The first part of this email exchange entitled "The Soros Center was a Perfect Machine" appeared in July 2019 in ArtMargins here and occurred on the occasion of the exhibition *The Influencing Machine* at Galeria Nicodim in Bucharest, curated by Aaron Moulton. The second e-mail exchange took place in March 2022 in preparation for the second edition of *The Influencing Machine* exhibition, this time in Warsaw. At the time I wasn't aware it was going to take place in the controversial U-jazdowski castle (you can read more about that here, in a review of Jakub Gawkowski). A month after the catalogue of the exhibition appeared (in December 2022) I found out, by accident, that the exchange had not been included. The curator failed to inform me of his decision and when asked could not give a reason apart from that it 'didn't fit'. Here it is.

—

Aaron Moulton: How did your first collaboration with the SCCA Network come about? Your prevalence in the early history evolves very quickly and you are involved in the production of exhibitions and part of several educational initiatives. How did you see your role? And as that role evolved, what were your goals?

Geert Lovink: My interest in the 'Eastern bloc' goes back to the mid-60s when my father worked there, learned Russian and brought back the language, records and toys from the trips he made there as a chemical engineer. The Dutch secret service used to be parked outside of our house in Amsterdam when the Soviet engineers would come over for dinner. Born in 1959, I am no doubt a child of the Cold War, from Vietnam and Prague 1968 to its sublimation in space programs. Together with my companion-girlfriend Kaisa, I hitchhiked through the snow to visit Prague, in early January 1979, my first visit. Next summer four of us went on another hitchhiking holiday, this time to Hungary, where we met like-minded youngsters. This was the time of massive strikes in Poland, organized by the independent trade union Solidarity, followed by martial law in Poland, later identified as a key event leading up to the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

At the time I was active in squatting and related new social movements while studying 'Marxist' political science at the University of Amsterdam. In 1980 I attended a research seminar on the 'real existing socialism' (key term of Rudolf Bahro's book *The Alternative*), taught by Siep Stuurman, who had just published *The Real Existing and Necessary Socialism* (in Dutch). For

that class, I wrote the first paper that I was proud of, on the Bolshevist war against the Ukrainian peasantry and the anarchist Makhno movement (1918-1921), based on Voline's 1947 study *The Unknown Revolution*. The '1968' curriculum, dominated by Althusserian 'Eurocommunist' reformers, showed some respect to the Trotskyist reading of events (found in writings of Isaac Deutscher and Leon Trotsky himself) but ignored early critiques of the Leninist dictatorship of Anton Pannekoek, Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman and the anarchist 'temporary autonomous zones' such as the Kronstadt rebellion and the one in Ukraine.

In the spring of 1981, I visited East Berlin for the first time, while staying with squat friends in the West part. The 1980s were not just a dark, lost decade for my generation, they were particularly grim and dull for the populations in Europe on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Around 1983 I lost interest in Marxism and the related historical anarchism altogether. The repressive stagnation throughout Eastern Europe became part of a general malaise. While living in a West-Berlin squat for a year I was invited to marry an East-Berlin lesbian poet, the daughter of a high party animal, to get her out of the country. The whole process took a long time and gave me a good inside view of the bureaucracy in East Germany and the workings of the secret police Stasi. A few years later I returned to Hungary where we establish contacts with what would become the scene of the Tilos bar and the related pirate Tilos Rádió, which started a few years later with Amsterdam 'tactical media' support. It is in this scene I heard for the first time of the isolation and incredible poverty caused by the destructive regime of Ceausescu in Romania through young ethnic Hungarians that had fled the country.

As a member of the autonomous theory collective Adilkno (1983-1999) I liberated myself of the restrictive political ideologies and by 1987, as a long-term unemployed, financed by the gas sales of the Dutch welfare state, started calling myself 'media theorist', influenced by Friedrich Kittler and his 'Kassel' school, studying various aspects of the faithful 1930s and 40s. During this incredible explosion of my theory horizon during the post-1982 years, I read tons of theory, philosophy and history. I liberated myself from dogmatic legacies, started my own intellectual radio show and got my first personal computer.

After the Amsterdam squatters scene disintegrated, in 1988, our theory collective was invited by Willem Velthoven to regularly contribute to their

video art magazine Mediamatic, which had moved to Amsterdam from Groningen. They offered me to become a member of the editorial board of Mediamatic magazine, in charge of the book review section—a gift from heaven as I had gone through a dark existential period, desperately looking for a media theory outlet outside of academia. I quickly familiarized myself with the then-thriving video art scene, hitchhiking back and forth between Amsterdam and West Berlin. During the summer of 1989, I hitchhiked alone from New York to LA and visited the Bay Area, familiarizing myself with the early VR and cyberculture there. Back in Europe, the breakdown of the Eastern Bloc unfolded. I travelled to Berlin to attend the events of November 9, 1989, in person. Over Christmas that year I was glued to the TV screen to witness the 'Romanian television revolution'.

Through Mediamatic contacts, I heard of the preparations to organize a conference and this is how I ended up in Budapest, on the way back from my first visit to Bucharest, in March 1990. When I returned I prepared for my first visit to Japan, which was overwhelming. But the 'reality overload' I experienced in Romania stayed with me and overshadowed the exotic otherness. Later on, our Adilkno group theorized this in the essay [Visit Reality Park Romania](#) which reflected on the overproduction of history in Europe. The contrast between a smooth simulacrum and a gamified virtual future versus despotic 19th-century European industrialism hit me like no other.

AM: The Budapest conference *Media Were With Us* (March 1990), hosted by Keiko Sei and Suzy Meszoly. is such an incredible media and educational event. I think of it as the great proto-SCCA event in terms of how ambitious and potential the power of messaging through the network can be. In terms of meta-media or critical media theory, this event predates and likely inspires the famous film *Videograms of a Revolution* by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica (1992). *The Media Were With Us* occurred months after Ceaucescu was killed and carried a very powerful message that for me does not seem embraced within the mainstream narrative of the Romanian Revolution. What was the general message of this event for you? And what did it mean that it was a contemporary art museum/NGO forum that was delivering such a message to not just the arts community but a room full of international journalists and media theorists?

GL: The event was a violent and mysterious end of a tumultuous year that none had seen coming, not even the best political analysts–or science-fiction

writers for that matter. We seem to be good at long-term thinking but fail to understand history in the making. I am writing this one month into the Russian invasion of Ukraine—a related event no one anticipated. The uncanny feeling of history speeding up in unknown directions wasn't all that different, in late 1989. This time we look at smartphone accounts on our timeline with similar disbelief. As common political forecasting failed, this was not the case with the underlying media technological changes that were taking place: the introduction of computers, the networking of them, the role of fax, video camcorders and most of all, global real-time satellite TV a la CNN. While these, still mostly analogue, technologies had been around for a while, it was only in the 1980s that they became available as consumer goods, first used by artists and activists, and then causing an unpredicted effect on a mass scale. While the German school emphasized their military origin, others stressed their democratic potential to provoke and accelerate social and political change.

The 'Romanian television revolution' is the European equivalent of 9/11, the first Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq: all of them iconic televised global events that cried for media theoretical interpretations. While for pragmatic reasons the Budapest conference mainly featured Hungarian participation, there were only a few Romanians that managed to travel out of the country in those first chaotic months such as two editors of the Romanian state television itself and art critics such as Radu Popa and Magda Carneci. Among international theorists that spoke were Margaret Morse, Dieter Daniels, Peter Weibel, Ryszard Kluszczynski. Most famous was the [presentation] of Vilem Flusser, who died in November 1991 in a car accident in Prague.

What is staged when a popular turnover of a dictatorship with army involvement and flocks of unclear officials, intellectuals, poets and workers is played out inside a television studio? Who's speaking, representing what? While in the weeks and months after the December 89 conspiracy stories started to circulate, framing the events as an internal coup of the Communist Party to get rid of the Ceaucescu clan, deliberately staging a fog of contradictory (military) actions to remain in power, the Western analysis deliberately remained at the screen surface. What is the status of the image? This question still occupies today, from selfie improvement to deep fakes. For those interested in the topic, there are two anthologies, both in German, published in late 1990, one compiled by the Budapest co-organizer Keiko Sei, published by Merwe Verlag in Berlin (with the involvement of Peter

Weibel), the second one by filmmaker Andrei Ujică and photography theorist and later director of the European Graduate School, Hubertus von Amelunxen, entitled *The Ultimatum of the Image*.

AM: *Ex Oriente Lux* was the first Annual Exhibition of the SCCA Bucharest. It was marketed as the first and largest new media art event in the history of Romania. It appears no one, not even the artists themselves saw it coming. There are frequent accounts in other SCCA locations such as Tallinn, Vilnius and Chisinau of the SCCA landing in the respective communities like a UFO in terms of who they were and what they brought had not been there in such a distilled form prior. As someone who was there and a close part of the Ex Oriente Lux exhibition and event, how did you see things in terms of the exhibition's purpose and approach to cultural production? And can you comment on the optics of Ex Oriente Lux in terms of how this UFO idea might look in that present moment with the media literacy culture that existed at that time?

GL: Nearly four years after December 1989, things were more or less in place at the newly founded SCCA Bucharest when Ex Oriente Lux took place. The emerging 'new media' focus was still primarily focused on video art but even for Gen Z today that wouldn't be a problem as they still spend considerable time on YouTube Analogue video was ubiquitous, even though it was often low-standard (S-VHS/VHS), and so was satellite television. Office computers were widespread but access to editing facilities was hard. Where to get the SONY exhibition monitors? What's important here are not the technical limitations (which were huge), but the proposed conceptual bridges to the invisible conceptual works produced in the dark 1980s. Instead of sophisticated video layer effects a la Peter Greenaway, the space and works had a rough material look and feel.

In 1991-93 I had the privilege to premiere my media theory teaching at the newly founded video and photo department of the art academy. I brought over videotapes from the Mediamatic collection and discussed media theories of Flusser, Kittler, Virilio and classics from the critical video art discourse, which was established by then, and compiled in catalogues and anthologies. The question here was one that still occupies us today: what's a video image? What's the nature of the medium video in comparison to painting, photography, film and television? In 1993 I worked in Bucharest for several periods to prepare Ex Oriente Lux, which consisted of four parts: the exhibition in Sale Dalles (curated by Calin Dan), a conference, a catalogue

that was produced in early 1994 and a special issue of the Arta magazine (both designed by the Dutch designer Mieke Gerritzen). The catalogue had essays by Keiko Sei and Kathy Rae Huffman and a comparison between the video installations and the world of VR and cyberspace by Margaret Morse, plus documentation of the installations and artist contributions from the Perjovschis, Alexandru Patatics. And an essay by me on the controversy in Romania around Videograms of a Revolution by Andrei Ujică and Harun Farocki, which also screened during the Romanian Video Week (the name of the conference).

AM: I read that the original open call for Ex Oriente Lux got almost no proposals back from the artist community and it was determined that a new media literacy workshop would be done in August of 1993 to equip artists with the knowledge to make proposals. This workshop occurred mainly in Bucharest but had versions that happened in Timisoara and Tirgu Mures. When I interviewed Nina Czegledy she marvelled at the hands-on approach that you and Keiko had with the artists. SCCA Curator Calin Dan who curated Ex Oriente Lux refers to the newly "trained artists" who became the contributors to the exhibition. And Egon Bunne was brought in presumably as a creative producer to help make all the technical magic happen with these newly endowed makers.

This level of collaboration in cultural production between artists, theorists, and ambitious media availability is unheard of prior. A notion that is even more exciting when thinking about the advanced technological level of production that is asymmetrically advanced for anyone but especially the Romanians, especially if one is to calibrate against western standards at the time. What for you was the creative opportunity here?

GL: To show that the world is there to be captured, aestheticized, virtualized, no matter what. In the years after 1989 Romanians were dragged into the media-saturated world of globalization overnight, after a long period of isolation and misery. If we only focus on Coca-Cola, bananas and Lucky Strike cigarettes we oversee an entire universe of deep conceptual thinking, conceptual art that had survived, that was already there, that could immediately be plugged in and transformed. To me, in my early 30s, to work amidst the communist ruins with Romanian artists and intellectuals such as SubReal or Anca Oroveanu was a privilege. As an anarchist, I did not feel any guilt or co-responsibility for the human destruction made in the name of communism. This brought an incredible

feeling of freedom, to experiment together—knowing that such possibility spaces are rare and close down soon. It is amazing to explore and work together beyond simple idealism. What I admired about working with Romanians was—and still is—their acute awareness of power relations, which is so down to earth, right in your face; a lived form of negativity as a creative force.

AM: Screening *Videograms of a Revolution* was a headliner and controversial aspect of this event. It had only been screened once in Romania just a year prior in late 92 and was met with extreme criticism and opposition as being a false document or "fake news". What was the value/expectation of presenting this experimental film in this context?

GL: This West-German documentary perfectly built the bridge between the world of Western media theory and the dirty reality on the ground. I did not buy the argument that the film was naïve. I had worked with Andrej Ujica on it at the very beginning, back in 1990 (I knew him from the Kittler media theory scene). He had gone into exile in West Germany in 1981 but was from Romania and knew the dire situation intimately. However, he chose not to expose the 'real' world of power interests (also known as the truth) that was hiding behind the images. None of us was interested in a Noam Chomsky-type approach. This is the line of Le Monde diplomatique, which depicted the Romanian media event as a fabrication, fake news, in particular the manipulation of the footage of the Ceausescus, the confusion of the origin of dead bodies in Timisoara, who was shooting at whom and the number of killed civilians during the uprising. Western theorists, like me, emphasize the pathos of revolutionary images, which has to be investigated on their own terms: the medium is the message. What does it mean when the orchestrated spectacle gets interrupted and implodes? What happens when the camera changes sides and allows multilayered 'reality tv' to broadcast live, when a crowd of strange characters take over the tv studio and stage a take-over? And (former)communist officials reinvent themselves, on the spot, as democrats and take control?

AM: Sei's last words to the SCCA Prague director Ludwik Hlavacek were: "They need me and my work elsewhere." Keiko Sei is one of a handful of important and yet totally unknown protagonists of this story. She was collaborating with network founder Suzy Meszoly from as early as 1989/90 and appears in SCCA materials as an important media expert, curator, producer, and lecturer. There is a story I have seen repeatedly that she used

to carry around a suitcase archive full of revolutionary dissident films and materials. She even talked about often travelling under the cover of being perceivable as an innocent Japanese student knowing she might otherwise be caught if she was maybe a white male artist-looking type. (I know those are different times and higher stakes). Keiko wears so many hats in this early period but for me, it is how she sees her own cultural operative qualities in this environment that make her an interesting subject. How would you describe someone like Keiko Sei and how she saw herself and the purpose and value of art? And what did its application through the network offer?

GL: I heard for the first time of Keiko Sei in early 1989 when I began as Mediamatic editor. She was a video art curator in Tokyo where she collaborated with the American translator Alfred Birnbaum, who both curated Infermental 8 in Tokyo in 1988 before Keiko moved to Eastern Europe, precisely at the right moment. During the turmoil, she based herself in Prague and lived there for a long time before moving to Bangkok and working in Myanmar, where Birnbaum had settled down (this is the 'elsewhere' she indicated). For sure, turbulent times attract independent, singular characters like Keiko—and me. There were no institutional ties. The communist cultural policy had imploded. The only places that more or less functioned were embassies. Big companies hadn't moved in either. It was basically up to entrepreneurial cowboys, who moved stuff in trucks and sold them on the spot. This is also how we felt. Japanese curators like Keiko Sei were extremely well-informed about obscure artists, videos, films, performances and avant-garde groups. At the time, literary the height of the Japanese boom, there was a lot of money floating around there to cater to highly specialized young audiences back in Japan with 'exotic' information.

Cynically speaking everything you do—or don't—contributes to the inevitable gentrification and commodification. In this view, all political and cultural expressions are sellouts, but I don't buy into that. I would not say that we were 'pioneers'. There was merely a short opportunity to assist like-minded soloists—and create temporary autonomous zones together. The danger of right-wing nationalists taking over was widely felt. 1991 was the year of the implosion of the Soviet Union and the start of the war in former Yugoslavia. Two years into that the overall situation in the former Eastern Bloc looked grim. Rising poverty, mass unemployment, and entire societies in free fall, with no EU or NATO insight. What was there was raw history as it unfolded (like now in March 2022, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine), under the

umbrella of a neo-liberal globalist regime during an economic recession that did not really want to conquer this vast Slavic territory. Western elites had zero interest in these Eastern domains (and still don't, just visit Rome, Paris, Madrid or London and ask around). It wasn't exotic, just tragic. Except for those few interested in the human, all too human side of what we later called Deep Europe.

AM: You're one of few internal voices willing to speak critically and openly about the SCCA as a model. Participants often say that same thing in a very confident way and hope it suffices as a critical appraisal: "It was a good thing." At what point did things change for you?

GL: Coming from the squatters scene in Amsterdam and West Berlin, having experience for 15 years in autonomous social movements, the NGO model was not a given. There was, and still is, a range of organizational forms at the disposal of artists. In the communist East, the dominant form was the artist union, which had predecessors before the war, but that model was compromised (what an artist union could mean in 2022 in the USA or Europe is a question we indeed address in the current Creative Reset project at the Institute of Network Cultures). The NGO is a specific legal, administrative model of 'staff' working in an 'office', guided by a 'director' and a 'board'. Needless to say, there are multitudes of other forms of self-organization. I wrote a critique of the SCCA model on the nettime mailing list (May 13, 1997) called *Soros and the NGO Question, or The Art of Being Independent*, later published in my MIT Press book *Dark Fiber* (2002). The essay reads like a summary of the debates over the previous five years that circled around artists creating their own networks. This is similar, but different, to the discussions in the decades before about the relationship between museums (and their curators) and art collectives (and avant-garde groups, even earlier). The point was not so much about money, the role of collectors and the art markets. Yes, it was about autonomy, in this case, the means of production and distribution. And the power to redefine who was in charge of the discourse, and the means of interpretation.

Nowadays, there is hardly anything left of the rich ecology of diverse Soros-led initiatives. The network of contemporary art centres was comparatively tiny, and only of many, compared to the much larger media program, the internet initiative (led by Jonathan Peizer), the newly established Central European University in Budapest and countless special programs for Roma, to study overseas or support funds for scientists in Russia. These days

'Soros' as a term, a meme, has been completely overdetermined by the global extreme right. This is, in a way, making it impossible to discuss the figure of George Soros and his Open Society foundations, which is a pity. If like us, you had militant antifa background, with parents that grew up during the war, it was clear which side you were on, regardless of the speculative capitalist nature of the Soros money. The debates were fearless and centred on strategy: what's to be done? Being acutely aware of the rise (or return) of nationalism and antisemitism on the street of Eastern Europe did not stop us to think about how, we, as Europeans, should organize ourselves beyond becoming aspiring neo-liberal consumer subjects or resentful xenophobes. What is the role of funding and private foundations in culture and the arts, what is a think tank, and how can artists and intellectuals act as a network, coop, group or collective, caring for common infrastructures that act in their interest? These questions are still on the table, 30 years later.

AM: Contemporary Art is a western fad no different than any technological innovation imposed onto a system. Stripped of industry or orthodox uses, Art itself has an innovative material quality aligned with mediumship (think divination) allowing for a whole range of tactical perceptual tricks that can create new language and pathways for seeing. The SCCA Network demonstrates many times an understanding of art that is using it as a communication technology with a holistic potential that can be applied through direct action. In this respect, the network represents the power of contemporary art as an active tool/laboratory for decolonization. And yet is itself a grand act of colonization. What for you is the biggest takeaway from this complex and paradoxical moment in contemporary art history?

GL: Contemporary art as colonizing practice, policed by identity questions, is an appealing trope but might run away from the bottom-up question of how the arts should organize and maintain themselves. Over the past decade, we've seen an impasse in the social imagination when it comes to the power of networks and self-organization in favour of extractivist centralized platforms (such as Instagram and TikTok). The curator-art magazine/critic-driven gallery-biennale-museum system is undermined by the similarly unequal financialization tendency of the NFT system. What happens when the 'contemporary' label would be replaced with 'crypto'? The Web3 craze is as much a product of the SCCA focus on 'new media' as is the handful of artists, curators and critics that emerged during the wild 1990s and who are now in established positions. The issue here is not such much about a worthy

decentralized digital approach versus the old school curator star system with its Artforum-NY-centric art market in which all cities, countries and continents were virtually non-existing. Dethroning the Western white cube system will ultimately not be resolved through identity policing but by regional and local experiments, done by real existing art scenes that thrive through sustainable revenue models for the arts.