

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

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

GL: The background story can be found in the nettime chapter of my book Dark Fibre. I hope you got it. 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'?

GL: 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. For sure 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 you think it was for succesful network communication, to seperate 'discussion-list' from 'announcements-list'?

GL: 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. This is not proven to be false but if people have that feeling then it may as well be true. This is all very subjective. For some announcement 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?

GL: I do not share this opinion. Nettime as a project has been over for a long, long time but the lists still live on and have their ups and downs, just like life itself. Nettime is not dead in that sense. Compare it to the

neighboring iDC list, which has (in some periods) taken over the role of nettime with pretty much the same people and topics. iDC also has its busy periods and then, a few months later, you almost forget it exists. In the late nineties it was agreed that the nettime moderation would rotate in order to prevent happening that people hang on to it too long. This did not happen. The current moderators have been in charge for a decade. Remember, moderators spend a lot of their time approving messages and clearing up the mess. That's good work, and necessary, but maybe enough to keep a list as a project interesting. Nettime is now turning into a time test, the long duree challenge in cyberspace. We know from even older lists that they can go on for ages.

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.)?

GL: First of all there isn't much to compare. Where are the 2.0 equivalents? They don't exist. What's going on is a lot of invisible people-to-people exchanges. I am not suggesting there should be. Maybe it is good that there is no xchange on Facebook... 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?

GL: 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 advices us when it is time to leave the stage

Q7. What you think, makes networks sustainable?

GL: 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? Organized 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.

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Rasa Smite is a Riga-based artist, curator-producer and network researcher who works with emerging media since mid-1990s.

Author: Rasa Smite. Translation (from Latvian into English): Linda Vebere. Copy editing: Miriam Rasch. Design: Katja van Stiphout. DTP: Margreet Riphagen. Printer: 'Print on Demand'. Publisher: Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam 2012. ISBN: 978-90-818575-0-5.

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