

(This is an email interview from late 2023, conducted for the Turkish [Art Unlimited](#) magazine that can also be read on their website [here](#). In the printed version where you can find the Turkish translation there is also a QR code that leads to the sound registration of my talk in November at Akbank Sanat and the following discussion: <https://www.unlimitedrag.com/post/stuck-on-the-platform>. I was there for the launch of the Turkish translation of *Stuck on the Platform*)

Sinan Refik Akgün and Ebru Yetişkin: Let's start with the techno-psychology of our societies. In *Sad by Design* you contrast technological sadness with melancholy but also with boredom, anxiety, depression, and similar mental states. You once expressed that "emotional rides are no longer experienced in solitude, the virtual others are always there". With a slight variation from Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together*, you stated that we are "*lonely together*". Yet, you call it "a pseudo-state". Why is this a pseudo-state?

Geert Lovink: In 1962 Daniel Boorstin published his classic study *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. Let's update his notion for the age of 'distributed loneliness'. This is the age of pseudo-totality. Users feel lonely but can no longer retreat in solitude. Who can afford to drop out anyway? Pseudo in today's context does not mean fake. Online others are real. For Boorstin a pseudo-event is an "ambiguous truth that appeals to people's desire to be informed." Instead of reading the newspaper we swipe. We can say that of the social media age, which, is, like the mass media era driven by advertisement and 'lifestyle advice'. There is no time anymore for solitary contemplation, as described in the 1964 *Saturn and Melancholy* bible by Panofsky and others. What is useful from that monumental study is the emphasis on the body, the bodily fluids and its dry and wet, hot and cold states. Instead of the black bile, we have the virtual blue bile, produced by our saturnine apps. What we can also learn from Kierkegaard, who stated that melancholia is not an illness, that the tristesse of our smartphone use should not be treated as an addiction, a medical condition: we are not sick. Instead, what we need is a new vocabulary that better describes why so many are lonely while surrounded by online others.

Sinan and Ebru: You suggest that we are at that stage where we need to move on from "offline romanticism" since our phones and minds have merged, and created hybrid spaces today. You suggest moving on from traditional "academic historicism" that refuses to engage with the current digital regime that rules the daily lives of billions. Yet one of the first things

psychologists recommend today to visibly improve patients' well-being is quitting "toxic" social media altogether, and it seems to have a positive influence. You, on the other hand, call to study "social media weariness". Can you tell us a little more about this nuance?

Geert: A weekend offline without a phone can be liberating but we need mobile devices to coordinate our busy lives. We should disconnect this from the surveillance and extractivist business model of Silicon Valley and its clones, whose sole aim is to keep us swiping without a cause, just because they understand how to hack the hungry brain that always wants more. There are already enough alternatives that break with these principles: tools for specific tasks, not fuzzy multi-purpose cloud platforms. Let's first of all untangle the personal messages and preferences from 'news' and addictive mechanisms such as updating. My life should not be organized according to the latest news principle. Why should social networking be a mix of shopping suggestions, news, entertainment and private conversations? No wonder you can't put the phone away. It is not rocket science to design other information flows. Here is something else: we need more debate, more polarization, not less. The phone should facilitate conflict, arguments, and debate. Right now this is an area in denial, and this is why it is so easy for algorithms to push fake news. We also need collective decision-making tools, another area Silicon Valley has traditionally shied away from. There is no money to be made to assist people to organize online. It is known that if this is done properly, the people will eventually stand up against the silent and invisible, untouchable powers-to-be, in this case, Google, Meta, Amazon and all the rest. They do not want us to collaborate and organize ourselves in autonomous cooperatives.

Sinan and Ebru: In your book, you argue that we are "stuck on the platform" as a way to describe how we're trapped, we're controlled and unable to change. It is a matter of fact that we are up front facing a digital regime, ruled by Silicon Valley. In this sense, it feels like we are situated as "addicted" "victims" of this regime, yet with your activist background, you oppose this very idea and argue that we, as users, have the power to resist and create alternatives. You once stated "We need to re-invent the social, which is now technical and digital" Can you tell us about how ordinary users learn to create alternatives? What kinds of tactics and tactical media do you suggest?

Geert: The idea that people will individually and voluntarily delete Facebook,

TikTok or Instagram proved to be an illusion. A decade ago we still believed that young people would rise up and revolt against the powers-to-be, but they didn't. Nowadays, they do not just politely refuse, young people simply cannot afford to leave. They need to maintain the zillion 'weak ties' with family, friends, and colleagues. They need to find out what's happening and entertain themselves to 'kill time' in this not-too-pleasant world, driven by a disaster logic. The danger of becoming isolated is imminent. The social media situation has become 'complex', as they say. What alternatives will have to learn to break through this impasse is the shock logic, this time combined with pleasure, desire and curiosity. Change no longer happens gradually. A liberatory moment will have to be combined with a disgust of the boring same-old of the dominant apps and an understanding of how to scale up. With this, I do not mean the tired start-up logic but a tech knowledge of how to combine distributed systems for literally billions with pragmatic decentralized approaches. Nowadays it is so easy to go from zero to millions in a few weeks. This is baked into the systems and so easily creates monopolies (and manipulation).

We know that EU-style regulation efforts have not achieved anything over the past two decades. Both the copyright and data approach were neither aimed to break up platform monopolies nor to create space for European alternatives. Fines will not impress Silicon Valley. Finetuning some privacy settings will not make any difference either, not for the users and not businesses. Europe will remain consumers of other people's technologies and we will have to reconcile with that. The only option left is then to unfold 'minor practices', islands in the Net as they were once called. But this will reach only a tiny part of the population, at best a few per cent. This in itself creates an uncomfortable elitist reality: commons-based decentralized networks for the few, trashy doomsday platforms for the rest.

Sinan and Ebru: You suggested that we need to "move in antitrust measures, split up the giants and dissolve them," and for this suggested that activism, redistribution of the 'wealth of the networks' and collective decision making are essential. Can you tell us more about the recent works of the Institute of Network Cultures in this context?

Geert: In 2011 when we started our [Unlike Us](#) network to combine social media criticism with efforts to build viable alternatives, we realized we were early and in for a long fight. When I say that we did not achieve anything much, this does not mean at all that nothing happened. Quite the opposite.

Think of the young Austrian lawyer Max Schrems who started Europe vs. Facebook and transformed this into an impressive [NYOB](#) NGO. We have dozens of working alternatives such as Jitsi which replaces Zoom and Teams, DeepL which is so much better than Google Translate, Cryptpad.fr which puts Google Docs aside and the publishing tools that we're utilizing at our Institute of Network Cultures. Not to forget Signal as an alternative WhatsApp (we can discuss the status of Mastodon, Discord, BlueSky, and the list goes on and on). On top of this there overall 'public stack' framework that brings all the levels from apps to infrastructure together. We do what we can but run up against this wall described above. Societies are driven by an odd mix of stagnation and rapid, disruptive change. Alternatives are frustrated by both (contradictory) processes. At least we can now articulate this catch-22 situation. We no longer need to be frustrated and feel that we failed. Still, we need so many open dialogues on how to get out of this dead-end street. Many say that only a further acceleration of disintegration and disasters will instigate real change. Until then we will have to bear the unbearable. In the meanwhile, the work of INC in this context focussed on publishing alternatives, not social media as that is simply too large, and too depressing, to make a difference with a handful of people. In my work it still plays a central role.

Sinan and Ebru: In the design manifesto [Made in China, Designed in California, Criticized in Europe](#) that you wrote with designer Mieke Gerritzen for the temporary Droog space in Amsterdam you describe the transformation of the design industry towards "self-design". Can you tell us more about this concept?

Geert: This is one of Mieke's central concepts that documents the shifts from the world of professional designers who work in the industry, in fashion and traditional media such as print to the digital media dominated by fixed protocol-driven formats on the one hand and the 'creativity of the billions' on the other. You can read self-design in two directions. One of them is the design of the self. This is the field of selfies, influencers, profile pictures, and the race to get more likes. But also dating sites. It is about the aesthetics of the online identity, which used to be a free, parallel universe (a 'second life'). Since 9/11 and the take-over of Marc Zuckerberg and the US Secret Service NSA he works with there are no longer anonymous/pseudonymous users. We all have proper profiles. No more polymorph-perverse actors. Instead, there is merely one ID, a propped-up make-up version of the legal self. A year after our manifest Mieke published her book on this topic called [Help Your Self!](#)

on the rise of self-design. The other angle would be to design it yourself or do it yourself. This is a topic Mieke and I dealt with decades earlier, in two cute design book objects, both called [Everyone Is A Designer](#). This is about the democratization of digital design tools and the rise of the internet and then later social media. Think HTML, fonts, gifs, Photoshop and later InDesign. There is a video that goes with all this, Beautiful World, and a second one, called Swipe (which is a smartphone app and also a book). Have a look at it: very Dutch, radical, critical yet pragmatic, filled with slogans (to which often I contribute).

Sinan and Ebru: You think that the digital space has been poisoned by the systems of likes, followers, updates, newsfeeds, and 'friends'. What do you think of virtual friendships? How do you think our notion of friendships has shifted, and how has this shaped the very meaning of this concept?

Geert: Virtual friendships are amazing. Intense, addictive, moving. Read what Foucault and all the other theorists of friendship have to say about this. I do not value virtual from the so-called real ones. This is deep modernity, real-existing globalization on a personal level, nothing wrong with that. But friendship is not the issue. It got out of hand when systems were offering you 'friends', contacts, and followers (as if you were a star or guru). You can even buy them. Algorithms are automatically generating them for me, suggesting new links. Collecting them became not just a status symbol but also a political economy: they were your new customers. They 'consume' your profile and content, your life. This is the industrialization of social relationships, ultimately replacing the traditional bonds of family, the street, village, work, church, mosque or sports club. We could easily ignore all this superficial work on the self if we had viable alternatives... but for many, this became their social life. The techno-social has taken over the social. Mothers are envious of the popularity and sophistication of their daughter's Instagram.

Sinan and Ebru: User behaviour tends to fluctuate between digital and physical realms. You argue that automated exchanges between users simulate the social. How do you relate techno-feudalism, techno-utopianism, organized pessimism/optimism, ceremonial sadism, infotainment and cyber-cynicism with cancel culture?

Geert: The modes of online behaviour you mention here have in common that they point to a movement of regression. How should we behave in a climate of general uncertainty and suspicion? Am I still correct? How to respond to

the surrounding misogyny? How Zen do you need to refrain from responding to all that stupidity? What happens when you have a bad day, feel tired and depleted of all energy and things suddenly bad on of your dear channels? Some herd is passing and moments later you're in it. You're involved, enraged, and dig into the case. This is the story of the time-killing industry that thrives on 'engagement'. We tried to be ironic but it turned out otherwise. Instead, the emotions took over and there was no way to hide the tears and anger anymore.

Sinan and Ebru: In "Stuck on The Platform" you mention that today we need temporary academic disciplines. You state that "all science begins with fiction." Departing from "collapsology", in which you worked along with Bernard Stiegler, how can one work on the aesthetics of procrastination, silence, stupidity, ignorance and regression? Are there any specific works that we can explore?

Geert: There are libraries filled with classics that can teach us in-depth about the current situation. However, before we run to bookstores or open the Amazon homepage, let's discuss the way we want to generate knowledge and insights in this online digital 21st century dominated by geopolitics. There is first of all a collapse of attention, basic historical knowledge and even a collapse of technical skills due to an unprogrammable smartphone that is the cause of a reduction of choice and depth in favour of mindless scrolling. Let's make reading great again. This is not just a question of focus but also time. Reclaim time. It will help us to create new stories, from collective myths to new neural pathways. And create time to unfold alternatives. Right now, there is only one way: down the abyss. But I admit, your question is legitimate and this is the work that you and I do. We need to start Operation Critical Concepts in which we detach the romantic old-school notion of first reading piles of classic paper books, offline, in solitude, with a new culture of scholarly work that builds on Wikipedia, using the amazing collection of online collaborative tools we already have, reading texts together, sharing resources. Let's make this inclusive, cool and sexy. See it as experiments in the design of multiple shapes of the digital intellectual self as a commons. We will need to start with tools to move away from the platform as the default environment. Platform exodus as a first step will be the toughest as we need to go beyond Hegel as a meme and Zizek as a trending topic on Instagram.

Sinan and Ebru: Along with your publishing-as-activism works, you also



present and discuss your ideas through artistic practices, and you collaborate with audio-visual artists. Can you also elaborate on the art historical background of your works?

Geert: For 35 years I have considered myself an independent media theorist with an interest in aesthetics, visual cultures and in particular video. In that period I worked with artists, publishing them, writing about their work, and running projects and campaigns together. With a political theory and communication background, the step towards the arts was an easy one, even though it took me some years. The years at Mediamatic (1989-94) gave me confidence as have the many years I spent in Berlin. While I was appointed honorary art and networkcultures professor at the University of Amsterdam two years ago I shy away from calling myself an art historian. Rather I see myself as part of numerous contemporary art networks, with an emphasis on new media arts, and the net. art in particular. But let's not get bogged down in institutional boundaries... Why all this is relevant is because of the 'visual turn'. We need visual literacy as much as we need literary language skills. And on a positive note, across the globe spoken language is alive: look at rap, poetry, dialects, hybrid slang, you name it. The importance here is in the ability of conservative forces to exclude large parts of the youngsters from (higher) education and, ultimately, resources and power.

Sinan and Ebru: In ["We Are Not Sick"](#), a hybrid lecture/music performance with your DJ friend John Longwalker, you're combining a diversity of text-, image-, and music genres, to reflect on the encroaching sadness provoked by social media architectures. Can you tell us about your common interests, converging practices and shared concerns that led to this collaborative work?

Geert: In 1987, the year when I was down and out with zero prospects, I started working with free radio stations associated with the squatters movement and made radio programs on radical intellectual culture. This is a good therapy to get familiar with one's voice and to learn how to read texts. I do not have a big ego so it took a long time for me to familiarize myself with performing on stage, or in front of the microphone (I am still not a huge fan of the camera). In 1999, my last year in radio, I produced a CD with readings and music/sound mixes, produced by the Supposé label in Cologne called [Electronic Solitude](#). This was already dark ☹ Twenty years later, John (who was once a student of mine) and I produced the Sad by Design album with eight tracks (which is online here and on most music platforms) under

the name We Are Not Sick. Around 2017 I switched my lectures to a more performative format, with a slide show in the background that no longer explains projects or websites. John immediately got it that I do have to sing or rap. I am in fact reading the text slowly, they are repeated, and it's spheric. As you may have noticed I am into aphorisms, quotes, and slogans (or sloganism, as I call it). Like so many projects, the album remained unnoticed because it came out in the darkest of the Covid period. At least we were able to perform a few times with the Transmediale one as a highlight, weeks before the first lockdown, in the big red hall of Volksbühne. Bernard Stiegler was there. It was the last time I saw him. An unforgettable evening.