Email interview with Geert Lovink by Daphne Dragona & Ilias Marmaras (Athens), February 26, 2010.

Conducted for Konteiner, a Greek monthly independent magazine on politics, culture and arts, which is distributed independently and also comes as a supplement of Eleftherotypia, a major and well-known Greek newspaper.

DD & IM: Twenty years of networked culture: Networked in the digital sense as you have specified since interhuman dynamics started to link and develop within software systems and we learned to live and share within digital environments. You have been one of the people that followed this development from the beginning as a researcher, writer and a professor. How do you feel that networks and their users have changed throughout this period?

GL: Networks between people may have existed throughout history but today's networks are technological. Digital global communications have accelerated, extended and intensified the presence of networks in everyday life. We carry them on our skins. There is a politics of speed here, in the spirit of Paul Virilio: real-time media have all but destroyed our sense of time and space. We all too easy familiarize ourselves with the new condition. What's more difficult is how manage the intimate aspects. The performative aspect is really seductive. We are trapped in the perfect Foucauldian treadmill in the sense of Power producing babbling subjects. The transparency of it all is hard to understand—even for insiders. There is no privacy in these networked environments, and this makes us vulnerable to corporate interests and state control. What strikes me over the years is how fast we adapt, and how slow we comprehend. The graphic interface layers have become user friendly, yet makes it even more difficult to understand the underlying network architectures.

DD & IM: Has the networked society made us more socially and politically aware, especially speaking about the younger generation of users? Or would you say that there is a need for a critical internet discourse more than ever now?

GL: A critical awareness would not just imply that we refrain using the internet. It could also mean that we develop a taste and an ethics. Maybe these Web 2.0 platforms such as Facebook and Twitter do not bring us anything, but there are so many other platforms and applications to explore. What has to stop is the marketing hype. We should be able to distinguish

between services that are useful and useless. Are we signing up just because others did it as well? The longer the internet is around the better we should decide what to use it for. Non-participation in certain cases doesn't mean we're left out, or a Luddite.

DD & IM: To what extend does the "network society" affect reality? Do networks really break hierarchies? Can they change institutions for example? Can society's rigid forms change and become more rhizomatic in the networked years to come?

GL: In our daily lives we can no longer distinguish between real and virtual. In that sense everything has become bloody real. In terms of institutions and society it's another issue. They are remarkably resilient. This is the gap so many of us experience: our lives are on the run, but society is not keeping the pace. This contradiction will only become more apparent. We can clearly see it in the rapidly declining legitimacy of television, radio and printed news media. We not only consume less 'old' media, we also no longer believe in their authority. Our tools are real-time but journalism has a hard time dealing with this new condition. In that sense we do not yet live in a network society. Cyberprophets and most scientists have a hard time dealing with these conflicts and uneven developments. They do not like to admit new media not only take apart but also create new forms of power.

DD & IM: How about bloggers? Would you see blogging playing an important role in the future? You know in Greece after blogging reached its peak, phenomena of control and centralization from the political parties and the mainstream media appeared. However, in other parts of the world e.g. Iran, Egypt, blogging seems to be very essential for the information circulation and social/political organization. What role does locality play for the future of blogs?

GL: Blogs are the contemporary publishing platform for the Web. It standardizes the do-it-yourself media experience. Blogging is not a belief system, and does not by definition create 'news'. What it does well is embedding stories within a wider context of the Web through linking and tagging. In a study Anne Helmond showed how blogging has been increasingly integrated in search engines. Blogs are good for a particular type of writing: short entries with a personal style, linking and commenting on information elsewhere on the Web. Blogs are the default standard, also in Iran and Egypt. There is nothing special about it, except that it is easy to use. In terms of local culture one could say that is popular in some, and

despised in other countries. Germans are wary of blogging. They love the collective experience of the forum software. The French love it and embrace the dramatic personal style. As a fashion blogs are on the way out, but web publishing for individuals will not disappear that fast.

DD & IM: In your texts you refer to Negri's and Hardt's notion of networks. For them networks derive from both a *democratic* and an *oligopolistic* mechanism. But how are users to understand where one mechanism ends and another begins when both elements appear within the same structure?

GL: We are very good at navigating paradoxes and contradictions. Networks are both inward looking and bridges to other worlds. Through the 'weak ties' we reach out to other social contexts while being sucked into all too human dramas of the tribes we subscribed to. The issue with technical networks is that we can remarkably quickly sign off and disappear. This is not all that easy in our traditional social lives. Whether networks are democratic, I doubt… Maybe autonomous activist groups are the exception here. They love to argue until, hours later, the survivors in the debate reach a consensus. The network maps might look decentralized and complex but the power distribution is a tragedy. Active participation is often very low (around 1%), with a hand full of people in charge. In that sense the democratization has yet to start. This is not at all depressing. It's not the fault of human nature. It rather tells us something how early we are in the process of becoming a network society.

DD & IM: According to Hobbes the absolute sovereignty and control can be gained only through fear, fear that can assure social order. Mechanisms of control are still accomplished mostly through fear today. What is the fear of today's multitude? It is the fear of disconnecting, not participating, being excluded from the networks, from the others, the "pseudo-others" are you say? How can third parties exploit such an element?

GL: Let's first of all get it straight with the tendency of 'slow communication', 'defriending' and going offline. These are all respectable strategies for the few that can afford non-participation. More and more depend on (mobile) networks to stay in touch with family and clients. This is vital for the urbanized migrants to survive. Whether or not multitudes really exist or not, remains to be seen. I read it more like a proposal. It a social sculpture, the perfect concept. Multitudes exist during the Event, and only for very brief moments in time, very different from the Party or even social movements. The big debate here is how social movements these days come

into being. It's not that hard to stage a one-day strike, design a tactical media intervention or occupy a building. What we've seen to lost is the ability to more create sustainable structures that cut across scenes, classes and ethnicities. The crucial missing element here is Time. Disruption is not enough. Some try to bring people together through social networking tools but I am skeptical about that. Technical tools are perfect once the 'cascading' effect is on its way, but how do we get there?

DD & IM: "Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right" said Ani di Franco. How can a network hold itself right or how a singularity from the multitude of a network should hold itself (her subjectivity) right? What forms of resistance can play a role today? How about art, tactical media or hacking? Are they still significant?

GL: Networks are test beds for non-commitment. They are vague terrains, social clouds if you like that rarely can be used to go from A to B. Try to instrumentalise them and they'll fall apart, resist, ridicule your aims, and so on. However, if you want to collaborate on well-defined tasks, they can be useful. Still, there is and will be a lot of noise on the line. The revolution is something else altogether and will quickly overcome the current state of blurriness. We're stuck in the neo-liberal desert and a bit of (art) activism here and there won't help. This is the era of sublime stagnation in which the real decay remains invisible. The rot is deep inside. The response to the 2008 financial crisis is telling. People know it can't go on like this, but still carry on. Networks prolong this state of indecision. To propose some Trotsky-style cells seems unpopular but probably the way to go. The vitalist optimism of Hardt & Negri is useful here. I agree: there must be Common outside of the Market and the State. Exodus, Yes We Can! Yet, it seems almost impossible to remain unnoticed, and invisible. The debate has to stop here. Let's switch to the offline mode. See you there!