Writing is both thinking and acting. Through writing, we explore and reflect upon the meaningful coherence of words and actions. This conversation between Geert Lovink and Nikita Lin discusses a constructive view of the social network in technologized cultures. It explores the tactics, aesthetic and political, that could help us not only get through breakdowns but also create new beginnings through writing. Since 2004 Lovink has been heading the Institute of Network Cultures at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and since 2022 Art and Network Cultures professor in art history at the University of Amsterdam. The conversation is situated in Lovink's three recent books: *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism*, *Stuck on the Platform: Reclaiming the Internet* and *Extinction Internet: Our Inconvenient Truth Moment*.

Nikita Lin: Let's begin with the titles of your latest three books from 2019, 2021 and 2022. They all carry a pessimistic and dark tone. However, on many occasions, I saw you describe yourself as an optimist. For example, in a [1999 email exchange](#) with Alexander Galloway, you said, "I am a professional optimist (by nature) and it is my passion to create strategies for getting new initiatives off the ground." Are you also a tactical pessimist (by design)?

Geert Lovink: My brain may be a pessimist but my heart remains an optimist. What I'm not is a realist. For instance, capitalist realism, as described by Mark Fisher, is a political program with the intention that we're giving up. But you are right: the dialectics at play here goes to the core of my nearly 50 years of political and theoretical engagement, which started in the spring of 1975 when I joined a 'third world' group called 'wereldwinkel' in the central village of Nijkerk where I spent the last three years of my high school before returning to Amsterdam. Throughout this period I believed in the premise that my political strategy needs to be based on a proper, painful, critical analysis of the present and not on some quasi-eternal values. One could say that this is a naive form of historicism, namely that there is something to be learned from past experiences. Would this even include the eternal return of the same motive, I wonder? Regardless, this is what I believe: organized subversion always needs to be grounded in a merciless analysis of the present condition. The deeper the merrier. Only then power can be sabotaged. My aim, and many of my lost-in-between-punk generation friends, is not to grab power but to claim autonomy, to build temporary free spaces and experience life together in these odd 'squatted' spaces. Only there we can experience freedom. no matter how short and

fragile.

NL: *Extinction Internet* closes with "There is beauty in the breakdown." What kind of beauty is it?

GL: Obviously this is not beauty in the sense of a nice picture that moves or upsets, or a song that calms you down. It is something produced by AI software, to stay close to the contemporary condition. Technical monstrosity is not teaching us anything. The breakdown is precisely not news, not a pedagogical image. It is also not something that comes to us as an inner experience, as described by, for instance, Ernst Jünger's intense life and death experiences in the trances of World War I or Georges Bataille's studies on ecstasy and rupture. Breakdown comes at the end of a long phase of non-stop denial, pain, suffering and coping. Finally, things come to an end—or so it seems. The breakdown has the promise of a new beginning. Please bring a halt to the undefined misery, and the never-ending dread of social media, audits, meetings, targets, and assessments. There is beauty in the break, yes. Perhaps not at the bottom of the abyss. There it is just black. But remember, even the pure black surfacing in Kazimir Malevich's painting has a mysterious depth and should not merely be associated with depression and anxiety. Black, together with red, is the anarchist colour.

Howard Ehrich writes in *Reinventing Anarchy, Again*: "The black flag is the negation of all flags. It is a negation of nationhood … Black is a mood of anger and outrage at all the hideous crimes against humanity perpetrated in the name of allegiance to one state or another … But black is also beautiful. It is a colour of determination, of resolve, of strength, a colour by which all others are clarified and defined … So black is negation, is anger, is outrage, is mourning, is beauty, is hope, is the fostering and sheltering of new forms of human life and relationship on and with this earth" Thank you, [Wikipedia](#).

NL: There is an intertwining of politics and aesthetics in the way you see, describe and experience breakdown, which serves as education for humanity/human beings/the human being/people, and which is at the same time political and aesthetic. Literature is education, too. This is what I was told in school. Some of the great literary works were intended as political projects. The intentional arrangement of words and texts is driven by the desire to express, communicate and keep track of the otherwise ungraspable, invisible traces of thoughts and sensations. It is the tool of the imagination. I think writing (fictional or non-fictional), for an author, is, first of all, self-education. It involves time management that comes with all its

psychic complexities: spontaneity, intensity, duration, etc. This awareness of time is sometimes provoked by breakdown and despair of powerlessness. Writing is both action and execution, feeling and thinking in both intuitive and logical ways. You write a lot. I wonder in what ways does the constructive view of network influence your own writing, both in terms of the style and the topics you are dealing with?

GL: I see myself as a theorist, critic and activist. I have also done journalistic work, producing magazines and radio programs. I do not consider myself a writer of fiction, or non-fiction, for that matter. Here in the Netherlands, this is considered a calling, a profession, and I have never been part of that group (though some of my good friends are writers). You may notice that I do not consider myself an academic either and do not take part in their modes of text production, such as writing peer-reviewed journal articles. I somehow got involved in higher education when I was in my mid-forties.

However, I do love writing and producing books. The first one was collective research about a large blockade of a Dutch nuclear plant, in the late 1980s. I was 21 at the time. Since then I have produced many and this really helps you to get into the routine, from the very first outline to the launch, publicity and distribution. This taught me that writing is never merely a solitary activity. At the very moment you write, yes. But this is something of a luxury experience for me. In my case, the moments I can really focus and work for longer periods, without disturbance, on a text, are precious (and thus well prepared). It's fine to be romantic about it, but the reality of the production is a different one.

What we do at our Institute of Network Cultures is that we demystify the making process and show how 'publishing' can be done in a more independent way. This is, in part, by sharing (technical-processual) knowledge, in part by showing that writing, in essence, is a social activity. Writers have their teachers, editors, publicists, designers, printers, sellers and platforms where they host their texts. And not to forget: their readers. Many of their roles have undergone profound technological changes over the past 50 years. I am not arguing that writers should have all these skills. Do-It-Yourself indy publishing is as much a social form as any other. But writers do have to get more digital skills to do their research, no doubt. With this, I do not only mean to find a proper response to the latest AI toys.

A content approach to answer your question is to look at the way I am trying to bring networks and the internet into my writing (as this has been my core

topic for the past 30 years). I do not want to give the suggestion here that my approach is the only one. I just report what I am doing. I love the grand vistas of far-reaching systematic theories. But that's not me. I am into essays, interviews, aphorisms, sloganisms, and memes. It is a privilege to develop critical concepts that people recognize, find useful and start to apply to their own activities such as „tactical media," „net criticism," „sad by design," or „internet extinction." I then blend those with snippets that I collect online. Sometimes I use quotes in case studies: online video, revenue models, selfies, Wikipedia etc. I always worked on specific, not general internet theory. What I still have not figured out is how all this relates to history writing. How to capture fast-changing real-time phenomena? Part of my work is to write chronicles of (European) critical internet culture. Indeed, I document but also leave room to anticipate. The better works remain untimely but this is next to impossible to predict in advance. The speculative Adilkno works of 30-35 years ago (the collective I was part of) is still relevant today, readers assure me, but this is due to its deliberative style to create 'unidentified theoretical objects'.

NL: As to the psychoanalytical aspect of breakdown, I can think of one example that is close to my own childhood memories. When I was small, there was no such thing as infrastructure in the village, let alone digital infrastructure. We had to walk across mountains and rivers on foot, without good shoes. Walking wasn't fun, not a fashion like hiking in Europe today. As a little kid, I hated hiking. I often had pain in my feet. Sometimes my feet were bleeding and swelling up while walking and our destination was like still two mountains away, and my mother would just tell me to keep up. I broke down with tears and wanted to go on strike. In such situations, my mother would tell me to make up stories for myself that would ease the pain for the moment. "Forget about the feet. You don't have them now." It was a kind of mental conditioning. We have found that our brain has this magic power of making up stories, which helps us get through difficult times, and breakdowns. We know the pain was real. And the feet were real. It was like giving up one's sovereignty over a territory; nevertheless, there's a chance you can reclaim it.

GL: All these potentially traumatic experiences you had to go through are cultural techniques to survive and deal with suffering. I refuse to romanticize them, and neither do you. Through its evolution, the human brain got structured in such a way as to forget hardship, even though the scars remain. Otherwise, women would never have a second child and

parents would never raise other children. What territory do you want to reclaim today? Not the traumas, not the pain. I would say, the ability to create other stories. Neuroplasticity teaches us that there is hope (even though I am not certain if this also applies to the ancient layers).

In terms of 'story theory' we see two opposing trends at the moment. Byung-Chul Han's 2023 essay deals with the 'narration crisis,' which manifests itself in the inability of people to remember and retell coherent stories, reducing a complex narrative to a few half-sentences of general phrases (Han 2023). Details and ambivalence are missing. The contingency storm of social media has erased the storytelling ability, selling stories back to its customers. Successful media, politicians and marketers are those who can communicate appealing micro-stories. I am summarizing Han here. Oral history used to re-produce social cohesion but there is no narrated life anymore. At least you can tell us the story of your feet. Against this trend, there is the renaissance of storytelling in education and marketing. Film and video play an important role here. Think of the movies *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*, both complex stories (which have become synthesized into a Barbenheimer meme). You noticed that the brain has this ability to make up stories. How can we tap into this when social media so seductively urge us to skip the unfolding stories and swipe to the next item?

NL: In *Stuck on the Platform* you beautifully evoked Hannah Arendt, describing the political capability of networks by creating new beginnings. Could you expand on that? Should the new beginnings always take place in the same place or change locations? Where and when?

GL: In my reading, she wrote this in discussion with Spengler, Heidegger and other German conservative thinkers who could only mourn about *Seinsvergessenheit*, the loss of skills, spiritual depth, and social cohesion after the upheavals of the industrial revolution and the related imperial wars that devastated Europe—and the world. Arendt's answer was not a romantic longing for a return to the village, the forest and the family. Hers are not utopian ideas. Arendt's call for new beginnings was a product of her lived migrant experiences. This can also be applied to political action and the design of new organizational forms. But also to aesthetics in music, films, fashion and visual culture—and of course internet culture. The issue here is how to break the spell of the current platform monopolies that create so much boredom and despair. But even if we leave the platform question aside, there is always the possibility of radical forgetting (as an alternative

to the unpopular gesture of erasing one's phone apps).

The social is fluid, restless, and can so easily be rearranged. This is a good thing but at the same time also a danger, if you think about how easily billions of users can be manipulated. The only hope here will be stubborn that will run actual communities, networks that matter and are not just there to kill time. Beyond good or evil, soon humankind will no longer be in hoovering mode. Will we then be nostalgic and wonder about all the entertaining video snippets on TikTok and Insta? For sure we will have forgotten about all of them, the influencers, dating sites, games, online markets and crypto. The collective amnesia in our field is already impressive.

NL: Back to my "pain in the feet" analogy, I wonder if new beginnings mean that we stop telling stories to ourselves that "no feet, no pains," or do we stop walking by foot, instead taking trains or biking?

GL: The pain-in-the-feet motive is part of the sacrifice myth. In your case the one about building the great Chinese nation as a world power? China became so big because of your suffering. But the question should be: Can China also thrive without the exploitation of its citizens and the environment? Will there be a Great China anyway after the Climate Disaster? What stories will we tell then? About wet feet? One thing is for sure: people will be on the run. They already are. Most likely China will no longer be the Global Factory that will produce the sneakers and sandals for the millions of migrants. They will come from Africa, Pakistan and Indonesia. In this light, new beginnings would be those that create powerful condensed stories about that exodus and its turbulent chain of causes: exploration, extraction, exploitation, extermination, and extinction.

NL: Perhaps equally interesting is the shoe analogy (穿小鞋, literally give someone small-sized shoes and let her/him/… suffer) in this case as you mentioned power structuring and governing. Arne de Boever uses it in his investigation of Francois Julien's thought about China and he came to the conclusion that the Chinese are manipulative and the West are persuasive. Well, with the digital you can obviously see how manipulative everyone can be.

GL: The issue here is that manipulation is not felt by most. In a sense, this is also not true as many will find out not much later. What's happening is a time race. The subliminal steering, filtering aka 'governance' is happening—but when will we find out if that is fake news, propaganda,

ideology or hegemonic discourse, for that matter? In the case of social media platforms, I would not use the term persuasive. Users never had to be convinced to create an account, install the app, type in the URL, click on the link or swipe the phone. All are pre-installed. There is no natural decision moment anymore. When were you persuaded to start using WeChat? This is the wrong question. Hypergrowth happens overnight. How many hundreds of millions already used ChatGTP in the first week after its launch? The other way around would make more sense. How many times have you already been persuaded to delete your Facebook account? The self-realization that one has been 'manipulated' is a painful moment for each of us. Who's longing for the moment of disillusion? We'd rather hover in an eternal stage of ignorance. Regression numbs the pain of enlightenment. Rather circumvent that and continue the state of stagnation. Don't think about it.

NL: The changing global geopolitical infrastructure (human and non-human) is worth another long conversation. For China, technology offers an efficient and effective template for writing national stories of success. And yes, as you have noted, the massive construction of technical infrastructures, and environmental and human labor exploitation provide the material foundation for such a successful template. China's industrial surplus is being exported to other developing countries. I am not sure whether and where this chain of writing successful stories will continue. Or if it is necessary.

GL: China is not (yet?) selling itself as a lifestyle. We all are aware of that. Made in China, yes. It is spreading power and control to strengthen its own interests. Plus old-school media influencing CCTV-style, yes, yes. Give this a decade or more and then the subliminal 'algo' effects will also be utilized. But maybe we'll never get there and will the empire remain material, resources and commodities-based? Is ideology a trap for regimes? Will there be a geopolitical battle of ideas? Convince the Russian population of Putin's evilness? Explain to the Chinese that they are better off with a multiple-party democracy. This is no longer happening. The Cold War was seventy years ago. These days, rulers on all sides believe in implosion, crisis, exhaustion, and depletion of entire societies, not in ideological battles, winning some argument, pushing for the right message, let alone winning the hearts and minds of the people. Inside certain countries, perhaps, but certainly no longer on a global level.

NL: Yesterday, at Frankfurt airport, I was reading one of the books, *Data Farms: Circuits, Labour, Territory*, which Ned Rossiter gave me last year in

Berlin. Ned and his co-author remind us that "when a sovereign power is decoupled from the state, the conceptualization of habit is similarly liberated from the everyday routines of a human subject. Instead, the habits of machines and data can be identified as asserting a sovereign command of how the every day is experienced." At first, I was surprised by the term 'habits of machines and data'. Then I got distracted by the question of human author-ity and data author-ity in co-operating with today's industrial economic-social infrastructure. I started wondering about the relation between author, authorization, and author-ity, and the software and hardware configuration in the early days of the emerging internet when you were actively involved in tactical media. What kind of author and authority was advocated in tactical media?

GL: Certainly not a fixed identity, as promoted these days. It is hard to imagine from today's perspective but the internet thirty years ago did not have profiles. One would choose a user name and there you go. One could be an author with a real name and have multiple other personalities at the same time. ID data were not centrally stored. One cannot use Google, Instagram or TikTok these days without a verification process. This created a culture of anonymity and experimentation—with all the dangers attached, still on a tiny scale compared to now. I am talking here about the 'short summer of the internet' until 1997. I am not a person who's into romanticizing this period of great upheavals on the European continent after the fall of the Berlin Wall. I personally experienced it as a liberation but the collapse of communist regimes came with a high cost, think of the Balkan wars and the collapse of relative economic security. Unresolved European border issues and shifting alliances led to the invasion of Ukraine in 2014. As you can see, back then internet experimentation and the end of the Cold War really came together in time and space. Nowadays the author is an influencer and the authorities are Meta and Google.

NL: What was exactly the concept of the internet? I guess it was not just two buttons: on and off, beginning and ending. Like you plug in and surf the internet, you plug out and leave the internet. What was the difference between a project like the internet and the Great Wall and the Three Gorges Dam in China? The Great Wall was built for military defence. The Three Gorges Dam makes use of nature's force and turns it into energy for social-economic interest. Engineering thinking and practice are in general manipulative. The ethical argument is 'for the betterment of humankind'. Engineers do not persuade very much. They just do it. They make and

manipulate. Literary people (authors of written words) try both persuasion and manipulation. The internet is a product by nature of much doing and less thinking.

GL: The early internet hacker scene has a saying for this: "We believe in rough consensus and running code." While competing computer networks were designed like centralized systems, the original internet architecture was based on loose connections: a network of networks, called inter-net. This logic appealed to us, squatters, anarchists, unemployed, artists and other irregulars. I would also say there was neither persuasion nor manipulation. One just went online and discovered what was out there, machines and connections going down all the time. There was no 'audience' to speak of. This is why we developed the 'sovereign media' concept that was netcasting to itself.

This only changed in the late 1990s. Before that, there were just bigger and smaller communities inhabited by lonely souls working on something together. Less thinking, indeed. The internet is a medium for and for geeks, not officials—and neither for intellectuals. It is post-ideological, which was so 1990s. As internet critics and media theorists, we saw it as our task to reflect that but that was a marginal activity—back then, until today. It's interesting you contrast the internet with the Great Wall and the Three Gorges Dam. The internet was not designed as a Tres Grand Project, as the French call it, growing slowly in its first 25 years. Most companies and officials preferred better working systems such as BBS, Compuserve and AOL. The victory of the internet protocol happened accidentally. Again, the turning point was the late 1990s with the take-over of venture capital after the user-friendly WorldWideWeb had established itself. This is the moment info warfare manipulation through UX persuasion took over.

NL: In the early days of the internet there was no such thing as a planetary infrastructure that wears us (Benjamin Bretton's term). Still, it was clear to you from the beginning that media technologies have been historically tied to military initiatives, e.g. surveillance technologies having been launched into outer space which collect data of the earth, helping to recognize and identify enemies on earth. It's interesting that the emergence of social media was lined with the exploitation of friendship (fake friendship you may say), that is, to make a profit by just connecting people. It's the other way around. The military uses the technology to identify enemies, and Silicon Valley use it to make friends. Do you see some similarities between their tactical

approaches? Do we have too many friends now? Or too many enemies?
Would it be better if most of the world's communities stayed as respectful
strangers, not too close, but still aware of each other's existence? What's the
cultural solution?

GL: While in the make-up of the traditional public sphere, it was the whole
idea to bring together 'friends' and adversaries, social networking sides of
the early 2000s broke with this notion and came up with the 'save' notion of
bringing together 'friends' in a closed community that is closed and
protected by a password through the introduction of a 'profile'. In this new
constellation, the user would feel intimate, while advertisers and authorities
could freely harvest one's private data. In a way, we should regain the power
to define terms and take back control over who's our friends. The aim here
would be to fight the inflation for corporate means of the term. If I am saying
that we're not friends it does not imply we're enemies. It can also mean
we're comrades, lovers, family, colleagues, classmates. Let's expand the
diversity of the social vocabulary instead of collapsing the real existing mess
called life into one term.

You are right when you say that we have too many friends. Our social status
has been quantified for everyone to read. Everyone online on social media
can read how many friends and followers you have. In general, there are just
lots of us, in metropolitan areas, large companies and universities with tens
of thousands of employees. In the early-mid 20th century this was called
'mass'. These days we no longer like this word as it reminds us too much of
the grey, anonymous crowd. Instead, we're all addressed as unique subjects.
We're approached as respectful strangers—yet we do not feel like it. We feel
abandoned and lonely, desperate to reach out. With all the current online
transparency and possibilities to sky into each other's intimate lives, we are
still the opposite. There is no resolution here. What happens is that the
dramatic turn of (world) events will urge people to come together in ways we
cannot yet imagine. We will need others to survive as most of us cannot
guarantee water and food security on our own, or secure a roof over our
heads. We will organize education in other ways. This cannot be done
individually.

NL: Alexander Galloway did some interesting philosophizing on digital and
analog thinking. He made the claim that Deleuze's writings (apart from his
earlier books like the Logic of Sense) were anti-digital (or analog). Many
contemporary artists and thinkers have absorbed the Deleuzian aesthetic

and ethic concepts, consciously or unconsciously. Were you also influenced by the Deleuzian style of analog writing?

GL: Sorry, I never was a Deleuzian. If I had to position myself inside the French Zoo of Theory, my teachers were Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard, with Michel Foucault in the background. Much darker. With teachers, I literally mean writers that help you to find your voice in terms of writing style and mode of thinking. Theory should not have a religious or sectarian aspect. I admire many thinkers but I do not consider myself a follower of them, let alone a pupil or believer. Can Walter Benjamin be a role model? This is in my view the wrong approach. One writer I admire most is Elias Canetti, who, in one of his aphorisms, reveals one of the most deep, insightful ways to engage with one's masters: by not mentioning them. From this perspective, it no longer matters whether they are analogue or digital.

I have a similar relation to the German Frankfurt School, which was—and still is—a major source of inspiration, also on the organizational level. My question was always: how would such a 'school' look like today? Dare to start your own institute, even if it is a virtual or imaginary one. How would an intellectual movement outside of academia function today? How do we create, grow and maintain critical networks of thinking, or 'correspondence' (to use an ancient 18th-century motive)? Today's academia straight out forbids the creation of like-minded intellectual schools. In the neo-liberal approach, it's all about the ranking order of the genius individual-as-leader who climbs up by creating temporary research teams around the 'principal investigator'. But what I like about Deleuze and Guattari is the way they worked and wrote together, creating a 'third mind'. This is what the writing collective Adilkno that I was part of also practised.

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(this is an earlier version of the interview, published here in the St. Petersburg-based journal Technology and Language)