(It has been a special honour and a pleasure for me to act as opponent for Franco Berardi's PhD defence at Aalto University, School of Arts, Design and Architecture in Helsinki on October 23, 2014. You can read more about the event on the Future Art Base website. A video of the two hour ceremony, which included an introduction to the thesis by Franco Berardi, me reading the text below and a debate between the two of us will become available in a little while. Semiotext(e) will publish a version of the thesis by the end of 2015. /geert)

By Geert Lovink

Being a decade younger, I heard for the first time from him and his activities around 1980, when stories about Radio Alice were spreading throughout Europe. True, the Amsterdam free radio scene, operating out of the squatters movement of the time, had a multitude of (local) roots but Radio Alice was certainly one of them. The Bologna uprising of 1977, in which Bifo played a crucial role, predated our most tumultuous year, 1980, and was thus a an important source of inspiration for the revolts in Amsterdam, Zurich and Berlin. What we shared was our common desire to find out what 'autonomy' could look like in different parts of Western Europe which lacked any trace of an 'operaist' workers movement.

Part punk and new wave, part rainbow coalition (feminism, anti-nuclear eco protests, anti-racism), part post-industrial turning techno, the sense of 'no future' in this late Cold War period was widely spread. The march into the institutions was over and doors were closing. Even the Situationists had closed shop. Being aware that well-meaning alternative proposals were no longer effective, we set up temporary encampments for anger & beauty. In these dark times of mass youth unemployment, the common language was one of refusal. After the lived utopia of the late 1960s with its failed experiments, my generation grew up in the shadow of armed struggles of others. Slowly but steadily we said goodbye to solidarity with the post-colonial national projects. After our own movements started to disintegrate, even our own militants went on a self-marginalising path (however, without taking others with them in their misery). By the second part of the eighties we were on our own, in a harsh neo-liberal technological world that inevitably forced the Media Question and the Globalization Question upon us. The 'slow cancellation of the future' (as Mark Fisher calls it in Ghosts of my Life) happened under our very eyes, leaving head space to dream how computer-aided social networking should look like.

I cannot but think strategically, in a political sense, about Berardi's timely mapping exercise that he performed here. Every insight breathes the sense of intense debate and collective consideration, set in 1975, 1996, 2011, 2020 and beyond. Suffice to say, this PhD thesis has neither become a hermetic Hegelian Magnus Opus, nor a boring academic residue of an author's wild years. Quoted sources are treated like equals. There are zero traces of a plagued genius a.k.a. arrogant theory celebrity suffering from melancholy. The tone remains urgent. We may or may not be depressed, but at least we've made the quantum jump to start studying depression. We do not indulge in our collective defeat, we want to unlock the general sensibility. Let's make our vulnerability unmanageable.

As you all might know, I do not belong to the Church of Deleuze with its evangelical positivism, but I am fine to say that Berardi's thesis is, again, an Exercise in Becoming. This doesn't mean that the work remained unfinished. Structure, purpose and method are all clearly defined. As an experienced thinker, working in the essay tradition, Berardi has taken the risk to start all over again. He has neither written a genealogy of the time-stricken present. Nor did he walk into the trap to start 5000 years ago. His starting point lies somewhere in the stagnation yet conflict-rich decade of the 1970s and ends with a warning of a "neuro-totalitarism in the making."

In his doctoral thesis Berardi maps mental and cognitive mutations in Western society that have occurred since the 1960s in the field of aesthetic and emotional sensitivity. This has, for instance, happened in terms of a transition from the alphabetical and the mechanical to the digital notation systems in the networked media sphere, the area of my expertise. This transition is not merely one that can be measured in terms of speed or cost efficiency. There is more to this than just an increase of convenience, speed and accessibility. In Berardi's view we need to go beyond rights, beyond access and comfort to understand the psychic impact of the actual information flows that reach our synapses. The premise here is that we cannot keep up. Our mental clock is not in sync with those of our systems, the news, the data flows at work and inside the traffic when we travel through multiple time zones.

A new sensibility is required, but most of us cannot always deliver. Instead, we get lost, we lose track, get disrupted, remain numb, get depressed and fall into a state of (convenient) lethargy. The shock of the present is no longer felt—and this is what makes us different from the pre-war generation

of Walter Benjamin and Ernst Jünger. We no longer sense the chock. Our affective sensorium grew up with the New. The fact that a phenomenon has never been with us, yet overnight appears and rules the world, no longer surprises us.

The procedure which Berardi follows is one making new connections between concepts and affects. The building blocks are already there. The prime aim of this thesis is not to bring into being new concepts. The goal here is a meta one: drawing up maps of possible futures.

Berardi's study fits into the recent turn from the Joyous to the Dark Deleuze. As the [Anarchist Without Content blog](#) puts it: "those who knew Deleuze consistently note his firm commitment to joyful affirmation and his resentment of negativity. Beatifying this sentiment, Deleuze has been used to establish a canon of joy. But what good is joy in this world of compulsive positivity?" According to its author, Andrew Culp, it is "time to move from the chapel of joy to the darkness of the crypt." Many of the characteristics of Dark Deleuze also count for Berardi. The overall task of 'destroying worlds' can be exemplified here with collapsing financial markets, epidemics as signs of failing health care, crumbling infrastructures, lacking social services due to budget cuts and environmental degradation. The word 'mutation' often appears in the thesis. The same can be said of elements and movements such as withdrawal and old autonomist motives such as the interruption. The politics here is cataclysmic, not molecular.

An example of the Deleuzian turn to darkness is Berardi's social media analysis. Internet is no longer seen as speculative conceptual realm for alternative media practices (in the tradition of Berardi's own trajectory from the print magazine A/traverso and Radio Alice to local television experiment of Telestreet and websites such as Rekombinant). He writes: "Multitasking implies the quick shift from an informational frame to another. Human mind seems to be perfectly suited to perform multitasking, but this kind of practices are triggering a psychological mutation, and this mutation is producing new forms of mental suffering like panic, attention deficit disorders, burnout, mental exhaustion, depression." Cyberspace is now seen as a source of permanent overproduction. Users are no longer described in terms of programmers or designers but are 'receivers' that fail to process the incoming information and have to take a variety of drugs in order to keep up.

Berardi describes cyberculture as the ideology of the 'general intellect'.

"Modern history has been marked by the interaction, the conflict, the negotiation and the alliance between the Intellectual, the Merchant and the Warrior." But what is the place in all this for the figure of the hacker, and their alliances with designers, artists and other bohemian types, and can we dream up new forms of sociality, new roles, and professions and institutional forms that can steer this century in another direction?

Drawing the map, overseeing the newly formed territory, is a first necessity and requires a visionary mindset. Our present seems to only be captured by 'what if' scenario thinkers. The hermeneutic 'what is' philosophy no longer plays a role in future diagnostics and has been sidelined by academic namedropping and formalistic reasoning. In the case of Berardi we can, again, sense of theoretical foresight.

There are only new beginnings of never-ending stories, re-inventions of forgotten concepts and motives. This is theory-as-poetry at its best: traces of possibilities (Mark Fisher) that combine dark insights in the catastrophic everyday with prophecies of brighter things to come, once the collective desires can, again, be unleashed (and not merely communicated).

All in all, his thesis offers a rich collection of concepts, proposals and visions that other theorists, activists, researchers and artists can further build upon. Indeed, there is no end. With Berardi we enjoy the plasticity of subversive ideas. Resistance is never static. Political strategies need to mutate. This process needs time, cybertime. Sometimes we can only claim this time in the act of withdrawing.