

A Conversation with Geert Lovink by Tommaso Campagna

(This interview was conducted on June 25, 2020 in the HvA main building as part of the intern report for the research master Mediastudies/University of Amsterdam. Tommaso was an intern at the Institute of Network Cultures in 2019/2020 and participated in the Making Public/Urgent Publishing research program)

Tommaso Campagna: I would like to start this conversation by telling you how I encountered the Institute of Network Culture for the first time. It was during the Berlin new media art festival Transmediale when I found a book for free in the hall of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, location of the festival. The object in question was the MoneyLab Reader II: Overcoming the Hype (2017). I remember being impressed by that. The most obvious reason the distribution of free books; such a weird concept in a neoliberal world. The second reason concerns the content, since reading the articles made me interested in their critical but also participatory standpoint. It was not similar to any other academic text I read before (blame on my limited experience) as it combined theory with experimental and practice-based research. I thought it was a crucial approach for these uncertain times. All these aspects led me to investigate further, discovering that, not only the reader had been published by INC, but also that MoneyLab was a much broader project than a single book, it is an active group of people made of activists, academics, practitioners, and artists. Finding a new community that tries not only to theorize but also to implement new forms of organization is what fascinated and still fascinates me the most.

I think today there is a general lack and therefore need, for autonomy and experimentation, especially within the digital sphere. That book gave me a new encouraging perspective. In this sense, the concept of organized networks (or orgnets) well describes that feeling. In your last book with Ned Rossiter, *Organization After Social Media* (2018), you conceptualize the orgnets as a socio-technical device “through which projects are developed, relations built, and interventions made”(p. 11). Can we consider that book a result of an organized network, or maybe even an organized network in itself?

Geert Lovink: There are many possible ways to start here. Obviously, the kind of fetish we have for paper is an outcome or an expression of the debate that is going on for years about the concept of post-digital aesthetics, post-Internet art and the new kind of hybrid forms. I don't necessarily want to

frame it as something regressive, a nostalgic return to the object, a rediscovery or renaissance of the material. I don't believe in all that. I don't want to project any romantic notion on free paper books. The question starts with the deeply felt crisis of organization. Not with the orgasmic feeling of the paper for your fingers, nor with the concept that only through writing on paper one can have real ideas and instead what you type is fake. The paper works, your case is emblematic in that sense, it is the rule and not the exception.

The way people start to connect is through these objects. This has to do with the crisis of organization not only coming from the crisis of the institutions of the 90'. Obviously, that is there but we have to be more contemporary in that sense. We know that the church declined, the family is less important, the tribe and the village are in a crisis because nobody is there anymore. We know that trade unions are not fulfilling a role the way they used to be and even when we look at political parties and membership, the story has been the same all along for almost forty, fifty years. This shows a steady decline in the active forms of organization. In this organizational crisis of 'the social' in everyday life, we see the rise of the internet.

In turn, we see the rise of the platforms that play an active role in preventing people from organizing themselves. This is ironic as the material goes down and the digital goes up. The digital realm is not providing us with adequate organizational tools. Quite the opposite. The platforms are designed to disperse and distract us, not to bring us together and focus. Social media as we know them are designed not to create a social entity but are profile-centric focused on the promotion of further isolation of the neoliberal subject. It's painful to state the obvious here. Today there are movements despite platforms.

In this sense we are using the paper object as a strange token, to bring people together again. Unfortunately, the Internet there works against us, not with us. Of course, twenty-thirty years ago we had a different idea, a hope about that, but the reality of 2020 is very different.

TC: Indeed, we are experiencing a departure from a utopian virtual space where it was possible to conceive new forms of autonomy. Today, we are dealing with an increasing intervention of centralized platforms within human life governance, concentrating power in the hands of a few big companies. In a 2017 e-flux article you define this shift as the "internet disillusionment" but likewise, you also tried to draw-up new possibilities of

self-determination within the virtual sphere. Therefore, how can the 'organized network' concept be recontextualized in a platform capitalist context? Are there any possibilities to create an organization through a centralized platform?

GL: People spend a lot of time on platforms but that doesn't mean that they are making new social experiences. Is actually quite the opposite. Situations, especially now in the late corona period, are very dire. People don't know how to meet others or to contact others. Even though we think that all these tools are available and there's close proximity to the other, actually this is not resulting. The desire is there, and Black Lives Matter shows us how strong the desire is, even if it goes against what the authority says. Across the world, people come together, especially young people. This demonstrates how the potential to come together is enormous but in my view, this happens despite the platform. The question then is what kind of role are these organized platforms playing? This is an open story because, you know, we have yet to find out if there is a kind of a family or a cloud of organized networks, for instance now in the last incarnation of Black Lives Matter. The answer is yes because you cannot identify the known NGOs or the formal civil society organization. Forget it. Maybe they exist but they don't play any role in this. The organized networks are small and maybe are not identified as such, maybe we also need another term for it, maybe we need a more precise term, more contemporary and updated term for today's forms of organization. I'm very open to that, I'm not sticking to this term, we are not here to promote some brand. This is not what it is about, we are trying to understand how, given the contemporary circumstances, people get involved in direct action. We are a concept machine, we are not once who promote some sort of brand identity.

TC: This idea of concept machine becomes clear in 'Organization After Social Media' as well as for your last book *Sad by Design* (2019). There you give an archipelago of concepts through which is possible to set new discourses on organization. Among many, I would like to discuss with you the sort of critique you moved to tactical media towards a new, 'updated' version of organized network. Indeed, looking at the concept of tactical media after more than a decade of experimentation you say that the problem in that specific practice was that it was not able to become a solid and durable tactic. In other words, it was not able to become infrastructure. With this, you refer to the importance of media, and in this case organized network, to become invisible, part of everyday use and not only a sporadic practice

which is prone to disappear (which however remains essential). I found inspiring this comparison between organization and infrastructure, as it well describes how important is to root discourse into practice. Therefore, how do you think it is possible to become infrastructure?

GL: It's important to emphasize the tool aspect. When you use a hammer you are not philosophizing the hammer; you are using the hammer, and it is the same with organized networks. The self-evident way the tools are presenting to us, and we use it, is precisely that infrastructural element, a new form of invisibility that I'm interested in. Becoming infrastructure means to reassess the protocol, or more contemporary some kind of popular forms of the algorithm, not as an oppressive tool but as a tool that can be on our side, in the same way as a protocol can be part of the commons; namely when they are written by us, the many, and not the few. That's where we should look. Of course, people in the past have focused on other things.

Do you remember when people were still discussing operating systems or database software? This is still happening right now, the blockchain is a very clear example. Now we are discussing the precise architecture of blockchain but it will very soon disappear in the background and will become part of the infrastructure. Thus, within five years blockchain will be "gesunkenes Kulturgut," which means that it has become part of the culture and has become a common heritage. I like this motif because we can see this process when we look at our computers and phones, where things become so obvious, so self-evident that we don't question them anymore. Therefore, becoming infrastructure is something we need to study, make it explicit, and then politicize it.

TC: Another contradiction here is that, in turn, platforms are becoming infrastructural and this makes it even harder for the social to occupy a space in the digital sphere. Therefore, if centralized social media are not able to bring people together, then we need to investigate new horizons. In this sense, in the last chapter of *Sad by Design* you discuss how the social can take command in the era of social media. I found inspiring your call to create new avant-gardes that can create artistic counter initiatives to the start-up model. In doing so you refer back to the Situationist approach. I think the detournement is emblematic here, namely a hack of pre-existing elements (in this case social media), in which the newly created work has an antagonistic or antithetical meaning to the original (organized network). In this sense, the avant-garde work expands beyond the artistic sphere and becomes part of

the everyday life experience. With that you refer to avant-gardes that can become social organizations, moving away from the idea of beauty and modernity. Not a practice based on future imaginaries, but instead a machine able to confront the real-time regime. I find this connotation of artistic research in line with the increasingly miscellaneous role of the artist-as-activist (or vice versa). Do you think the art and activism worlds can come (again) together in building new organized networks?

GL: There are multiple roles and disciplines. People hopefully come together. In the past twenty years, we have indeed anticipated a little bit the rise of the “artist engineer” or the “activist geek” and all kinds of different mixtures of that. This has to do with tactical and technical competences that we all have and that in the same way become part of people. People understand that code is not given and you can question it. All this has got to do with certain competencies, now whether you are in fact, an artist yourself or a programmer or an activist, this depends really from person to person. I’m not trying here to create some kind of idealistic new figure that, like a sort of Übermensch combines all these characteristics. What counts really is collaboration and cooperation between groups, or as we call it free cooperation. That’s why we emphasize the social because individuals can never solve things today.

People work in teams, even if in the end their name appears alone because everyone knows that in the background there are always multiple others that contribute, edit, cook, care, transcribe, illustrate. Whether this has to do with the education or the execution doesn’t really matter. We are always a team, no matter what. Why? Because we are living in a really complex fast-changing world in which the sole individual can’t ever manage everything. Even if you are sceptic about the group or you don’t want to be part of the collective, I don’t care, I’m not impressed by that, because I know that even those “Einzelgänger”, who are on their own, are actually always with many by definition. This is due to the complexity of the world, so if you want to change something you would do that with many people.

TC: This made me think about another passage of *Sad by Design* where you underline the co-option of the term organization by the corporate world. Thus, if we look at the definition of the Business Dictionary, organizations always have a management structure and are directly linked to business logic. So how can we differ from this definition of organization?

GL: I would also add, how can we differ from the fascist definition of the

nation as corpus with 'organs', right? One could go back to the Italian fascist definition of organization as a corporatist organic whole, the nation as one collaborating body. In today's context this means that we have to understand that we need to bring a multiplicity of contradictory backgrounds in the picture. But I'm positive about that, we don't need to emphasize here, people have multiple identities, that's in full swing. At that level, we are quite advanced... The problem today is how to translate that diversity of identities, and take that outside of the neoliberal individual framework that only produces isolation and really start to put the organized multitude to work because for change we do not only need identities, that's not enough.

TC: The concept of identity is an increasingly complex terrain especially considering the constant intervention of technologies in our lives. In times of AI and automation, become vital starting to consider machines not only as a tool but rather as a subject. A good example in this sense can be seen in the recent project [Asunder](#) by which Tega Brain, Julian Oliver, and Bengt Sjölen well describe the role of machine learning in global sensory systems. Asunder is an AI-based on real data drawn from specific regions, arising from a climate modelling system that is able not only to make forecasts but also to propose specific improvements and modifications of human environmental impact. With this project, they provocatively question what would happen if human needs are placed in the background. The results are impressive and demonstrate how different will be the outcome of machine learning without taking in consideration anthropocentrism. This is an example of autonomous machines that organize themselves beyond humans. Therefore, do you think the concept of organized networks could be applied also to non-human communities?

GL: I always hope that, at some point, the orgnets that I still further develop with Ned Rossiter will also find a technical expression and the concept will be translated into running code. The problem here is, especially from the network side, we have seen an incredible decline and almost neglect of the network idea itself. Networks, even from the mathematical and actual software side have not progressed at all in the last fifteen years. This stagnation has happened for a reason. Because networks are clearly an alternative to the platform logic, investors simply refuse to invest any money into network innovation. If you know, you can make money overnight through a centralized infrastructure. So there has been systematic disinvestment in the technical possible version of organized networks. And we can nail it down to the agenda of venture capitalists but there is more

because this not only refers to financial disinvestment but also a social one.

TC: It seems that for many years now there has been a sort of cult for the hi-tech companies and their leaders. Seems like symbolic “statues” have been raised for these figures. But, as we said, their impact on society is far from being positive and progressive. Adding to this, we should remember that, due to the tendency of centralized platforms in becoming infrastructural, contemporary critique accused these companies of a new form of colonialism in terms of data. To call back the recent tactics of Black Lives Matter, do you think we should start to take down also these allegorical statues?

GL: Yes, we need those symbolic moments as well. We need to take down the statue but how and when that’s going to happen we don’t know yet.

TC: Shifting into the technical side I think a still urgent question concerns the theme of platform alternatives. Solutions of decentralized social media already exist, there is a multitude of examples like Diaspora or Lorea, that due to their structure completely avoids third-party data collection. The latest example is Mastodon, an open-source microblogging platform; a federated social network of interconnected and decentralized servers. Everyone can run their own Mastodon server, and users can select and participate. If these solutions exist, the problem there shifts from the political to the practical, as only a few people decide to move between platforms for ethical or organisational reasons. In fact, if people are now used to migrating between different social media depending on the new trends it is really difficult to attract people in these independent architectures. Is there any possibility of building a persuasive process of migration on decentralized infrastructures?

GL: There always has been this biblical kind of hope, that after forty years of going through the desert at some point, we will arrive there. But forty years going through the desert is a long time, even in times of acceleration. We had these conversations also ten years ago and it is sad to see that we haven’t made any progress. This makes me desperate but on the other hand, we also have to face the real power and size of the corporations which can never be underestimated. The power we are talking about here is substantial and so is their lobby power and even their ideological and hegemonic claim that they still make over the intimate parts of people’s lives, and let’s remember we are talking literally billions of people. So we are really facing quite a hegemony. We can’t be naive about that. But we know that Babilon must fall at some point, we are sure about that, it is a biblical certainty.

TC: However, there have been more recent critiques that don't see in decentralized platforms the (only) solution. If this is not the case with social media, this is evident in the environmental critique, as centralized infrastructures (global sensory systems) are the tool from which scientists can detect and study climate change. Plus I'm currently struggling with the datacentre question. Thus, within a centralized system, server buildings are located in cold countries to reduce the emission from the cooling systems. However, on the other side, local data centres could permit the use of more independent and "green" energy sources, like solar panels, wind turbines, geothermic. It seems that organised networks will face those eternal contradictions but how can they relate to the environmental issue?

GL: We should definitely push and hope for scientific discoveries that minimize the dark side. There are many factors to consider, sustainable software and hardware that does not need to be upgraded, this would be a very easy step to make to go out of the eternal upgrading craziness. Another one would be to focus not only on minimizing electricity but also on more sustainable and more powerful batteries. Resolving the battery or storage issue would be an enormous thing and I'm quite sure this is doable.

It would be interesting, and again there we see that among us we still have this unresolved tension and almost dialectic between decentralized power tendencies. Even within accelerationism, people are very certain that centralized economies and economies of scale would do that for us. So the big debate between centralized and decentralized networks is going to occupy us for decades to come. This might be one of the central issues for the 21st century if we want to resolve it. We are reaching a critical point of consensus there, thinking of climate change etc. But how to do that? How to implement it? That's really open. The good thing about it is that if we do it right we will have an open debate about strategies, about things to move forward, and not only about us defending something or being defensive, or even worse, becoming part of regressive tendencies ourselves.