and political lives of people. They often serve a purpose, despite all their indirect, implicit aims. Maintaining the highest stage of vagueness can be goal. But it shouldn't be the default.