The Meaning of Open is Obfuscated
Interview with Geert Lovink by Andreas Hirsch (AEC), for the Ars
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Andreas Hirsch: In your book "Dark Fiber" (2002) you wrote: "Changes in
technological paradigms take years. It's questionable whether human
nature, with all its fatal flaws and charming defects, will ever change. It is
therefore good to distinguish between true excitement during ruptures and
long reality waves." This casts a rather grim look on the perspective – that
Ars Electronica with "Open Source Life" somehow postulates – that an
emerging new form of life oriented towards principles from Open Source
Software or at least from the ideas of Openness might help bringing about
changes in mindsets required to survive. How do you view the chances for
change of human behaviour in this context?

Geert Lovink: The term 'survival' is not suitable in the context of new media
and is best reserved for the bottom one billion that have to live on less than
one dollar a day. We do not have to survive, and that's exactly why can have
discussions like this. I also do not favour the use of biological metaphors, in
particular if they are used in a 'cool' and slightly prescriptive context like
arts and culture. I grew up in the shadows of World War II and have, from
early on, seen liberation as liberation from the terror of biology over society.
Anti-fascism for me meant being alert for the use of bio metaphors in any
possible context. I am not questioning good intentions, but the harmless and
subversive bio metaphors are contagious and can show up in contexts that
you don't like. This is why I am not a big fan of Michel Foucault's term bio
politics. If used within the correct theoretical context the term can be
meaningful but outside academia it can start to lead a whole different life.
Another example would be Agamben's 'homo sacer' and the associated term
'bare life'. It is odd to see how this terrifying image, derived from extreme
situations like Nazi extermination camps is showing up in art catalogues.
The state of exception indeed lies with the legal arsenal of those who rule
but what is more urgent is to get an understanding of the invisible (software)
architectures that steer the lives of billions. In other words, the
unexceptional.

What we should study, and fight, is the dull everyday life under neo-liberal
capitalism, its privatization of public facilities and preoccupation with
shareholder value. We should question their rules: low pay, no or expensive
health care, bureaucratic nonsense, tough migration laws. Precarious labour

is exactly not bio politics, it's a social condition of low wages under bad work conditions and has little to do with nature, biology or ecology. It is obvious that certain aspects are indeed linked to life, like reproductive technologies or the manipulation of genes, but I would question these in relation to race or gender. For me those are cultural terms and should be dealt with as such. We are now too much preoccupied with the exception that happens elsewhere. This might be legacy of the outgoing Freudian century that studied the exception as a 'mirror'. Sickness, in this theory, would tell us something about the general condition of society as a whole. In the context that I work in, (critical) internet culture, this approach is not utilized. What we instead should focus on is the global unconscious: daily routines in terms of communication and mobility and related bodily conditions that cultural studies is unable to read because of its preoccupation with the (tele)visual spectacle. In theoretical terms this would mean to make steps beyond the notions of Foucault and Deleuze on surveillance and control. The latest issue of the magazine Open entitled Beyond Privacy is a successful example in this direction.

Let's clean up the term 'open' or forget about it all together. I am with Richard Stallman in his historical fight against 'open source', which started back in 1998. He didn't win this fight, but 'in defense of lost causes' (Zizek) we should not give up so easily and support the spirit of 'free software'. In the end, both open and free are legal terms that regulate ownership. We have to keep that in mind, and this includes Stallman's GNU GPL. As soon as you are talking about 'open' you bring the conversation into the realm of legal arrangements and 'social contracts'. We cannot just talk about open source life in a transcendental way as if it were some lifestyle proposal. Open source life is a legal arrangement that has to be positioned inside the life sciences and its obsession with patents.

Let's not forget that 'open source' is the commerce-friendly recuperation of Stallman's project. Open source is the explicitly depoliticized version of free software. As is commonly noted, open source is 'not a movement, it's a development method'. There is a history to this term that is easily washed away, but must be faced head on. We must also look at the practical reality: Google, IBM, Sun and Cisco – these are the main players in the open source game. Google has written more open source code than anyone. In this light, the 'principles of 'open source' seem conservative, and fit easily into the rent-based methods of value extraction of neo-liberal capitalism. What exactly are these principles of open source? Metaphors of cathedrals and

bazaars won't help us. The infrastructural distinction between utopian networks and ugly hierarchies/centres is important, but should not be seen as the end game of politics.

If not open source principles, then what about more general 'ideas of openness'? One of the problems with openness, as Chris Kelty has written, is that everyone agrees open is the way to go and the thing to do. Nobody wants to be closed minded, closed to the world, closed off. At the same time, its meaning is obfuscated, and this obfuscation might be the necessary condition of its proliferation. Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, for example, make use of it in Multitude but it is just as easily taken up by Obama's strategists in their Open Government initiative. Let's also not forget that the biggest political treatise on political openness (Popper) was a defense of one version of capitalism. What seems urgent and missing in the openness discourse is specificity. What do you mean when you talk about openness? What are the details? Can you point to this better world?

AH: Could the idea of an 'open source life' have emancipatory potential and amplify emerging forms of activism and dissident lifestyle that might be helpful in bringing about changes in mindsets required for the massive behavioural changes needed for humanity to survive the current situation of the ecosphere brought about by human action?

GL: I am with Slavoj Zizek here. Nature is violent. It is one huge catastrophe. There is no 'harmonious' equilibrium that we need to restore. We are not in danger as a species. Having said that, we can of course save energy but even there I would say that it's better to use a language that stresses the abundant nature of alternative sources. Let's stress the violent excess of wind, sun and tidal energy. The last thing we should is promote sustainable ecology with a calvinistic 'savings' mentality. It's not a shame that we exist. Excess and plenty are as (un)natural as scarcity. The alarmist rhetoric often has conservative if not racist undertones and refuses to speak of the underlying capitalist mode of production, which, in my view, is the main source of pollution because it socialises costs and privatizes benefits. In my view, it is a mistake to put all your eggs in the 'climate change' basket. Poisonous materials make you sick and nuclear waste poses great immediate danger for you and your environment (in the case you happened to live near Tjernobyl in 1986). But climate change is much more abstract, and the political strategies have, in my view, made themselves way too dependent on scientific models. It has also been way too easy for the climate skeptics to

question 'data'. The environmental movement should be de-institutionalized and dismantled, if you like, because now it is becoming complicit. The whole debacle around the Copenhagen summit is a good example, as are 'emissions trading' schemes.

Renewable energy should be introduced at a large scale regardless and uncoupled of the 'climate change' circus. Fossil fuels will eventually run out and if you are against nuclear energy, like I am, renewable energy is the way to go. One doesn't need the alarmist ideology for that. Apocalyptic warnings will only mobilize dark forces of fear. We need to understand that this is not an age of progressive forces and the collective metaphors and imagery that mobilize need to be adjusted accordingly. Warning of 'endtimes' will not bring us any closer to liberation. Social justice will be reached through our own imagination, for instance, by experimenting with new forms of institutional power. We need to tackle the question of organization.

AH: Is there sense after all in transporting ideas of Openness, or more specific: principles from Open Source Software, to different areas of life and business?

GL: We need to discuss in what context it makes sense, and where it might be a political or ethical failure to do so. There is a danger of 'open' becoming an empty signifier. If we want this term to play a role in shaping the commons, we need to discuss its consequences. A critique of 'open' doesn't mean we are in favor of closed systems or secrets. Let's look at a historical example of the open ideology, a 60s leftover phrase that dominated a good part of the 70s: the open kitchen in an open marriage. Thankfully, this image has been thoroughly deconstructed, we can even say destroyed, by feminists. This is my version: the open kitchen breaks open the spatial division between kitchen, living room and dining room. Taking away the walls made the domestic work in the kitchen visible, but also created an integrated space for the drama of the 'open marriage' to play itself out in spatial-psychological manner. Add the television set and the telephone to the mix and you have all the ingredients for the late 20th century reality soap as performed in millions of suburban family homes across the globe. In Cold Intimacies, written by Eva Illouz, we can read about the reasons behind this increasingly public nature of human relationships. Her thesis is that capitalism has fostered an intensely emotional culture. The therapy movement and television programs that feature people's intimate problems laid the grounds for social networking sites like Facebook to exploit our will

to self-disclosure.

What needs to come before transportation to other context is a clear statement. What is to be open? On what level and in relation to which people? Absolute openness, of course, would merely replicate the status quo (open to slavery, racism, wars). Here we bump up against the limits of a politics where all nuance is eventually reduced to a binary. Is this the best we can do?

AH: You promoted the "Slow Media Manifesto". Which aspects of the idea of slow media make this interesting for you?

GL: We should not portray ourselves as victims of speed politics. We are not slaves of the availability economy. The idea is not simply to slow down, or have a break. Howard Rheingold calls it "mindful infotention." What's at stake is to take matters in our own hands and to turn what seems to be a private failure into a public affair. We need to be aware of what it means to depend on realtime media. There may be a multiplicity of voices but there is also zero time to reflect the constant stream of incoming news sources. The manifesto says: "Slow media are not about fast consumption but about choosing the ingredients mindfully and preparing them in a concentrated manner." Another aspect of the manifesto I like is the emphasis on 'monotasking'. The emphasis here is on the quality of the conversation. Ned Rossiter put it well in an email correspondence, slow media is important inasmuch as it says 'no way' to the mono-temporality of real-time. To live in a media sociality of homogenous time is equivalent to flatlining.

AH: You recently quit Facebook. Do you see a relevant alternative emerging in the form of the Diaspora project? Is there a need for a different, user-owned, user-driven form of Facebook?

GL: Together with tens of thousands I joined the May 31 Quit Facebook day of action–not the first and also not the last initiative of this kind. It wasn't so much because of the privacy concerns that I deleted my Facebook profile and related data. My motivation to join the 'exodus' movement was that it questions the growing role of centralized internet services that offered to us at no-cost in exchange for our data, profiles, music tastes, social behaviours and opinions. The question here is not so much that we have something to hide. I hope we all do. What we need to defend is the very principle of decentralized, distributed networks. This principle is under attack by both corporations such as Google and Facebook and national authorities that feel

a need to control our communication and the data infrastructure at large.

There is a growing awareness that we need to take the architecture of social networking into our own hands. This trend started a while ago with Ning but that's still a centralized commercial venture, initiated by Netscape's Marc Andreessen. We now see the FLOSS community coming on board with initiatives like Diaspora, Crabgrass and GNU Social (July 2010 all still in beta). There are a number of political reasons to support such initiatives. I don't want to overestimate the CIA's role but it is well known that activists have to be very cautious using Facebook. For a while it was OK to spread the message for this or that campaign, but Facebook is becoming too dangerous as internal channel to coordinate civil disobedience. We cannot just warn youngsters to be careful uploading compromising party pictures onto social networking sites. We should all be more careful and think of what forms of political expressions are most effective these days. Let's strengthen the self-determination of the nodes against the central authority of the data cloud and keep the Web decentralized.

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