

politics of internet culture

interview: geert lovink

Geert Lovink is a Dutch media theorist and internet critic, with a background in social movements and tactical media. In the 1990s he focused on the contribution of artists and designers in social movements through his concept of tactical media. In 2004 he founded the Institute of Network Cultures at the Amsterdam School of Interactive Media (HvA), a research centre dedicated to the social dynamics, politics and aesthetics of new media and internet in particular. He also teaches at the new media program of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam and is professor in media theory at the European Graduate School. Lovink is co-founder of the Internet groups nettime and fibreculture, and author of the books *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture (Electronic Culture: History, Theory, and Practice)* (2002), *My First Recession: Critical Internet Culture in Transition* (2003), *Uncanny Networks: Dialogues with the Virtual Intelligentsia* (2004) and *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture* (2007). His institute has recently organised conferences and related publications on urban screens, a critique of the creative industries, online video, network theory, the culture of search and Wikipedia research. His forthcoming book is on critical issues in Web 2.0. Geert Lovink will present his Keynote paper 'Artistic Strategies Within Web 2.0: The Politics of Internet Culture' at *Artists Week, Adelaide International 2010* Curator Victoria Lynn interviewed Lovink in Amsterdam, October 2009, her visit to the Netherlands made possible by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust.

VICTORIA LYNN: You are currently completing a book on critical issues in Web 2.0. What is Web 2.0?

GEERT LOVINK: In technical terms it means a major upgrade in comparison to the first wave of applications and services dating back to the mid-1990s. There are three distinguishing features: it is easy to use; it facilitates a social element such as linking to each other; and users can upload their own content in whatever form, be it pictures, videos or text. Web 2.0 is a hype term, agreed. But what it makes unique is the royal space it gives to the user, and that's not always the case in media history. Web 2.0 could very well be the 'brief summer of the user'.

VICTORIA LYNN: What for you are the critical issues in Web 2.0?

GEERT LOVINK: The ideology of 'participatory culture' is a pressing issue. We know that of the whole potential, only ten percent of people make active use of it, and of that ten percent only ten percent have a dominant voice. Therefore, to make democratic claims is weird. It's post-representational. Another issue is the hidden, and not so hidden power relationships between people: how can the user—according to the theory—participate in a decentralised and quasi-democratic structure? We know the claims that the techno-evangelists make, but what is the reality? What are the actual power games that are happening there? What are the commercial interests? What's the role of the State and the new forms of censorship that are happening? What are the new enclosures, the new "walled gardens" as they are called? If everyone is your 'friend' how can there be a lively public debate? This ease of communication comes with the so-called ideology of trust. Trust is very important especially also for e-commerce, related to the whole rhetoric of safety and security. That implies and means guarding off a lot of these 'open' networks that are in fact the complete opposite of open networks. They operate like enclosures. These information architectures are aimed at excluding outsiders. The participants themselves are trying very hard to manage themselves, in search of constant self-affirmation, trying to manage their busy lives. They have to wall themselves off against an overflow of information, files, impressions, invitations. You can also say that these tools design the 'personal information autonomy'. That's a positive way of looking at platforms most users get addicted to. They need to check the updates and check out what others are up to—simply because they can.

VICTORIA LYNN: Is it through these forms of addiction and production of desire that the virtual world of participatory cultures online starts to affect life in the real world?

GEERT LOVINK: I don't think so. Web 2.0 is about the integration of the real and the virtual. They are no longer opposites. The goal is a synergy of the real existing social life with the annotated environment. This is done to abstract value from one's intimate environment and personal relationships. It is not proven that it generates new social forms. We could also say that it initiates new social contexts in real life situations. The third body, consisting of a data cloud that surrounds us, is becoming real. However, unlike the cyber-prophets predicted it is not a virtual reality out there that we step into. The movement has gone in the opposite direction and collapsed into ever smaller devices. Social networking sites are honest about their purpose. They do not claim that you will meet new people. For that you have special services like dating sites. The companies that own the

social networking sites know through research that, in order to be commercially viable, they have to parasite and exploit your existing social relationships. Meet your old school friends; meet your friends and family that live overseas, make contact with people at work that you don't see that often. These are all existing social relationships. What you need to do is to reconnect. They are not new and these social networking sites in fact thrive from the exploitation of these existing networks. No-one makes a secret out of that. This is the most affective way to set up a Web 2.0 venture.

VICTORIA LYNN: Do you think that the ideology of participatory culture is having an affect on our cities, architecture, or larger cultural context?

GEERT LOVINK: Web 2.0 further assists an acceleration of social life and social relationships. You can send and receive real-time updates about where you are and what you're up to. In the past you would do that through telephone, letters, you would hear that through gossip, or you would meet people on the streets. This is now all happening online. Most architects and urban planners have been remarkably slow in paying attention to these developments, let alone that these technologies alter their designs. Exceptions in the Netherlands would be projects like Martijn de Waal's *Mobile City* and the work Ole Bouwman is doing at the Netherlands Architecture Institute.

VICTORIA LYNN: Who is watching us?

GEERT LOVINK: In terms of links between Google and Facebook with the CIA and NSA? That's not very well known. Over the next five to ten years we are going to hear much more about that. People are still in the mode of exploring these social networking worlds and the powers those that control us or have an interest in knowing what we are doing in our social lives. We know that secret services are active on Facebook etc. and collect data in order to create social profiles of groups that they have identified as potential security threats. There are companies that harvest this information and resell it. Our social lives are becoming the main source of income. Revenues no longer come from advertisements. The French theorist and economist Yann Moulier Boutang has described this process really well by using the 'bees that pollinate' metaphor. I like it not so much because he compares us with insects but because of the analogy with the billions of clicks we make each day. It's us who create the user profiles. We play a vital and active, creative role in this process. We're not passive victims of some capitalist plot. In the same way we need to rethink our attitude towards surveillance and control. Without a critical understanding of the 'pollination' process we will merely repeat old school they-rule-us approaches.

VICTORIA LYNN: They are selling our data?

GEERT LOVINK: Very much so—our profiles are packed with personal preferences and fluctuating micro judgements of events, opinions and products. Michel Foucault's phrase of us producing the power that rules over us, is becoming ever more true.

VICTORIA LYNN: With this production of so much information on ourselves in the form of the image, do you think we are in a situation now where we can say that everyone is an artist?

GEERT LOVINK: There is certainly an incentive to express oneself in a creative manner. There is an urge for an expression of the Self, and this is reproduced, time and again, in real-time, because there are all these new services that invite our instant input. It's the minor fluctuations that make the difference these days. Over the past few years, people created profiles and designed an overall image of the Self. The online subject has to constantly perform creatively and reinvent her or himself. You cannot be dull, boring or uninteresting. You cannot hate the system or behave like a renegade. It is just not an option. It doesn't even exist and it would be interesting to ask why this is the case. Is it the tyranny of the positive? You are everybody's friend. That's the iron default. There is no ambiguity or antagonism. You can't have enemies or people you don't like. Or people that you like but had a falling out with. It's hard enough to 'unfriend'. All the things that happen in the social world out there do not find a representation in the online world. It is a self-promotional happy new age environment that wants to create the feeling that we all feel good, that there is nothing adverse happening with ourselves. These environments are event free. You can't just say that something serious happened to you. It is the last thing that you would express there. So they are peer sites of the Self, or as Foucault called it, technologies of the Self, and what you do there is you create or do self-management. I like very much the work of the critic Eva Illouz, and her book *Saving the Modern Soul, Therapy, Emotions and the Culture of Self-Help*. She has done a lot of research on dating sites. For instance, she writes about the tyranny of intimacy that you share with others online. Another book that I really like of hers is called *Cold Intimacies*, in which she writes explicitly about that type of self-representation that you find out there.

VICTORIA LYNN: It is not really a space in which you can have a critical perspective.

GEERT LOVINK: No, that is the big difference between Web 1.0 and 2.0. It is a world without controversy and discussion. People can organise themselves, yes, but mainly through a limited form of positive association. There are a few quite impressive tools out there for self-organisation. No doubt there is a lot of empowerment happening in some cases such as the possibilities that an artist now has when he or she makes a video and puts it up there and the incredible amount of people that can see it, in comparison to the video festivals or the galleries or very obscure places where work has previously been seen. The multiplications of audiences inside Web 2.0 is very real and websites like digiactive.org do interesting work in this respect. But there is no element of public discourse out there, and very consciously. This has been left out and this is the case for all the Web 2.0 applications. Do blogs have a discussion or a debate culture around them? Yes, some do. Some blogs are absolutely great tools for commentary especially on daily news or current affairs. But then again that does not necessarily create a rich and diverse public discourse. If you already know what you want to achieve, and have the ability to create organisational "crystals" (as Elias Canetti calls them), then Web 2.0 is a perfect set of tools. But if you find yourself amongst a scene of busy youngsters and vague people that have a hard time to navigate the contradictory complexities of late postmodernism, then it's most likely only to be a short-lived adventure.

VICTORIA LYNN: Online groups such as nettime, fibreulture, crumb, empyre and so on, are a product of Web 1.0?

GEERT LOVINK: Yes, and we can only guess that if there is ever going to be a Web 3.0 then elements from the Web 1.0 public debating culture might return. What we can also see is that slowly the social networking functionality is now being taken out of these very large sites like Twitter, Facebook and MySpace and turned into applications that people can own and run themselves and in that sense can create independence from the massive control that is happening on these concentrated websites. Could we have imagined a couple of years ago that there would be a Facebook with three hundred and fifty million users? That is an incredible number. They can potentially get in contact with each other but do not form a 'public'. At best they are confined 'publics'. On certain public forums it is possible to clash and have debates, but they are, significantly enough, not seen as part of Web 2.0.

VICTORIA LYNN: What is going to happen, can it be sustained?

GEERT LOVINK: You could say that the hyper growth of Web 2.0 is so titanic, it is bound to explode into a thousand pieces. That's inevitable. People will get suspicious and bored with the claustrophobic atmosphere of this very American definition of all these nice 'friends' and what they do in their daily lives. The definition of 'social' is so rigid.

VICTORIA LYNN: How do we archive all of this and is it necessary? There are so many images out there, so much documentation of lives.

GEERT LOVINK: Funnily enough, Web 2.0 is one of the least archived places. Harvesting Twitter is one of the main challenges for Google at the moment. The controversy over Facebook settings is all about this. Can these social activities become indexable and become visible on the open internet? Web 1.0 was, and still is, much better archived. That has got to do with the centralised activities and initiatives that we know right now, such as archive.org, the Library of Congress, a few European libraries, the National Library in Canberra and so on. But these initiatives are simply too small for the large players like Google or Microsoft, Yahoo, Facebook and so on. They don't allow these smaller archives to harvest them. Today's large sites are archives in themselves. It is unknown if these gigantic commercial entities have any interest in long-term archiving, even with all the good intentions they have towards existing archives. Maybe they do not have the capacity to store it all. Just think of blogger.com and the millions of blogs that have disappeared. Blogger deletes them automatically when they are no longer used. A site like this is a very static entity in comparison to the current real-time trend.

VICTORIA LYNN: It challenges the whole notion that you can archive contemporary culture.

GEERT LOVINK: There is also a fundamental shift happening at the level of protocols and the very architecture of the internet, from the archive to the flow and the river. We see that in many metaphors (just think of Google Wave). Silicon Valley is gearing up for the colonisation of real-time, away from the static archive. Some have even said goodbye to the very idea of 'search' and that is interesting, because search is, in the end, a time-consuming activity with often unsatisfactory outcomes and one that originated in library science.

VICTORIA LYNN: 'Search' is a library-based model?

GEERT LOVINK: Yes, you go back to the archive and search a database. This could, potentially, be the point where the Google empire will start to crumble, and this is why they are at the forefront of creating Google Wave, which integrates all the feeds of your Facebook and Twitter accounts etc., into one real live event happening on the screen. It is an online tool for real-time communication. Wave is flow based, river based. It is no longer the case that you sit there and go back to the archive, which is a completely different approach. The internet as a whole is going live, which means that you'll only see a segment. In this way the internet is trying to come closer to the messiness, the complexities of the social world.

VICTORIA LYNN: Even though the Facebook site, for example, was set up to mirror the social networking we do in our lives, could you say that the complexity of our life in a technological environment—with all the feeds etc.—is forcing the technology to change and adapt to a social networking that is at the same time real and virtual?

GEERT LOVINK: I would not put it that way. The virtual wants to penetrate and map out the real lives and social relationships to such an extent that the movement is going in that direction, not in the other way. There is no evidence that the world is becoming more virtual. There is all the evidence that the virtual is becoming more real. All the investment is there, and moving away from Second Life, and virtualisation and pretending to be someone else. We are not being encouraged to pretend to be someone else, but to be ourselves. You have to log in; you have to tell your name. The idea of the virtual where you could potentially become something else has broken down. When we are talking about the virtualisation of everyday life, we are referring to the fact that the technologies themselves are becoming smaller and more mobile.

VICTORIA LYNN: What are some of the more extreme examples of censorship of these "walled gardens" that you have come across?

GEERT LOVINK: Well, Australia's proposed web filter legislation. It is quite a sad story. Many Australians don't even realise that they are already living in a closed and monitored media environment. Filtering happens both ways. From here, in Amsterdam, one cannot access the iView programs from the ABC TV portal. It tells you that you are outside of Australia. The website says: "Due to licensing agreements, the service will initially be available via the web, with all shows only accessible via streaming in Australia. Geo-blocking is in place to prevent the content being accessed from outside Australia." YouTube is using a "suggested location filter". Sites often say: "Content unavailable. This video is not authorised for your location." Such nation-based IP blocking goes against the very idea of the internet, even if it is done with the best of intention, such as the case of content of the Norwegian national archives that can only be accessed inside that country. I wonder if people realise what that means for the Australians themselves. Do they really expect this to happen when they go to a BBC site that says, sorry, you are not in the UK, you cannot look at this website?

VICTORIA LYNN: What about information coming in?

GEERT LOVINK: It happens as much going outside as coming inside. There are one million Australians living offshore. Why are they, I should say we, suddenly excluded from this? Should they be exempted? Should they fill out forms? It is networked madness. Control is also fierce in large structures in universities, company websites, and intranets. The problem of course is that the control is very invisible, indirect. People haven't really noticed it too much. Why? Because there is no conflict. As long as there is no immediate conflict, there is nothing to worry about. But if people get fired, if there is a breakdown of infrastructure, if there is a real conflict in the world happening, we will immediately see a direct optimisation and utilisation of these tools that are now still used for marginal purposes. In that sense we could say that mainland China is leading the way. It is the dream of many politicians to have a Great Firewall.

VICTORIA LYNN: What role can an artist have in a network such as that we have painted here? Or, if not an artist, how can we critically intervene? Is it in the figure of the hacker, the critic?

GEERT LOVINK: There are still lots of artistic ways to show how power operates. We haven't really done enough work in this field. It would be great if more artists would engage with this internet world, to turn it upside down and inside out. So many of us take the freedom of the internet for granted and treat it as a secondary PR tool. Let's question it from the inside. With that I also mean irony, play with it. The problem is that you need a bit of technical insight in order to do this, so the call from the 1990s that the artists of the digital age should also have technical expertise and they should be able to deconstruct the tools that they are using I think is still very valid. This can only be done by changing the curriculum and teaching more technical skills, with a critical deconstructivist agenda. We cannot just be users, consumers or prosumers. We have to break through the glass ceiling of the smooth interfaces and start programming. This was, and still is, the task of the artist. It is not enough to make nice, or disturbing, visuals. This is the problem we have with visual studies. It is naïve because it limits itself to the symbolic value of imagery, without understanding the wider (techno-social) context in which these images circulate.

VICTORIA LYNN: What are some of the main bodies of thought about the network?

GEERT LOVINK: Networks have always existed, so we can very easily write a history of networks that starts with the Egyptians, Greeks or elsewhere. The network form of social organisation has always existed and the study of it has a structured body of knowledge started with the rise of sociology in the post-Second World War period. The first social network theories are from the early 1970s. The internet started in 1969. So there must be a coincidence there. Important work was done by Mark Granovetter, who defined networks through its weak ties, not by adding up your close friends. The network effect becomes important once you start to explore the social edges of your contacts. We are now so familiar with this cultural logic that everybody has almost intuitively understood that these 'social media' are about expanding your social horizon: how to reach into other groups of people, finding the nodes that are bridging people from one scene to the other; from one discipline or sub-culture or whatever context you are in, and this happens on a local, national and global level. Then there is Manuel Castells, who, in the 1990s, formulated his theory of the network society. He presented a theory of flows, and the ways in which these flows are interconnecting. I appreciate his work, but I find it too descriptive and uncritical. It also lacks awareness of aesthetics and visual culture and of the media *per se*. This type of sociology is a very dry. The ideas are presented as a given. What they lack is an understanding of the utopian and imaginative power of critical concepts. In itself there is nothing wrong with the Castells' network society notion. And that is the case with many of these network theories: they are often quite descriptive. They come from social science, and this is why many people in the arts and humanities have shied away from them. There are truisms. The current network theories are not necessarily innovative, creative or subversive. A recent theorist would be Bruno Latour who is involved in actor-network theory. It describes how actors perform within a network. His main contribution is that there are also non-human actors: bots, viruses, computer programs, and software in the background that present themselves as human and that we vaguely understand are not human, but we still perceive them as such. The term "network" refers to an entity that both organises social life and is also the internet—a technical protocol that is associated with a very boring, traditional office culture. A couple of decades ago, social networks would never have been associated with computers because computers were very exclusive, they were hidden. Maybe the computers themselves were networked, but not the users. That really only changed in the 1990s and now we are undergoing this revolution at the moment that hasn't really stopped. This revolution blurs the two: social networks of people and technical networks at the level of internet and mobile communication. Today, we can't even distinguish between the internet and a network such as the Sicilian mafia—a classic social network that has its

influence not only on the island of Sicily but across Italy and the world. It is an offline network related to family relationships, business ties, with a technical component. For young people of course they would think the other way around. They wouldn't necessarily start with their existing social network offline. So offline and online are blurring and maybe this is why there is no overriding network theory available at the moment because we are in this state of transition. My contribution has become more and more focused on details which have started to become large entities in themselves. An example is Wikipedia where millions of people contribute—it is the fifth largest website in the world.

VICTORIA LYNN: So rather than painting a whole network theory at the moment, you are saying one has to focus on these particular nodes within the network that are emerging and growing very fast?

GEERT LOVINK: They are already completely mainstream except that the artists, academics and journalists have a very hard time catching up and understanding the critical concepts within these large universes.

VICTORIA LYNN: What is an example of what is at stake in Wikipedia?

GEERT LOVINK: How do people collaborate? We did a conference in 2004 called 'The Art of Free Co-operation'. What does that imply? If we start to collaborate, what are the power relationships? Who is moderating? Who is in charge? Who defines what knowledge is? How do you resolve online conflicts? All this is being fought out at the moment within a place like Wikipedia. If you look at academia and education in general they still speak about Wikipedia as something that is forbidden. You can't quote it and copy/pasting from it is plagiarism, even though everybody is doing it. So the large knowledge institutions are by and large in a process of denial, instead of looking at it from the perspective that they could learn something from it. What I call for is much bigger involvement of scholars and artists in projects like Wikipedia. Go for a 'wikiwar' if you think what is being stated there is not true.

VICTORIA LYNN: Is there an example of someone who is taking a creative approach to Wikipedia?

GEERT LOVINK: There was a very interesting debate about wikipediaart.org for instance. As the website explains, it was a collaborative project initiated by Scott Kildall and Nathaniel Stern, originally intended to be art composed on Wikipedia, and thus art that anyone could edit. The idea was that anyone could start adding photos or videos with each different entry. One aim was to pose questions around copyright. The Wikipedia Art project was considered controversial by those in the Wikipedia community, and removed from the site fifteen hours after its birth. Why is Wikipedia shying away from the visual aspect? Because geeks have dominated the environment and claimed the collective imagination of what this collaborative online encyclopedia should be, the whole idea of Wikipedia Art struck them as being from another planet and not to be tolerated.

VICTORIA LYNN: What are some of the changes that you think we are going to see in the immediate future?

GEERT LOVINK: Technology will become more mobile, and more invisible. We are witnessing a growing amount of machines being connected to the Net. This 'internet of things' has been predicted for quite a while. It also involves remote sensing, so that you can sense what is happening in your house, for example. It means an interconnection of everything with everything in a very cheap way. That is about to happen. This will be another revolution. A further drop in prices is connected to this development. Network technology becomes more ubiquitous, being more available, being around everywhere, to a point where it leaves the IT and media spheres and enters different fields such as decentralised energy distribution. This will give us new incentives to create new spaces, new spheres of our own where we are not so bothered by others. There will be an inevitable rush to design spaces for one's own autonomy.

VICTORIA LYNN: It seems to me that the only people in the museums that are interested in emerging technologies are the marketing people, at best, but in terms of content or the different ways you can use technology to address the issues that are at stake today are not being taken up. Do you think there is a danger that the museums will start to only be talking to one generation?

GEERT LOVINK: As long as the arts blossom outside the museum, it doesn't really matter. If that is not the case, we have a problem. If the arts are thriving in society, it is a problem for the museum, and not for society. But if nothing happens in society and everybody is looking at all these centralised institutions to do something, then you can wait forever because they are not going to resolve these issues any time soon. What lacks in museums and the art market is a basic curiosity and a will to experiment, but in the end whose problem is that?