Interview with Geert Lovink for www.vita.it by Marco Dotti

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Marco Dotti: Can you explain the title of your book? Are we all sad by design? What does the 'engineered' dimension of sadness evoke for us?

Geert Lovink: I am not selling sadness. If you're happy, all the better. As you know, phones are an intimate part of our lives. They accompany us 24/7. Long-term social media use, especially by 'digital natives' that identify with tech, demands an emotional investment that can be exhausting. It becomes hard, if not impossible, to forget the phone. If it is all too much we put the device aside and for a moment feel sad because we can't cope anymore with the overload and complexity of the information. Updates come in at a relentless pace but the other is not responding. We swipe and like up to the point where nothing matters anymore. We are numb and close down. We're aware that the data flows are a product of algorithms and interfaces that are fabricated as such on purpose. The smoothness of it all results in the opposite of empowerment. While some get enraged, others become indifferent. In my current writings I am not dealing with fake news, trolls and shit storms caused by alt.right kids. Instead, I look at the mild and flat everyday responses of billions of users that feel trapped into platforms they depend on. A life without choice makes us feel depressed.

MD: How does sadness relate to digital nihilism and platform nihilism?

GL: When we collapse from exhaustion and overload of stimuli, information, emotions, we shut down and the world no longer matters. Nihilism in the digital age is different from the 19th century image of the one who no longer believes in God, or the 20th century version of the cold and indifferent existentialist who no longer cares because the world has lost its meaning. We all recognize that nihilism today is not just an identity. We never meet nihilist believers. It is not that we no longer believe. Today's nihilism is a product of real existing stagnation and regression in a world that makes us believe that we have choices, freedom and hope. Because the platforms are intimate and interactive, they invite us to express our feelings. They are huge emotional registers.

If only the internet just contained information. Wouldn't it be odd if 'new

media' stagnated in the early 1990s 'information society' context? In this possible parallel world, Marc Zuckerberg would have been an uber-librarian (which seems entirely likely). Instead of friends, recommendations and likes, we would have been stuck inside dull knowledge expert systems. The common roots of this likely reality and today is the community idea that we find in both narratives. Yet, cold instrumental rationalism, which is no doubt still part of the engineering belief system today, has ultimately lost out against the emotional trickery of behavioural psychology, which understands so much more about the dark, primitive side of humankind (comparable to Edward Barneys' use of Freudian insights when he laid the foundations of public relations).

MD: Internet culture has moved from enthusiasm to disenchantment. It seems that in recent years critical thinking has not made great strides in understanding social media and how they work.

GL: I agree. Compared to the unprecedented hypergrowth and the uptake of the smartphone and apps within months, or even weeks, thinking about the nature and implications of such technologies has stagnated. How many internet critics can you list besides Evgene Morozov? Compare this to the amount of political commentators, celebrity watchers, film or music or literary critics you know by heart. Is this because the platforms are marginal and no one is using them? Is it because 'new media' are still new, even after 25 years? Is it perhaps because we do not need to know anything specific about the internet as this is a 'medium without qualities', in the same way as we do not have to know the technical specs of the elevators we use. Is it because the liberal-conservative elites in Europe decided a long time ago that the internet is merely hype that will be surpassed by more solid systems such as AI and machine learning?

What to make of Hollywood's subtle ban of the smartphone from the screen: we never see contemporary cinema stars interacting with their devices as is the case in normal life, this is today's visual taboo. I compare this to the romanticism of the 19th-century high culture that was consciously unaware of the industrial revolution that unfolded in its midst. Today's popular culture is still deeply 20th-century, defined by a retiring old media managerial class that technologically clueless and fights anything digital and networked.

The same can be said of the lack of critical thinking within higher education where resentful professors are still waging a silent war against the internet.

At best computers and networks are supposed to be tools that do not need to be studied, let alone become objects of critique. In my case, the lack of a comprehensive critical internet theory has been a given throughout the decades. We're trying whatever we can to organize critical voices, work with artists, activists and coders without becoming bitter or moralistic. It's a strange uphill battle. I don't want to get too deep into boring institutional politics. How can we criticize the future? Is it possible in the first place? This question still intrigues me.

MD: Do you believe that the social has died, as Baudrillard said, and has dissolved into the platform? Do we have an alternative, or, as the Invisible Committee commented, is it the present itself that has died?

GL: The social, as in the 19th-century definition of the 'social question' has indeed died in the sense that it has been 'kaltgestellt', neutralized, managed and massaged to death. In certain part there certainly still is a revolutionary energy in social compositions as a large part of the population there are on the move, subjected to industrialization, urbanization and migration. Think of the hundreds of millions of farmers that have lost their land, in part also because of climate change, and move to the cities, in China, India and Africa. This vast, in part violent movements are technical in nature today, as they are embedded in, and facilitated by digital infrastructures and smartphones. In Western societies, social changes are micro-managed. Emerging and/or marginalized social classes are simply no longer allowed to come together and roam around. All we have are one-off events, spectacles of unexpected social media (mis)use, exploits, if you like. This is what we, tactical media activists, call 'alternatives': temporary autonomous zones, as Hakim Bey called them. Think of Hong Kong 2019.

What has died is the ability to stage collective 'presence', not the present an sich. We live under the regime of the perpetual now. Repetition of the same difference. Think of it as the Truman Show delusion combined with the eternal return of the same, the perpetual loop of Groundhog Day, in which a revolution that overthrows the entire system became all but impossible. What remains the mystery of today's electronic revolution (to use William Burroughs' term) is the use of the term social in social media. Is this a mausoleum effect, a tribute to a once vital force in society that drove history, or is there more to it? Is the social in that context an implicit reference to simulation of the social? Are computers theatre, as Brenda Laurel, proposed, nearly thirty years ago? Are we witnessing the social as a digital spectacle?
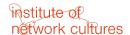
Do we re-stage the social, as a phantom, or should we indeed consider the social dead and gone? There is a lot to be said to leave behind all the 19th and 20th-century references here and make new beginnings. This means that we forget about the social all together. Go ahead and try.

MD: Intellectuals seem lost, their public role and influence have been decimated. They don't even seem to orient themselves anymore. Do you think this is because of a lack of moralistic posture or is it because of a lack of analysis of what we continue to call, euphemistically, 'new media'?

GL: The move of public intellectuals to the typewriter, radio microphone and television camera has been a gradual one, assisted by an army of experts who were hired to record and distribute their musings. Such apparatus of near-by assistants these days is lacking. Media machines have become abstract. The transition in the 1980s and 90s of the media professionals towards the personal computer took a while, but to understand the workings of the internet is still exponentially more complex. We should not blame creative individuals for this. Don't forget that this IT revolution came the destruction of entire professions, just think of graphic designers and typographers. Nowadays we depend on invisible geeks, outsourced engineers. Software has been dumped down in order for ordinary people (like philosophers and writers) to use it. Instead of the anticipated rise in computer literacy, we are witnessing a dramatic drop in the technical and critical understanding of IT systems due to simplified user interfaces that not just obfuscate political power relations (for instance, inside social media) but also drastically reduce the complexity of the interfaces themselves.

The programmed lack of technical awareness comes on top of a certain organized arrogance of the 20th-century intellectual who believed that the media apparatus was there to serve the thinkers and writers at the centre of the universe. Do-it-yourself is now the norm. In the neo-liberal network era, the voices of national thinkers have been marginalized in favour of columnists and other celebrities that are better able to do the popular-populist talk. Media training is key. If you cannot communicate your message in a few clear sentences you're out, even as an 'expert'. However, with the rise (or return?) of centralized geopolitical platforms the uncertain position of public intellectual could, in theory, be overcome, but this is not yet the case. Is it already too late for the self-made philosopher-influencer? In general thinkers these days are late, much unlike their 20th century avant-garde ancestors. In such a situation is probably best to become untimely

instead of trying to keep up.

MD: Which alternatives are out there? In your book you talk about commons. Can we think of commons as infrastructure?

GL: I am in favour of commons as an invisible, self-evident public infrastructure. Commons, for me, is not a religion, ideology or discourse, let alone a mentality. As do-good identity commons is a dead-end street. I emphasize the word 'ground' in common ground. If 'commoning' has to be used as a verb (which I am not using) I would use it in the sense of 'grounding'. I'd prefer the more messy term 'the social', or activism and, of course, organization or organized networks (orgnets). Doing stuff together in harmony is idyllic but not enough. I prefer building material commons that we all can ultimately use as agnostic tools or environments. I understand that the legal dimension of commons is huge, but I would like to get lawyers involved at the very end of the process, not in the initial stages of the social and political struggle. If the commons avant-garde primarily consists of lawyers, or 'civil society stakeholders' that only think in terms of 'issues' and 'rights' we've lost the battle even before it started as such language endangers to shut off the collective imagination.

Commons is not a right. With commons you're already in. We are not outsiders claiming this or that. We do not need to beg at the counter. This puts us in a passive position of victims in which the real players are officials and bureaucrats who have to act on our behalf. This is an outmoded 20st-century form of representational politics. We do not build commons for imaginary others under the watchful eye of authorities. The best is to build them, then take them for granted, share them while actively using those commons yourself.