Jess Henderson from the No Fun blog (hosted on the INC site) and the Band of Burnouts exhibited in Zurich her own version of the materials generated by [We Are Not Sick](#) (me and John Longwalker). This consists of music tracks, texts, slides and videos. [Here](#) you can read an email interview she did with me about the Sad by Design album and the sickness metaphor. Below, the interview again.

An Interview with Geert Lovink, June 2021

Jess Henderson: The band name *We Are Not Sick* is a clear statement. It is a refusal, but of what?

Geert Lovink: We should refuse to see our smartphone and social media 'addiction' as our individual problem that can be 'healed' by corrective apps, designed by the very same platforms that have designed these manipulative interfaces in the first place. We should not feel guilty and internalize the problems. A digital detox weekend is not the solution. It might feel good to delete the Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp symbols from your phone and install Telegram and Signal instead but this should not be our aim. Individual solutions are now part of the problem. They defer from the urgency to come together, organize, strike, refuse and bring the internet, in this case, to a hold. Platform monopolies should be dismantled, that simple, not 'regulated'. How do we get there? By realizing that it's not our mental mess that's at the centre of the universe, even though it feels that way. We need to collectively get out of the catch-22 situation that neo-liberalism created for us, in which the individual, confronted with the poverty of its techno-subjectivity, has to be both the starting point and the ultimate goal of every intervention we imagine.

JH: We often hear the phrase 'social media is the new smoking.' Presumably, this means it is bad for your health. What are the problems with this analogy, and how does the band conceive the notions of 'health' vs 'sickness'?

GL: Most French philosophers in the 'postmodern' category used to smoke and some of them even died of lung cancer. For them, the 'pleasure of the text' was indeed intimately related to smoking, as it did for Hannah Ahrendt and many others of that generation. In the same way, we're seeing a new generation taking the stage for whom both reading and writing is closely tied to social media and their smartphone. Likes and nicotine have certain similarities. I'd leave it up to the dissident neuroscientists and behavioural

psychologists to explain the scientific details here. Please reread Sadie Plant's Writing on Drugs. We all have our own preferences and pleasures, neurotic impulses and bad behaviours. I personally love to delegate smoking and social media to others: please do it for me. I miss it yet I can't. I have a Bartleby "I'd prefer not to" attitude here, which I despise to promote.

JH: Your album is titled *Sad by Design*, can you explain some of the critical thought and main themes that lie within the songs?

GL: There are similarities with my first album in which I read texts in German and English of our Bilwet/Adikno collective called *Electronic Solitude* or *Elektronische Einsamkeit*, which came out at the height of the dotcom boom in 1999. This time my collaboration with John Longwalker resulted in the Sad by Design album, which was produced in pre-Covid 2018-19 years, which had a similar frantic, pre-apocalyptic 'roaring twenties' feel. As we know from previous epochs the intense and depressed psycho states of artists and other irregulars pre-empts the actual outbreak of the crisis, whether it is late 1929, mid-2000 or early 2020. In this case, it is all about social media anxiety, the waiting, anticipation, the silence of the Other in an age of real-time exchanges. What does it mean when your ranking is low when you are, virtually, surrounded by influencers and other TikTok dancers? What is the long-term implication of the absence of underground and subculture, when literally all cultural expressions are commodified, set in gentrified urban environments? What's the impact of the real existing nihilism caused by state and platform surveillance? In my work, I have lately focused on techno sadness as a possible result but we all know there's a whole range of expressions, from loneliness and anger to depression. Collective anxiety outbursts are real. Shitstorms are real. So is bullying, revenge porn, but also cyber warfare, ransomware, pump 'n' dump schemes, fake news and other yet unknown forms of cyber manipulation. When we add it all up it is not hard to understand the mass disillusion and inability to act collectively to overcome the 'stack of crises' the world's facing.

JH: The band has made the whole album openly available for remix and you and John have said that you 'want to provide the entire world with the opportunity to remix our album'. All the tracks, as well as hundreds of lines of text and thousands of individual words, are available and completely configurable to any interpretation. What was the motivation to put the album up for free remix and what would be your dream to see done with it?

GL: This idea grew out of John's push controller for Abelton Live, an instrument where you pre-program buttons that light up. You play them as a square keyboard. Under each button, you can have either a sample or phrase, a slogan or a world and thus you can recombine certain moods and phrases into a song, scratch and repeat them while doing the same with the underlying music. In my 1980s world, this would be a reference to Laurie Anderson and William Burroughs but there might be multiple music theory performances one could refer to that have used similar techniques in the past. The idea here would be to dance to the theory, which, in the case of rap, is proven to be entirely possible. The body no longer needs to be disciplined, sit still and silently take in the complexity of the carefully crafted sentences that are packed with concepts and references. Instead, theory turns into meme mode and acknowledges the contradictory, fragmented ways of life we live.

JH: How do you see the relation between the 'encroaching sadness provoked by social media architectures' that *We Are Not Sick* addresses and the phenomenon of burnout?

GL: I know, the boundaries are blurry, but we refrain from saying that everyone is suffering from depression, that everyone is sick, needs to see a doctor, get medication and time off to heal. While I am wishing everyone time off to have a break and recover, I strongly believe in organization, uprisings and revolts and fundamental change—and not in the medicalization of everything. We need other media architectures, other social networks, more relaxed ways to communicate, not this hyperbolic pressure to stay available 24/7. Burnout is a serious condition, which acts like a 'sickness container' in which a multitude of symptoms are blended into one, very heavy feeling of no longer being to continue, a psycho-somatic breakdown that I do not describe here in details as so much is already known about it. I am more interested in its weaker variations that are sensed by billions in homeopathic doses, daily. What I can do as an internet critic, media theorist and activism is to get a better understanding of the designed dialectics of extraction on the one, and exhaustion on the other hand. For some this leads to burnout, for others, it merely leads to a mild form of resignation. How the platform economy plays out exactly should, in the end, not bother us. What matters is how we respond, care, and organize.