

At the Launch of [Maisa in Webland, Detouring UX Destinies](#) (Set Margins', 2025)

By Geert Lovink

“What does ‘user-friendly’ mean if online behaviours like stalking, teasing, and ghosting — once considered peripheral — are now central to survival, care, and belonging?” This comes from the blurb of the second book of INC researcher and LA-based PhD candidate in media arts, Maisa Imamović. It is courageous and dissent work devoted to web design, a practice that is presumed to disappear due to AI. Over the past years, Maisa Imamović dedicated her time to creative coding, cyberfeminism and radical web development.

I met Maisa Imamović in the Amsterdam debating centre Spui25 in 2018. At the time I was wrapping up my book *Sad by Design*. She sent me email the next day: “I am the Sad Youth T-shirt owner, from your book launch. I am curious about your sad essay, so I would appreciate if you would share it with me, through this platform of Gmail, the greatest.” Soon after she published her first longform with INC about boredom, [How to Nothing](#). Not much later Maisa joined our research centre and graduated from the Rietveld art school. Her professional relation with web design started after signed up for a government unemployment scheme that retrains artists into coders. This is when Maisa discovered her love for (diminishing) Art form of web design. In 2022, before leaving for LA to do her master degree at CalArts, she published *Psychology of the Web Developer*. *Maisa in Webland* builds on her education and professional practice as a builder of conceptual websites.

In a schematic understanding, graphic and information design ruled for ages but then were quickly pushed aside by multi-media design, and soon also by web design. The question at the time was how to design interactivity in a user-friendly way. Within a decade the web design skills were overruled by app design and platforms. What remained is perhaps game/3D design. All these professionals whose knowledge depends on specific platforms now worry about the rise of AI that at best shrink all these professional tech design fields to a minimum level. Will also furniture design and fashion survive the AI rupture? In the argument Imamović makes there's a return possible, a way back to fundamentals, which guided by, what I would call,

principles of feminist communication design.



Geert Lovink: The aim of your book is to regain lost territory that Big Tech claimed with their disruptive invasion of professional design fields. Why, according to you, design is such a prime target for the platform bros?

Maisa Imamović: Technically speaking, design is a bridge between the internal complexities of a website and the user. In the early days of the personal computer and websites, this bridge was not as long, tall, and scary as it is today. It enabled a close proximity between the website's internal complexities and the user, which sustained the user's curiosity about the underlying technologies and logics of the website. This also meant that the divide between the user and the developer was not so distinct. Everybody was, in a way, a developer – and not only a developer, but everything else that building a website requires its creator to be: a content producer, photographer, designer, and so on. A multidisciplinary role that makes building websites really fun because you're not solely doing one thing. In her essay *From My to Me*, Olia Lialina reminds us of this creating joy that belonged to every user who wanted to be online back in the day. In his *User Interface: "A Personal View,"* Alan Kay – the developer of

iconic graphical representations of computing function (folders, menus, and overlapping windows found on the desktop) – passionately argued that the computer is the medium that should be enjoyed and explored by users as much as by designers and developers. According to him, to consider it a tool was a weaker interpretation. Making complex operations visual and accessible, for the sake of enabling learning and creativity, was a key goal of his idea of personal computing. Yet despite this early recognition by geeks, scholars, and artists, the web did not ultimately develop into a medium that encouraged broad creative agency and technical engagement.

Because the medium has always been so rich with these various roles, Big Tech saw a profitable potential to provide users with a false sense of freedom and control. The realization of this potential entailed branching out first by claiming the most powerful aspect of the website – the infrastructure (today understood as a platform) – as theirs, then by offering the tasks needed within it (in order to legitimize the platform) to the working class. The most needed task was for users to produce content about themselves. When platforms such as Myspace and hi5 (its Balkan version) disabled users’ ability to customize their profile backgrounds with code, it became evident that a corporate line had been drawn: highly skilled developers would build and control the web’s infrastructure (for substantial pay), while users would merely inhabit those structures by producing content for free. By offering users the ability to post, share, and express themselves within platforms they do not own, Big Tech could simulate the creative autonomy of the early web while quietly enclosing it. You could make things, but only within their container. You could speak, but on their infrastructure.

For this divide – which I’d call a class divide rather than a professional one – to be maintained, design was redefined to be a tool that would solely serve this function of sustaining distance between the two and hiding behind its aesthetic capabilities. The bridge’s infrastructure was built to be longer, taller, and scarier, while its surface was cleaned, painted and polished to appear as “doable” for the user to cross. This “solution” marks the beginning of the UX industry and the ideology of user-friendliness, which claims that the web must solely be legible, amongst other boring stuff that killed its creative

momentum.

Corporate decisions not only promised a divide between users and developers, but between developers and designers too. The technologies of the web's infrastructure and the web's surface grew more complex in both directions, turning the user's genuine curiosity about the functionalities of a website as a whole into a technical burden - one that requires figuring out which combination of tools works best for it to become a whole website, AND justifying the bridge's really long length to the point of silent agreement that: yes, companies should be the ones making websites, and users should simply inhabit them.

If you look through the fog surrounding the bridge, the complexity is a mere repetition of the same old patterns. It only looks complex because of how many tools there are doing exactly the same thing. Design, in this context, became the middle class' intellectual stimulation. It offers just enough creative latitude to feel meaningful, just enough proximity to the user's pain to feel ethical, and just enough distance from the infrastructure to avoid any real accountability. The designer empathizes - genuinely, even - but empathy without power is just a more sophisticated form of compliance. To practice design under these conditions is to be handed a very refined set of tools to decorate a system you did not build and cannot dismantle. You are tasked with making the bridge feel worthy of crossing, not with questioning why it was built so long in the first place. To practice it is to empathize with the poor content producers, but please the rich.

GL: Do you think an avant-garde movement can unleash an organized response to the addictive platform monopolies? What's the dynamic you see could unfold?

MI: I do and I don't. While I was writing the second part of my book, I dived deep into many projects that felt like they could bring back internet liberation if we all just radically leaned into the many tech projects that could distract us from platforms while also socially and politically stimulating us. The caveat is that for this liberation to happen, it would have to happen on a big scale, meaning we'd all have to do it at or around the same time. That's precisely why these projects are not impactful enough - they're too financially vulnerable

to prioritize spending most of their budget on successful promotional strategies (which are also oftentimes designed against their ethics) and to provide a classic and seamless organizational experience at a scale that platforms are good at providing. They can't, nor do they want to, compete. On the other hand, even if they did, the risk is that they could end up being impactful only temporarily, then get sucked into the hype cycle. You know the drill.

Where I find and sustain my hope is in the educational system, a particular "prison" of its own kind. More and more, I'm starting to think that leaning into "ethical" educational efforts - not art production - could plant the seeds for new forms and formats of organization and counter. In my mind, organizing no longer looks like people getting together in the same room and drawing mind maps from which a certain amount of energy and hope arise, carrying them to the streets. Furthermore, I no longer think of the streets as spaces we understand as primarily functional for organization. They too have become images that users occupy and reproduce online. Users know that if they don't, the state's cameras will - and they'll find themselves profiled through them, whether as dissidents, passers-by, or users on a "surveillance hold," a surveillance that can happen years from now. Before imagining anything as a successful response, I try to imagine what organizing means amongst younger generations who are too saturated by the online sphere to experience any kind of pleasure - not just the pleasure that derives from being together with like-minded people. Where else do they get their high, if not from social media or consumption-driven spaces?

Alongside some of my book launch events, I was hosting workshops on radical web development with basic coding - but really just trying to gather people around code without necessarily prioritizing the goal of teaching them how to code; I don't compete with AI on a technical level. I was surprised by the people who showed up, the overlap of generations, and the overall return of interest in learning basic HTML/CSS. Although these workshops operate on a small scale, it became clear to me that there is still a hunger for learning and finding meaning in an educational space together.

Lately, I've been to events that highlight ambiance - atmospheric and musical - that have gained a lot of traction amongst younger

generations who are very plugged into the AI world. This could be a radical contrast to their everyday user experience, one where new forms of organizing could spring. Maybe that organizing is solely about being together without materializing the proof of their togetherness. So yes is my final answer, but the dynamic I see unfolding is blurry at this point.



Photo: Brandon Tauszik

GL: In the opening part of the book, the social media condition is described as an essentially paranoid one, defined by tech-induced

stalking, teasing and ghosting behaviour. Can you tell how these three relate to each other and how we got there? The internet experience wasn't always dominated by these forces. In my reading it started with a profile-centric design, accelerated by the 'follow' logic. In earlier online communities the idea of 'following' others was simply absent. Following was considered docile and passive, not empowering. The idea was to escape (known) others and explore new worlds. Was that, retrospectively, a wrong presumption of well-meaning engineers?

MI: Stalking, teasing, and ghosting are the successors, and dark versions of what the platforms call being inspired, sharing, and setting boundaries- in that order. All three are next-level—advanced if you like—activities that users perform online. To recap, stalking is an activity that emerges when one is too inspired by the other to the point of wanting and reenacting their life through image (a classic image consumption scenario that extends from the TV era); teasing is an advanced practice of someone's genuine sharing of their thoughts, breakfast, daily activities and so on, because it utilizes professional, industry-defined methods to gain metric validation for such sharing.

Calling it teasing instead of "sharing" assumes that the user no longer wants to share their life voluntarily and is putting extra work into making that sharing profitable. Like many software products, their life becomes a Freemium. As for ghosting - this one is a bit more tricky because it confronts the platform trap. Ghosting in real life - often rooting from professional, romantic, and friendly relations - entails vanishing or leaving amid the communication that sustains such relations. Such an act depicts the actor's change of mind, capacity limit, inability to communicate, and so on. In general, it derives from some kind of saying "No," which leads to an end of association with the other. I reflect on this boundary-setting - its clear and clumsy versions - in the context of the platform, in order to also expose the platform's design which makes it impossible for the user to say no to the platform.

The platform allows the user to say no to other users (via buttons that block, mute, unfollow) - and because of which the user might want to leave the platform in the first place - but the platform will make it hard for the user to leave the platform itself, despite the Deactivate

button flashing red and being easily findable at the bottom of the User Settings. Because the platform has built an empire of possibilities good enough for the user to remember as reasons to stay, the almost-leaving user is often confronted with doubt when the platform asks “are you sure?”, which softens the impulse to leave and further makes room for the user to reflect on whether they really want to opt out. The platform design here becomes a psychological effect – a clear case of the Stockholm Syndrome (when hostages develop a psychological bond with their captors). The user loves its abuser because the abuser has given its target multiple reasons to stay right after the attack. I not only reflect in the domain of a platform, but the web ecosystem which consists of similar platforms. Even when the user clicks Yes and opts out, the empire of the opted-out platform is to be found on the platform on which the user opts in next, or when the user makes an account again on the same platform – something we see a lot of these days. And then the teasing and stalking cycles begin again.

The three are closely related, on an individual and collective scale. Without content production (teasing) one cannot study the content (stalk). Without stalking the content, one’s own or the other’s, one cannot reach the mania that leads to flirting with the idea of opting out. And they remain secretive, despite everyone agreeing to being extremely online (on platforms). Most users would rather describe their online activities by using the platform’s combination of words – being inspired, sharing, and setting boundaries on the platform – while others feel more comfortable in confessing. In my book, I also write about the different comforts of sharing the extent to which one is performing these activities that depict one’s extreme online-ness and addiction, as well as their contexts.

These activities are not speculative or predictive of what will happen if we continue being inspired, sharing, and setting boundaries as the platforms expect us to. The activities are here, amongst my peers and traceable in the everyday experience of the platforms. I know because many of my peers want to opt out and we talk about it. Most of the time I find myself in, and belong to, precarious creative communities across the EU and US. Because our careers heavily depend on the platform, the discussions are rich with critique. This common desire and context began my investigation and led me to

questioning: Why do we want to opt out? Why don't we? Why can't we? – questions which cannot be answered without taking into consideration the design and the history of design.

I see these user activities as the subtext to the platform's appropriation, a kidnapping of early (cyberfeminist) web intentions. Whatever terminology the tech bros use to frame these activities, their main function is to mask the history of colonizing the web. Studying the evolution of capitalistic appropriation of early web intentions is also the evolution of decreased user agency and increased user precarity in all professional fields, not just creative. This allows us to justify and understand the reasons for colonizing beyond mere profit and, yet again, learn how hard it is to break the exploitative cycle.

It is not a wrong presumption of well-meaning engineers to enable the infrastructure for connection. These exploitative cycles of capitalism will always extract from meaningful connections, especially those facilitated by well-mannered folks. That's why, I realize only now, that alongside my call for leaning into the "ethical" educational efforts – aka moderation – I also think there should be a bit more gatekeeping in the creative technology scene. Gatekeeping shouldn't only be a typical move of the commercial industry, the commercial industry can sometimes receive it too.

GL: According to you, Instagram is primarily used as a stalking device. Everyone does it. Do we go online to spy on others? How literally should we take the stalking? Is it a metaphor or is it as bad as 'real' stalking? Or is this a wrong comparison to start with?

MI: Right at the beginning of the chapter about stalking, I make a comparison between everyday stalking – i.e. when people comfortably say "I stalked you" followed by "you seem cool, let's be friends..." – with early, classic cyberstalking which is meant to harm others also in physical space and which is today often referred to as doxxing. In my analysis, I sustain distance from the spectacular and stay closer to the everyday life of a user, in which the intensity of this activity is not measured nor determined by the state or the police, but by the users themselves, the ones performing and witnessing the act, those who feel comfortable joking and exposing details of their stalking, and those who would literally die should anyone find out.

That being said, the overall portrait of stalking in my book is that it's still an activity users don't feel comfortable sharing, unless they're in a circle of trusted people and with whom they will exchange a secret for a secret so that they could then gate each other's equally. It is also an activity that can be proven technically should one lean into the OSINT research methods, but remains an ambiance – something that everyone knows is happening yet pretends that it's not – like complicity of sorts. It's something that I feel is happening and so I guess I decided to make a bold move and speak on behalf of everyday users, whether they agree or not. Many of my first readers confessed feeling exposed.

I wouldn't say that we go online just to spy on others. But the mere fact that everyone has an often public profile is a driving force of staying on the platform and returning to it, and from which stalking gradually solidifies as a user's daily habit. Stalking should be taken very literally because, as seen in some of my case studies, it tends to slip into the domain of psychological torture and physical violence. I don't think it should be studied from a policing standpoint – in which the user performing the stalking act is hunted, cancelled, or punished – but from a platform design standpoint, in which, rather than bragging about discovering/knowing the truth, users come to an almost-technical understanding of why things like this keep happening. Such an understanding can be inspiring for new design proposals which the platform design needs more of.

GL: *Maisa in Webland* is written from the perspective of the web developer. Can you tell us something about this figure? Is it a profession? How different is it from the web designer and the net artist? Or the content creator, for that matter.

MI: I often think how to revive the joy around web design whilst automation is making it disappear. My definition of a web developer seconds Olia Lialina's in *From My to Me*: a web developer is a multi-disciplinary role in which one codes (back end and front end), designs the aesthetic, produces the content, and thinks about how it all comes together – at the very minimum. The developer's to-do list expands through the process of working within the chosen stack; some tasks become dead darlings, while new ones come in and change the outcome of the website's initial plan for the looks.

Each task is paid equal attention to in order to build a website whose parts are informed by each other, are in conversation, and developed based on each other's affordances, blasphemies, and limitations. Because components of a website depend on each other, say typeface choice and layout preference, the developer is in constant conversation with the website in a way that the thinking behind it, and the time it takes for thoughts to bring the developer's desired outcome, conditions her philosophy that a website is, above all, a thinking tool. This allows her to take a break from the website in order for complex thoughts surrounding it – whether technical or creative – to untangle, and solidify decisions intuitively. This is what I call *conceptual web development*; each web component responds to its technical and visual surrounding, the neighbouring components, developer's conversation with the client, and the period of time they have available.

The commercial industry is not a place where such an approach to web development can be practiced, primarily because its grounding philosophy is to be in service to the client and deliver him a web product which primarily functions to archive his competencies of sorts. Total service to the client is a relationship in which the web developer disappears and technologies take control. The developer, in the context of his full-time availability, is a technology operator, not a thinker of how those technologies impact the qualities of a product nor how they could be repurposed in the process of development. A website that emerges out of this process reflects none other than the developer's slavery to the machine and client's strict, and often short, deadline, which forces the website to look too good in order to hide these inhuman working and thinking conditions.

The second reason why the industry is also not a place for this conceptual approach to web development to bloom is because of the classic over-specialization of the field, the previously mentioned branching out. Saying that you're a web developer today requires specifying what kind: software developer, front-end developer, web designer, user experience, researcher, AI developer, and other even more specific roles that make "web developer" sound cringe. But I love seeing myself as a simple web developer without any further explanation! It makes room for criticality and research – the things that make coding really fun and not stressful. I stopped keeping up

with the industry roles when I realized that, to be any of those roles you have to put up a linguistic performance rather than a technical one, and instead chose to become comfortable in Lialina's and my definition of the web developer, perhaps even at the cost of losing access to the industry. Luckily, I still have income from leaning into this role and at the scale in which I can bring my client into my research, creative, technical, and decision-making processes. Aaaaand I love me a curious client!!!! They support the continuation of a curious web developer for whom a website is primarily a thinking tool for creative expression and functional purpose. (shout out)

Speaking of functional things, the role of a web developer is different to that of a net artist because a web developer – whether working in commercial or independent context – is always at the service of their client. When I build a website for my client, I think about their needs and anxieties, and how design can reflect that instead of solve or hide that. Oftentimes, I'll have a client who is afraid to be online because they think their work is not professional enough or because they're not ready to be represented in an institutional way – in the way that most people out there are using the web for. I also think about their purpose and things that they *have* to do in order to survive capitalism. And I think about the context of the internet, the everyday internet ecosystem, the neighbouring websites, the effectiveness of social media platforms, etc. In a relationship with my client, to support them in having their archive published on the world wide web is the priority, developing my design aesthetic and philosophy is the secondary, or rather, a subtext of the priority. Unlike the previously mentioned service in the commercial industry, in which the service is determined by tomorrow's deadline and the client's financial investment for the developer to meet it, the service to the client in the case of an independent web developer is a negotiation: of the developer's and client's time and wishes.

A net artist, on the other hand, doesn't make their art to reflect this relationship and service. Sure, they could have an institutional gig as a reason to develop their work, but the depth of understanding required – of the host's needs, anxieties, purpose, and survival within the structures of capitalism – is not a condition for the art to exist. The net artist's website doesn't need to hold someone else's archive, doesn't need to negotiate between two people's time and wishes, and

doesn't need to ask how design can reflect rather than solve. The net artist is, in this sense, detached from the client in the way that both the commercial developer and the independent developer are not. The commercial developer disappears into the service; the independent developer negotiates within it; the net artist steps outside of it entirely – the website becomes an autonomous expression rather than a thinking tool that is affected by a conversation with another person's needs. This is not a hierarchy of practices but a distinction of relationships: what the website is for, who it is built with, and how much of someone else's world it is responsible for holding. Therefore, the politics and relationships underneath the interface are different.

GL: You have been teaching over the past years. Should the next generation, Gen Z, learn HTML so that they understand the basics of the Web, or PHP for that matter. Linux? AI will put such web workers out of their jobs. They should learn programming regardless?

MI: Yes, yes, and yes, and possibly in combination with a seamless publishing tool! I've witnessed an insane amount of joy from my students when they published their first websites in my introductory coding classes. It instantly allows them to think about the scale of the audience on a world wide web that might land on their website and encounter a piece of their interiority. Seeing their sparkling eyes always reminds me of my early joy on the web, and of the joy documented in the history of cyberfeminism, particularly during the self-publishing blog era. Throughout my years of teaching so far, this joy is almost like a constant: whatever mood or crisis the web was going through could not seem to dim it. Automation only sped up the path to this joy.

Most of my classes last year were introductory and combined technical learning with the cyberfeminist history of the web. We explored HTML/CSS/JavaScript, p5.js, and firebase databases. We touched the surface of the logic embedded in programming languages, but we didn't have time to study them as design objects that also carry cultural significance. The hardest part of my book involved writing about how Boolean logic – the core logic of most programming languages, including modern ones – has shaped the world as a product of capitalism, rather than the other way around.

My next teaching goal would be to dive into a programming language with the intention of learning it more thoroughly. An advanced version of that goal would be to try to incorporate more diverse forms of logic into programming languages – perhaps even by designing them. For now, my bureaucratic position in the world, along with increasing automation, still only allows me to operate on a small scale and prioritize sustaining curiosity in basic coding. I'm patient.

GL: In the current situation it is an extractivist architecture that defines social relations. Do you see a role of design in a possible reconfiguration of the social relationship? What's the social today according to you? Traditionally this was the village, the tribe, the family, sanctioned by the church and the state. In the ascii-html 90s it was still communities, then social networks. And now?

MI: Based on my previous breakdown of design's power, I do believe that design can contribute to the reconfiguration we all dream of. And it can do so by lying to the user, right? Design doesn't always act as an honest bridge that exposes the truth about its technologies. Oftentimes – if not most of the time – it hides them. That's what fascinates me about web design in particular, and about how detached it has become from its underlying technologies over the years, especially compared to the early web you mention. These technologies are vulnerable; they break. And when they do, web design becomes a kind of witch hunter of daily glitches – glitches that expose traces of human learning and presence.

We can reflect on this through a simple example: social media platforms displaying metrics through web design. This is a tricky case because, technically, it is one of the most "honest" design features. It exposes the platform's core logic and what its underlying technologies are built to do: calculate social interaction. Today, it's normal for many people to "like" the way you live, what you say, or the hacks you perform on a platform. Back in the day, that would have been strange. Why would people spend their time liking what someone said? We didn't do that in real life – not in such a dry, quantified way. You wouldn't tag someone's forehead with a marker for saying something smart, funny, or anything! To me, it's still strange. Yet, it feels less strange because this logic has become so embedded in the system that our professional and social statuses

now depend on it. And because we stopped asking the question: why would people spend their time liking what someone said?

Design is powerful only insofar as it opens space for questioning the platform. It becomes a visual enabler of critique. But design alone cannot reconfigure the social relationship between developer and user. Whether it lies or remains faithful to its technologies depends on those who build it – and on whether they see design merely as a tool for legibility. Many designers, especially in the US, understand design primarily as a tool for legibility. It's the thing that produces clear restaurant menus. For legibility goals, I highly recommend Canva. And I recommend that designers spend the rest of their shift reading the history of design. I also suggest website builders to anyone who reaches out wanting a simple, legible site. Cargo is a good one. But what truly interests me is rethinking the blasphemies of web design: rethinking likes, metrics, and repurposing them. Making them work for us in personal ways. Ridiculing them through creation – a visible, creative pushback rather than a merely theoretical one. That pushback is something I try to enact in each of my designs. That's where the art of design steps in.

For me, the *social* today means establishing in-between spaces with friends – collectives, wannabe institutions, ephemeral initiatives – even while knowing they might fail or wither. Through trying, one learns the structures these projects attempt to plug into. One learns negotiation. One discovers passion. I think negotiation and passion are precisely what the industry targets, and I love seeing that character flourish through web design. I'm particularly interested in observing what role technology plays in these settings – how design emerges, and whether it supports or distracts from collective goals. The best-case scenario is when everyone involved contributes to making their technologies function within the limits of the free labour they are willing to invest. That's love – a tough one. And of course, fighting for better conditions under which such love can be given is just as important.



Photo: Brandon Tauszik

GL: Do you see experiments happening in cyberfeminist projects that use web tech as tools? I understand your reservations concerning solutionism. Maybe this could be reframed as tech with a purpose? Often, the optimization is beyond us.

MI: I'm not sure if cyberfeminism is still a term that neatly addresses

what's going on in web design that, to me, feels cyberfeminist. The word itself still circulates, but often in its more established, almost historical form - rooted in cultural and art theory. It lives strongly in academia, in exhibitions, in certain discursive spaces. Only confident scholars or practitioners seem to apply it publicly as their declared lens. Because it's my lens, I see it in places where it's not explicitly referenced - in small design gestures, in alternative infrastructures, in experiments with publishing or hosting. Other peers use different terms such as digital care, feminist servers, critical tech, community protocols, etc. and that's completely fine. That multiplicity is also cyberfeminism. It has always been porous, always evolving, always absorbing more specific vocabularies.

My new teen spirit is not as allergic to solutions as it used to be. I think I previously equated solutions with solutionism - with that Silicon Valley drive to fix and scale and optimize everything. But I've softened. Earlier, I mentioned leaning into the "ethical," which I think is one of the more workable frameworks from which solutions can emerge. Ethical doesn't mean perfect, but it does imply some degree of reflection and accountability. At least it's not purely based on hunger for money and power and destruction - which so many large-scale "solutions" today clearly are. There's a difference between designing something carefully for a community and designing something to dominate a market. I'm more open to the former now.

Writing *Maisa in Webland* brought me closer to people who are actually doing amazing things in the field such as building tools, maintaining servers, teaching, organizing, writing code slowly and intentionally. Thanks to them, the field feels less abstract and more populated with committed individuals who want to offer something to coming generations. They don't shy away from the word "solution," but they approach it with care, aware of its weight. That willingness, that combination of passion and responsibility, to me, felt like I should join them, instead of dwell in the critique of solutionism. And if I really must, I can rebel from there too hehe.

GL: You're based in California. Do you see any attempt there to disrupt and boycott the power of venture capital? The critique of social media is now projected on Europe as an attack on 'free speech' (or 'American speech' as it called these days). Is critique of Big Tech

different in California and even possible? While reading your book, the US doesn't seem to lack interesting digital art or tech artists and initiatives, which is encouraging. As a European foreign student under the Trump II administration you need to be careful, I suppose.

MI: Yes. Like in Europe, the experiments are similar and operate on a similar scale, that is within the cultural and educational scene and with too little financial support to scale up. Big money tends to support ideas compliant to the industry standards and cringe innovation. Beyond the scale which I'm referring to in my book, I've seen the emergence of tech products made by artists. But they stand out from the other tech crap largely because they were made by artists. Artists are supposedly the "good" people in society, and there's a certain moral aura around that. When artists develop tech products that comply with industry and innovation standards, it becomes a new form of complicity - one that produces the same waves of harm and the same obscuring of underlying operations.

I recently interviewed Tega Brain and Sam Lavigne, whose work I admire. They reminded me how much we expect from artists, especially in the technological realm. We expect them to ideate, develop, and ship products capable of competing with the capitalist systems, when what we actually need are more solidarity-based projects. This resonates with me. I'd rather ideate about new technological systems than have to develop them, but artists often receive criticism for developing technologies that are seen as too speculative, too weak, or incompatible with the existing software ecosystem - rather than for simply imagining pretty good alternatives. So yes, attempts are always around, but I haven't seen much solidarity coming from the other side.

At the moment, academic peers internationally are cautiously navigating increased censorship, especially after witnessing cases where harsh consequences led to revoked documents and deportations. Every word in this interview has been carefully chosen with an awareness of the censorship methods that are currently deployed. That alone is reason enough not to take risks - to hope that midterm election in November this year might shift the political course, or simply that four years will pass quickly (shout out to Roman Jaster for building [this countdown](#)). But censorship does not equal

silence. I'm certain that many peers, myself included, are documenting their experiences. I hope these forms of documentation will begin to surface in the cultural sphere soon.

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Maisa Imamović, [*Maisa in Webland, Detouring UX Destinies*](#), Set Margins' #63, Eindhoven, 2025.