Optimist by Nature, Pessimist by Design: Writing Network Cultures

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Abstract

This conversation between Geert Lovink and Nikita Lin reflects upon our inner experiences within the global networked digital cultures. It explores the tactics, aesthetic and political, in response to the breakdowns brought by digital platforms and the possibility of creating new beginnings through persistent engagement in writing and publishing. Since 2004 Lovink is heading the Institute of Network Cultures at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and is Art and Network Cultures Professor of Art and Network Cultures at University of Amsterdam's Art History Department. The conversation takes as point of departure 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*. Over the past 30 years, Lovink has been experimenting with the networks and the internet in his writing by developing a distinct style that dig into essays, interviews, aphorisms, sloganisms, and memes. This includes critical concepts that he has developed - such as 'tactical media,' 'net criticism,' 'sad by design,' and 'internet extinction' – that people recognize, find useful and ready to apply to their own activities. For Geert Lovink, the fascinating question with writing is how to capture fast-changing real-time phenomena which means not only documenting but also leaving room for anticipation.

Keywords: Network criticism; Digital platforms; Media theory; Art and activism; Writing and publishing

Оптимист по натуре, пессимист по замыслу: Создание сетевой культуры

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Аннотация
Разговор между Гертом Ловинком и Никитой Лин отражает наш внутренний опыт в рамках глобальных сетевых цифровых культур. В нем исследуются тактики, эстетические и политические, в ответ на сбои, вызванные цифровыми платформами, и возможность создания новых начинаний посредством постоянного участия в написании и публикации. С 2004 года Ловинк возглавляет Институт сетевых культур Амстердамского университета прикладных наук и является профессором искусства и сетевых культур на факультете истории искусств Амстердамского университета. В качестве отправной точки для разговора взяты три последние книги Ловинка: "Дизайн грусти: о платформенном нигилизме", "Застрял на платформе: возвращение Интернета " и "Вымирание Интернета: наш неудобный момент истины ". За последние 30 лет Ловинк экспериментировал с сетями и Интернетом в своих произведениях, разрабатывая особый стиль, в котором используются эссе, интервью, афоризмы, лозунги и мемы. Сюда входят разработанные им критические концепции, такие как "тактические медиа", "сетевая критика", "дизайн грусти" или "вымирание Интернета", которые люди признают, находят полезными и готовы применять в своей деятельности. Для Герта Ловинка интересным вопросом, связанным с письмом, является возможность улавливать быстро меняющиеся явления в реальном времени, что означает не только документирование, но также прогнозирование.

Ключевые слова: Сетевая критика; Цифровые платформы; Теория СМИ; Искусство и активизм; Написание и публикация

Nikita Lin: Let's begin with the titles of your latest three books: *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism* (Lovink, 2019)*, Stuck on the Platform: Reclaiming the Internet* (Lovink, 2021) and *Extinction Internet: Our Inconvenient Truth Moment* (Lovink, 2022). They all carry a pessimistic and dark tone. However, on many occasions you describe yourself as an optimist. 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."[1] Are you also a tactical pessimist (by design)?

Geert Lovink: My brain may be a pessimist but my heart remains an optimist. What I am not is a realist. For instance, capitalist realism, as described by Mark Fisher (2009), is a political program with the intention that we are 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 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 is 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.

Lin: *Extinction Internet* closes with "There is beauty in the breakdown" (Lovink, 2022; cf. Kurtov, 2023). What kind of beauty is it?

Lovink: 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 an inner experience, as described by, for instance Ernst Jünger's (1922/2021) intense life and death experiences in the trenches of World War I or Georges Bataille's (1986) 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, the never-ending dread of social media, audits, meetings, targets, assessments. There is a 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 color. Howard Ehrich writes in *Reinventing Anarchy, Again*: "The black flag is the negation of all flags. It is a negation

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[1] https://networkcultures.org/geertlovink-archive/interviewed/interview-for-rhizome/

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 color of determination, of resolve, of strength, a color 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, good old Wikipedia[2].

Lin: There is an intertwining of politics and aesthetics in the way you see, describe and experience breakdown, which serves as education for people, and which is at the same time political and aesthetic. 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 a 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?

Lovink: First of all, I am 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 1980. 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 is 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[3] 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, 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

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[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anarchist_symbolism

[3] https://networkcultures.org

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 in the 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 is 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 (1994; 1998) 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.'[4]

Lin: The psychoanalytical aspect of breakdown reminds me of an anecdote from my childhood. There was no public infrastructure in the village such as trains or buses. We had to walk across mountains and rivers, without good shoes. I often had pains in my feet. When my feet were bleeding, I was told to make up stories for myself: "Forget about the feet. You don't have them now." It was mental conditioning, a strategy to ease the pains temporarily. The human mind has a magic power of making up stories. It helps us get through difficult times. In this case, the pain in the feet is real, and the breakdown breaks this 'real.' It was like giving up one's sovereignty over a territory; nevertheless, there is a chance you can reclaim it.

Lovink: 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. Neuro-plasticity 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. Details and ambivalence are missing. The contingency storm of social media has erased the story telling ability, selling stories back to its customers. Successful media, politicians and marketeers are those that can communicate appealing micro-stories. I am summarizing Han here. Oral history used to re-produce

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[4] https://networkcultures.org/bilwet-archive/adilkno/TheMediaArchive/index.html

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?

Lin: In *Stuck on the Platform* you evoke Hannah Arendt to describe the political capability of networks by creating new beginnings (Lovink, 2021). Could you expand on that? Should the new beginnings always take place in the same place or keep changing locations? Where and when?

Lovink: In my reading, she wrote this in discussion with Spengler, Heidegger and other German conservative thinkers that 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 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 how easily billions of users can be manipulated. The only hope here will be the stubborn hope 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 hovering 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.

Lin: 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?

Lovink: 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 be thriving 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, 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, extinction.

Lin: Perhaps equally interesting is the 'shoe analogy' in this case as you mentioned power structuring and governing. "The law and spirit operate from above by command to control conduct whereas the shoe, operating from below, conditions us to walk in a certain why" (Mitcham, 2022). The 'shoe analogy' appeared in Arne de Boever's introduction of François Jullien's thoughts on Chinese politics and warfare: "Democracy rests on one thing alone: persuasion. Whereas in China this is not the problem: there, one manipulates. That is to say one manages the conditions in such a way that you will follow the path that they want you to follow"(De Boever, 2020; Mitcham, 2022). With social media today, you would perhaps have to agree that democracies are also not immune to manipulation.

Lovink: 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 is happening is a time race. The subliminal steering, filtering aka 'governance' is happening – but when will we find out that this 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, klick 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 million already used ChatGTP in the first week after its launch? The other way round 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 is longing for the moment of disillusion? We would rather hover in an eternal stage of ignorance. Regression numbs the pain of enlightenment. Rather circumvent that and continue the state of stagnation. Do not think about it.

Lin: 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, 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 would continue. Or if it is necessary.

Lovink: 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 will never get there, and the empire will remain based in materials, resources, and commodities. Is ideology a trap for regimes? Will there be geo-political battles of ideas? Such as arguing the principles of international law? And in another part of the world chastising the persecution of minorities? And across the ocean explaining the sanctity of true and fair elections? This is no longer happening. The Cold War was seventy years ago. These days, rulers on all sides believe in implosion, crisis, exhaustion, 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 not longer on a global level.

Lin: In their critical analysis of the 'smart warehouses' like Amazon, Liam Magee and Ned Rossiter remind us that "when sovereign power is decoupled from the state, the conceptualization of habit is similarly liberated from the everyday routines of human subject. Instead, the habits of machines and data can be identified as asserting a sovereign command of how the everyday is experienced" (Hristova et al., 2022). This seems to repeat the same gloomy fact: the everyday is either in the hands of machines and data or of the state (which is also a machine); in there many see ourselves trapped - indeed we are. It is not a romantic picture of machine-human cohabitation. When human author-ity and data author-ity co-operate in today's industrial economic-social infrastructure, "The proliferation of decisions in banking and logistics registers how leadership and labour mutually enmesh with 'time-critical media' (Ernst)" (Hristova et al. 2022). I wonder: in the earliest landscape of the internet, what was meant by an author, authorization, and author-ity? How did the software and hardware configuration look like?

Lovink: 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, Insta, 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 is 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, for example, to the unstable Minsk agreements and all that followed. 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.

Lin: What was exactly the concept of the internet? Does it make sense to compare a project like the internet with the Great Wall or 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 is in general manipulative. The ethical argument is 'for the betterment of humankind and human society.' Engineers do not persuade. They make and manipulate. Literary people (authors of written words) try both persuasion and manipulation. Is the internet a product by nature of more doing and less thinking?

Lovink: 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, discovered what was out there; machines and connections breaking 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 from 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 is 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, AOL. The victory of the internet protocol happened accidentally. Again, the turning point is 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 (User Experience Design) persuasion took over.

Lin: In the early days of the internet there was no such political and design speculation as a planetary-scale computation megastructure Benjamin Bretton envisions. Yet it was clear from the beginning that media technologies in general have been historically tied to military initiatives. Surveillance technologies have been launched into outer space in order to collect data of the earth, to recognize and identify enemies on earth. It is interesting that the emergence of social media was linked to the exploitation of friendship (fake friendship you may say), that is, to make profit by connecting people. These two seem to oppose each other: The military uses the technology to identify enemies, and Silicon Valley uses it to 'make friends'. Do you see 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 stay as respectful strangers, not too close, but still aware of each other's existence. What would be the cultural solution?

Lovink: While in the make-up of the traditional public sphere, it was the whole idea to bring together 'friends' and adversaries, social networking sites 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 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 are our friends. The aim here would be fight the inflation for corporate means of the term. If I am saying that we are not friends, it does not imply we are enemies. It can also mean we are 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.

I think you are right that we have too many friends. Our social status has been quantified and for everyone to read. Everyone online on social media can read how many friends and followers you have. In general, there is just lots of us, in metropolitan areas, large companies and universities with tens of thousands of employees. In the early to 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 are all addressed as unique subjects. We are approached as respected 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 spy into each other's intimate life, it is still the opposite. In my view there

is no resolution here. What will happen 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, secure a roof over our head. We will organize education in other ways. This cannot be done individually.

Lin: Alexander R. Galloway (2022) does some interesting philosophizing on digital and analog thinking. He makes the claim that Deleuze's writings (apart from his earlier books such as the *Logic of Sense*) are primarily anti-digital (analog). Many of the contemporary artists and thinkers have absorbed the Deleuzian aesthetic and ethic concepts, consciously or unconsciously. Are you also influenced by the Deleuzian style of analog writing?

Lovink: Sorry, I never was a Deleuzian. If I have 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 aspect. I admire many thinkers but I do not consider myself a follower of them, let alone a pupil or believer. Consider this: Can Walter Benjamin be a role model? This is, in my view, the wrong approach. One I admire most is Elias Canetti, who, in one of his aphorisms, reveals the deepest, most insightful ways to engage with one's masters: by not mentioning them. From this perspective, it no longer matters whether they are analog or digital. In this spirit, I have a similar relation to the German Frankfurt School, which was – and still is – a major source of inspiration. My question was always: how would such a school look like today? Dare to start your own institute, even if it is virtual or imaginary. 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 ancient 18th century motives)? 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 'principle 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 practiced.

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