(This is an email interview, conducted by Teresa Numerico on March 18, 2023, for the Italian daily Il Manifesto, that took place in the context of two book launches of the Italian translation of my book Stuck on the Platform (Le paludi della Piattaforma), published by Nero in Rome., early 2023. A short version of the interview was published in Italian in the March 21, 2023 edition of Il Manifesto).

Teresa Numerico: In *Stuck on the Platform* you write: "We urgently need agency, yet we don't have it. The online billions are frowned upon as busy bees working for the Valley or seen as (addicted) victims of the latest conspiracy." How can we obtain the agency we need, considering that the subjected subject is not even aware of being subjugated? How can we activate an antagonistic project in a "disillusioned time"?

Geert Lovink: In his 1972 *Mass Psychology without Resentment*, Alexander Mitscherlich remarks that the critique of mass behaviour is always judged from the outside. The critic is never part of the crowd, never a mass participant him or herself. The same can be said of social media user and their critics fifty years later. We need to be careful not to judge from the outside and train ourselves in a critical imagination of the techno-social: what does it mean when an app like TikTok has 1.5 billion users? Despite our disgust, we need to be with the social media masses. How did they grow so immense, so fast? In the case of today's personalized systems, we still feel addressed as unique beings—and this paralyses us: we are alone together, immersed in the lonely online crowd. Paradoxically, we can only act again when we admit that we were all stuck inside these golden cages. The way out is to become social again. This can be done by gaining an anonymous, collective status in the (both reals and virtual) crowd. But are there also other means? In Italy, Franco Berardi and Tiziana Terranova have brilliantly taken up the task to theorize the techno-social condition—and the whole world reads them.

Because of historical traumas, 20th-century mass psychologists, from Freud to Fromm, could only see the desire to become part of a crowd as an escape from, and fear of, freedom. The crowd was seen as a danger to democracy and individual freedom. Fast-forward a century later and we see that the reverse is also the case. Today, the social is felt as a medicine to poisonous social media, to put it in Bernard Stiegler's terms. The need for transformative events such as debates, raves, festivals and demonstrations, including their hybrid component, is real. The common drive to overcome

stress, despair and loneliness is there—even if it's only for a brief moment. While this may sound liberating, there is also a 'quantification of the social' happening (as Steffan Mau described it). Rankings and ratings are real, and have a negative psychological effect: The message is: compete with the ones close to you, don't show empathy or solidarity and keep a distance. These are the barriers that keep us from coming together. Instead, we keep updated and keep a watchful eye on what others are up to.

TN: You suggest the need for an anthropology of emergence as a way to investigate networks beyond taxonomic alternative models of control and decentralization, which is really interesting. How can we achieve such a relational move that avoids being stuck in the old antagonistic rhetoric, that leaves us without practical suggestions on how to produce a transformation in the right direction?

GL: I would emphasize the design challenge to create supportive tools that assist in the hard times ahead. So far, social media apps are ad-driven, not task-driven. Italy is in a perfect position to bring together its theorists, hackers and designers to take up this task. We need to domesticate, to tame digital networks so that will work for us, instead of the other way around. I am not a fan of European offline romanticism. A yoga weekend in the countryside without your phone is not the solution (even though I am in favour of a ban on phones in primary and high school classrooms). When we criticize Silicon Valley, we inevitably get close to the dream of throwing away these addictive devices so that we can regain our lives. This is only a wishful dream. In reality, the phone is vital to help us coordinate our busy multitasking lives and is ideal to optimize dead time. A start could be to redesign apps in such a way that they are no longer update-centric so that notifications will be a thing of the past. Tools should assist us, not be designed to disturb and distract us. The challenge is how to deal with the entertainment aspect and the 'human right' not to be bored. But these are questions for later. It could start with a ban on the attention-driven business model. And apps Made in Europe. 'Sovereign cloud services' offered by Microsoft is a joke, right?

TN: One of the crucial points in your book is that even considering the political effect of infrastructures, we cannot imagine that the technical architecture could exhaust all the political positioning we need. Can you explain the final list of political moves, that prevents us from being stuck in technical solutionism?

GL: Let me start with the need for digital modesty. A radical redesign of the internet is a medium-sized global challenge that can be realized in a relatively short amount of time, compared to the climate, migration and housing crises, let alone the exploding social inequality. This redesign will need to be done on local, national and EU levels. I do not believe in the return of some multi-stakeholder or UN global order. This means that we have to act, here in Italy in the Netherlands, and not even wait for Brussels. EU regulation will come too late as it only addresses yesterday's problems. Regulation will need to be replaced by redesign. Next to this, we need to deal with the politics around the socialization of Google, Meta and the internet infrastructure such as cables and data centres. How much of this can be achieved through different protocols and software? It will not just be a matter of building a few non-extractive, secure apps. To get there is a need to untangle the way-too-close relationship between open source/free software and the tech giants. This is an unspoken drama that needs to be addressed. It's easy to state that "the only safe AI is open source" and that "all closed AIs are dangerous." The fact is that Microsoft, Google, Meta etc. have infiltrated, corrupted and taken over the so-called neutral and cool hacker scene (incl. internet governance bodies). To demand that open source will be the defining tool against corporate control is an empty phrase at this moment. We cannot easily ignore this drama and say that governance is a complex legal issue. No, the future will be technical, not legal, if there is one in the first place.

TN: In *Stuck on the Platform* you alternate some chapters in which you describe the platforms fatigue such as zoom fatigue or the exhaustion of the networked psyche, or even stuck on the platform to chapters in which you try to formulate an exit strategy and some adequate tactics to achieve your goals. Can you briefly describe your line of reasoning: my hint is that even when you describe the negative effects of the platform on the subject or on art you are suggesting that we are close to a turning point which is maybe not anticipated in the analysis of digital media critique, but it is carved in the flesh of users. Are we fed up with binge-watching? Are we bored of food porn, or of Insta lives? Are you suggesting that boredom could save us from addiction?

GL: According to some boredom is a protective shield against lethal mental intrusions from outside. At what point will endemic exhaustion lead to a breakdown? Where is the tipping point, when regression flips into collapse? In this context, it is important to learn from the scientific debates over the

1,5-2 Celsius heating up of the planet's atmosphere. This is such a crucial figure because after this point irreversible and uncontrollable dynamics will start to accelerate. The same can also be said of the madhouse of the attention economy and the underlying ad tech ecosystem. Barcelona artist Joana Moll predicts an imminent breakdown of the ad tech companies that work underneath TikTok, Instagram YouTube, Facebook, etc. Right now we only hear from lay-offs inside the tech giants themselves but the real avalanche will happen once the underlying business eco-system, the ad-tech world, falls apart. This deeply interrelated data economy is also a card house, be prepared. The implosion of social media will not happen because of Brussels regulations—or our demands to break up and socialize the platforms, for that matter.

TN: All over the book there is a profound reflection on the shape of the networks, which is not only a matter of technology but also of social design and of collective thinking. The shape is not a neutral attribute, it is a possibility that creates or prevents the space for transforming our world for the better. In your opinion which is the productive shape of a network?

GL: Unfortunately, most mathematicians that created the tiny 'network science' discipline sold out. Like their fellow programmers, they couldn't resist. This brain drain was so sudden—and total—that this emerging research field literary vanished in less than a decade. All we're left with are a small group of social scientists and even fewer humanities theorists and designers that now grapple with the unprecedented power of platforms and the synthesis of tech forces on all levels into an even bigger Hegelian entity called 'the stack'. It's a sad role that I have taken up in my recent work: where have all the networks gone? The Italian context is one of the few in the world that still speaks of 'social networks'. The fact is, platforms have subsumed networks. Look at the way we scroll through the hours of TikTok videos can basically do without social recommendation. The addictive part here is the automated never-ending tailored stream of suggestions. The algorithm can basically do without others, replying, liking or retweeting. If you like this you may also like, the basic YouTube, Amazon, Spotify and Netflix logic—ideals for ads, too bad for your social life online. Social exchange on its own is no longer the prime 'product'. This death of the social also creates space for new possibilities of social self-organization.

TN: The power of platforms is produced out of a balance between strength visibility and ubiquity and invisible force that is exercised to maintain the

government of power, via secret lobbying activities, or via the commercial acquisition of all dangerous competitors. How can we defeat their strategic approach tactically? Should we copy their methods, or should we use more public, explicit strategies of struggle, more in line with our collective, common goods preservation aims? In other words, do we need a revolutionary avant-garde to defeat the platformed Leviathan?

GL: Yes, and I am armament that Italians should that the lead. Italians have the most sophisticated concepts of what the techno-social is and how it should look like. Most other Europeans are clueless. For them, every software from Silicon Valley is a God-given product that cannot be questioned. Just download and use it and in the meanwhile focus on your cheese, tulips, borsch, champagne, whatever. The social? What is that? Social networks? Do they still exist then? MySpace and Friendster died a decade ago. European start-ups delicately walk around the techno-social question and instead focus on biotech, games, big data, and AI. This manifested itself early on when a top-down attempt to design a European search engine failed. We should not be afraid to start small, in the shadow of events. However, learning from the 'Lost Decade' we can say that do-good prototypes alone will not defeat the platform Leviathan—a beautiful, precise and frightening metaphor, by the way. The self-organization will need to learn how to scale up. The good news is that the Leviathan will, most likely, implode. But also then the alternatives will need to be in place. Will they be ready in time?

TN: We are aware that Silicon Valley start-ups and well-established GAFAM are fragile as the Silicon Valley Bank collapse unequivocally manifests. Why we are still ready to believe in their uncontrolled, disruptive power of exploiting people's data, after expropriating collective knowledge? Why can't we just block their wills with regulations, practices and the self-awareness of our human, political and social rights?

GL: We, the online billions, are sitting in a Platonian time cave, looking at the shadow play of 2-3-year-old technologies. These startups are themselves products of past finance deals. The ChatGTP hype of the past months is a prime example. AI investments already topped in 2022 and we're nearing the next AI winter but the trash consumer apps that are thrown at us still fascinate many. There is a similar situation with social media. TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are all in different situations but what they have in common is that they are stagnating and hover in an inherently

unstable fashion. Common users are not stupid and start to get a sense that there's something wrong. The marketing machine around influencers is hampering.

TN: In the Minima Digitalia chapter you cite Bogna Kronior who suggests that to resist the power of the platform we have to silence the need for communication and keep our thoughts for ourselves, without dissipating them in a never-ending meaningless buzz in social media. Do you agree with such a radical, existential approach to resistance? Do you think it is feasible? I ask you to explicit it a bit more because in that chapter you use a very peculiar way of interacting with your sources, something radically communal. Can you say something about that writing process too?

GL: This may be an appropriate Finish-Baltic solution where long silences are an accepted part of the social conversation, but will this custom ever reach Italy? Let's not buy into national stereotypes but that isn't going to happen. The world admires passionate debating rhetoric and gestures, there is nothing wrong with that. But what's addressed here is not culture but omnipresent recording techniques. And they are starting to merge. Do we want to store all our words, thoughts, gestures and even dreams? And then resell them to third parties? We can say that surveillance cameras and data collection points do not bother us but I am afraid their impact is profound, in a subliminal way. This is what Tijmen Schep described as 'social cooling': as we become more aware of how systems work, we start to change our behaviour accordingly, a societal feedback loop.

Some are brave enough to protest. Look at France, Iran and Israel as recent examples. Or the white paper protests. The Communist Party of China wants to know who each and every one of these protesters was. The same happens to the thousands that organized resistance in Hong Kong, back in 2020-21. The social credit system is not a joke. It also exists in the Netherlands where one of the key political crises resolves around a discriminatory algorithm, employed by the state. All aspects of social life have been digitized and these data can and will be used against its citizens, in particular against identifiable vulnerable groups.

Concerning the inclusion of quotes, slogans and aphorisms: this is a freedom that I take. It's neither academic nor journalistic. It is an old technique of idea compression that I learned from diverse authors such as Cioran, Nietzsche, Baudrillard, Canetti and Adorno. Over the past decade, ultra-short texts have become an integral part of internet culture, think of tweets

and memes. I was passionate about 'sloganism' and the production of concepts much earlier, as you can see in my long collaboration with the Dutch designer and dear friend Mieke Gerritzen. Often, the short notes have an untimely feel, it is not merely social commentary. I wish more writers integrate them into their work but in this age of marketing and 'storytelling' one's popularity is believed to suffer when your texts are seen as fragmented and full of mysterious stand-alone quotes and encrypted messages from out of space. Book publishers are adamant that essays and aphorisms don't sell. So be it. I am glad we've still got the web and hand-over experience with self-publishing to the next generations.

TN: Don't you think that in the digital time, we're living in, with its zoom fatigue and deep fakes, there is a need for face-to-face, in-person meetings? Is there something like feeling homesick of presence with its perceptive reality effects? Don't you believe that we will assist an anachronistic analogic desire, whose origin will be found exactly in the deceptive nature of digital media, that will exhaust our imagination, by colonizing it too strongly to resist, a sort of unforeseen counter-effect?

GL: The late Hakim Bey already discussed this in the mid-nineties and called it the desire for 'breast-to-breast communication'. Three decades later we still discuss the real and the virtual as separate entities but this is no longer the case. Fair enough, during the harsh Covid lockdowns there was a strictly policed separation and loneliness levels skyrocketed while

The more prosperous ones experienced relief. The expected post-Covid orgy didn't happen. Instead, we're dragged from one anxiety to the next: war, inflation, and high energy prices, resulting in higher travel and overnight costs. You are right that gatherings in real life are the way to go but they will inevitably be more local. I am a fan of summer and winter schools, festivals, book sprints, and hackathons. We need to conspire, outside of the watchful eye of officials. Meetings in real often have consequences while virtual information tends to remain 'interesting'. Add to this the messy wetware desire and you'll get an idea why the social forces that implement change kindly reject the Zoom/Teams invitation to do their own thing.