

INTERVIEW WITH **GEERT LOVINK**

The media activist and internet critic Geert Lovink is co-founder of the **Nettime** mailing list (<http://www.nettime.org>), one of the most active communities on the internet, and of **Next Five Minutes** (<http://www.next5minutes.org>), the first festival completely devoted to tactical media.

Lovink is PhD at the Melbourne University. He was editor of the Dutch digital culture magazine **Mediamatic** (<http://www.mediamatic.nl/>) and helped to organize forums, festivals and conferences such as **Fiberculture** (<http://www.fibreculture.org>), **digitalcity.nl** (<http://www.dds.nl>) and **Ars Electronica** (<http://www.aec.at>).

Author of several books and essays, his most recent enterprise is the **Institute of Networked Cultures** (<http://www.networkcultures.org>) — a mix of school and incubator, settled in Amsterdam, in the Politechnical School —, which develops projects and research about the internet.

During his stay in São Paulo, he was interviewed by **Eduardo de Jesus** (Critic and Curator, PUC-MG), **Guilherme Kujawski** (Journalist, Itaú Cultural), **Lucas Bambozzi** (Multimedia Artist), **Patrícia Canetti** (Critic and Media Activist, Canal Contemporâneo), **Paulo Hartmann** (Media Activist and Artist, Memefest.org), **Priscila Arantes** (Critic, PUC-SP), **Raquel Rennó** (Critic, MediaLab Madri), **Ricardo Rosas** (Writer, Media Activist and Webeditor, Rizoma.net) and **Roberta Alvarenga** (Writer, Trópico).

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EDUARDO DE JESUS: TO THINK ABOUT THE INTERNET IS TO THINK ABOUT DIVERSITY, BUT ALSO ABOUT A DOMAIN MARKED, IN SOME LEVELS, BY THE POWER OF THE COMMERCIAL AND ECONOMICAL ENVIRONMENT. CAN POLITICAL ARTISTIC MOVEMENTS THAT STRUCTURE THEMSELVES AROUND INTERNET AND COUNTER COMMUNICATION RELATE PRODUCTIVELY WITH THESE POWER STRUCTURES? WHICH IS THEIR WAY OUT?

Geert Lovink: For many, communication is a necessity, not a luxury. In the ideal world we would have forgotten the Internet. The question whether or not social movements, NGOs, activists and artists merely use the Net as a tool or seriously engage with the politics of the medium itself remains largely up to them. The Internet is not a stable and 'finished' medium. User cultures are not just consumers of a product, they also shape the direction as much as the developers do. It is key to make clear that users give the medium its direction. Open architectures yes or no, corporate dominance, state censorship, this all happening—and being contested by large groups at the same time. To answer

your question, yes, they can relate with the powers but only if they have an explicit interest in the future of this medium. It is political to use open source and free software. It is significant to further development mailinglists, weblogs, wikis and make public knowledge accessible.

RICARDO ROSAS: WHAT DOES CRITICAL INTERNET CULTURE MEANS?

Geert Lovink: It's a culture that reflects media culture beyond everyday use. Not that today's user cultures are that ordinary... On the Internet one can find pretty extreme practices. However, they are not necessarily critical for the simple reason that they just happen. They are pure practice, events that occur. Very little of it is even documented. New media are very fluid and little of it is 'captured'. So critical in this context has got nothing to do with an 'anti' attitude. No one is against technology. What is being discussed though are the apriori under which people are communicating. We can chat and send instant messages, but can we change the standards and parameters of these communications. Who is owning the lines and frequencies? Who defines the interfaces? Can we detect the monitoring and possible censorship that is going on? Who's in control of the filters? The millions of smart mobs that use today's communication platforms are not always aware that there is this techno-political unconscious below the smooth surfaces.

Ricardo Rosas: How do you see tactical media actions nowadays?

Geert Lovink: The tactical media concept came up in the gay and groovy nineties. Ten years later there is a stunning diversity of tactical media practitioners, even though they would perhaps not all use this term. But that's not relevant. The same counts for media activism. Not all who are active would like to use this fixed identity of 'activist'.

GUILHERME KUJAWSKI: WHAT WAS THE MOST EFFICIENT MEDIA TACTICS ATTACK YOU HAVE SEEN?

Geert Lovink: That would be no doubt the rtmark/yesmen group: <<http://www.theyesmen.org/>>. I have to admit that I wasn't that much impressed with RTMark when they got onto the scene in the late nineties. Some of their spam actions had that pseudo-subversive net.art attitude of young male teenagers. But once they got into their role of actors that pretend to be GATT/WHO officials, they became very effective. What I like about them is their insistence not to be do-good NGO types that have a moving message. There is no call for engagement. Instead, they reserve signs and make perfect mis-use of the new media networks.

ROBERTA ALVARENGA: WHAT DIFFERS ARTISTS AND ACTIVISTS THAT EXPLORE NEW MEDIA?

Geert Lovink: There should be little difference as long as they, indeed, explore the medium, and not merely use the default programs and aesthetics. What they have in common is their hunger for research and mentality to question authority.it <<http://authority.it>> is tempting to say that artists focus on form, whereas activists deal with content. There is some truth in this because the division of labour in digital capitalism is a very real issue for all us. The ideal of the artist as genius who can 'master' all forms of art is long gone. Instead,

we're living in a knowledge age in which skill sets of millions can become obsolete overnight. We're all specialists in our own ways. The idea of a synthesis between art and activism sounds good and worthy but should not necessarily be projected upon one person. In the present multi-media teams we see that collaboration, or rather free cooperation, is key. It is vital that designers, programmers, editors, project managers, call the artists and activists or not, have different backgrounds and interests.

RAQUEL RENNO: THERE IS AN INCREASING NUMBER OF TACTICAL MEDIA WORK EXHIBITED AS ARTWORKS IN MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES, AS A CLOSED WORK OF ART. ACCORDING TO YOUR INTERVIEW PUBLISHED IN ARTNODES ("GHI DE LOS MEDIOS TÁCTICOS", <[HTTP://WWW.UOC.EDU/ARTNODES/ESP/ART/BROECKMANN0902/BROECKMANN0902.HTML](http://www.uoc.edu/artnodes/esp/art/broeckmann0902/broeckmann0902.html)> "THERE IS A GAP BETWEEN ABSTRACT TOPICS OF THIRD WORLD DEBT, WORLD TRADE AGREEMENTS, FINANCIAL POLICIES AND THE DAILY MISERY, WITH ITS CONCRETE, LOCAL STRUGGLES. I DON'T THINK INTERNET ACTIVISM, OR TACTICAL MEDIA FOR THAT MATTER, CAN FILL THAT GAP. WHAT WE CAN DO IS TO EXCHANGE CONCEPTS". AREN'T THE ACTIONS OF GROUPS LIKE DANIEL ANDÚJAR'S IRATIONAL, IN SPAIN, OR METARECICLAGEM, IN BRAZIL, EXAMPLES OF CONCRETE PROCEDURES THAT AIMS TO GO BEYOND DE SIMPLE DENUNCIATION, CREATING A POSSIBILITY OF LOCAL INTERFERENCE BY MEANS OF DIGITAL EDUCATION (TEACHING PEOPLE TO BUILD HARDWARE AND USE OPEN SOURCE SOFTWARE) OF INDIVIDUALS ECONOMICALLY EXCLUDED?

Geert Lovink: Yes, most tactical media groups facilitate access in order to foster new dialogues. There is nothing against that. However, what interests me most is what happens next, after the access and the exchange. In my view, interesting tactical media initiatives do not merely facilitate but question and deconstruct, first and foremost the mythology of their own technologies. Irational and Metareciclagem are not ordinary telecentres that only provide training in hegemonic software. These projects are deeply metaphorical, critical, conceptual. They are prototypes. They do social experiments in the age of demo design. They construct memes. Most of these 'cultural viruses' fail but some succeed and have a huge impact on society. And then there is the movement aspect of it as well. Movements come and go but at best media activists can also transmit and rewrite their own history and be aware of the rich tradition they operate in.

ROBERTA ALVARENGA: WHAT DOES THE GAP BETWEEN ART AND ACTIVISM MEAN, AND HOW IS IT IMPORTANT TO BOTH AREAS?

Geert Lovink: A dialogue, or clash, between art and activism is only interesting for a small group of people so we're not talking about a general concern. The gap you are referring to is not perceived by that many people. Art and activism are two different universes, as much as art and technology, or academia and the NGO world are. Some artists address social and political topics in their work but to me that's not essential. In area we should be careful not go for politically correct art.

PATRÍCIA CANETTI: WHO SHOULD PRESERVE THE CURRENT MEDIATIC PRODUCTION?

Geert Lovink: Let's first of all start saving and storing the cultural digital data that is being produced. Only then we talk about preservation. I am not sure you

want to give everything in the hands of the US Library of Congress, Google or even the worthy Internet Archive with their Wayback Machine. It sounds dull but for the time being I guess it's everyone's individual responsibility. Make printouts of essential email correspondences. Make backup copies onto next generation data carriers. Go back to your own digital archives every now and then. I made good experiences with putting as much as I could online. Many scholars still have big reservations about them because they fear copyright problems, but from a conservation point of view the Internet is not such a bad option after all.

PATRÍCIA CANETTI AND PRISCILA ARANTES: GIVEN THAT ART GOES INTO THE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION, HOW DOES THE RELATION OF STATE AND ART HAPPENS NOWADAYS?

Geert Lovink: In most countries the idea of an arts market is still a distant concept. The state still has a great control over the arts production. I do not see this changing that much over the years. In the US it's low, in Europe it's big, that has been true for a long time. Sponsoring has risen and so has the importance of foundations, but they have not yet reached the level of policy making. The increased role of market forces is, of course, devastating for experimental art forms such as new media arts. Companies are not interested because electronic arts is not by default interested in producing workable prototypes. It could be used to polish up the image of a corporation but most new media artworks are simply not accessible and 'sexy' enough to appeal to the broader public. It's introspective art that needs a lot of explanation. This is why most of these art forms are either produced within the safe walls of academia, or through state support.

PRISCILA ARANTES: SOME THINKERS, LIKE THE FRANKFURTIAN ADORNO AND HORKHEIMER, SUSTAIN THAT POLITICAL AND ARTISTIC PRAXIS CANNOT BE INCLUDED IN THE CULTURE INDUSTRY CONTEXT. ANY PRACTICE THAT DEALS WITH MEDIATIC DEVICES, ACCORDING TO THIS VISION, ENDS UP PLAYING THE ROLE OF DOMINANT IDEOLOGY AND, THUS, OF THE CURRENT CAPITALIST LOGIC. HOW IS MEDIA ACTIVISM SITUATED IN THIS PERSPECTIVE?

Geert Lovink: Quite simple: it radically rejects this conservative and elitist point of view. We should not forget that these intellectuals are themselves deeply emerged in media culture. They wrote on typewriters, used printing presses, distribution systems etc. In particular in this digital age there is no distinction possible between 'good' media use (like writing deep and meaningful aphorisms with a fountain pen or attending a Schoenberg concert) and 'evil' computer games. I would say that opera and classical music are deeply embedded in capitalism, as is reading and writing books. The whole distinction made here, from a media perspective, is ridiculous. Adorno and Horkheimer read newspapers and listened to records, didn't they? Well, we do that with computers these days.

LUCAS BAMBOZZI: BY NOT NECESSARILY HAVING AESTHETIC VALUE, POLITICAL ART WITH ACTIVIST DISPOSITION DOES NOT HOLD ONTO THE CAPITALIST LOGIC AND DOES NOT CONSTITUTE ITSELF AS A MARKET [FOR MANY, NOT EVEN AS ART]. FOR THAT REASON, HOW DO YOU POSITION ACTIVIST ARTISTIC PRACTICES BEFORE THOSE WHO INSIST IN SAYING THAT ARE NOT IN THE ART TERRAIN, BUT IN THAT OF POLITICS?

Geert Lovink: The refusal to participate in the market is a power gesture. In the past, technology was expensive and surrounded by a mythical aura of the engineer-expert. Increasingly, also non-technical producers of creative works can use electronic media with little or no support of the technical class. To be able to operate outside of the arts is not all that easy. Even without declaring yourself an artist your work can be dragged into the arts system. The strategy of anti-aesthetics, like punks, or non-aesthetics, like activists, doesn't help much. Of course you can maintain that your work is purely political, but that only makes your creations, potentially, more interesting. Perhaps it could help to label it as 'amateur' or 'meaningless' to escape the attention of curators and critics. Local also helps, in some cases. Lots of localities are not sexy, or at least, not yet.

LUCAS BAMBOZZI: HOW DO YOU SEE IN THIS PRACTICES THE POSSIBLE CONVERGENCE OF AESTHETICS FRUITION [FROM THE ORDER OF THE SENSITIVE] AND UNITARY VALUE [INCISIVE POLITICAL POTENTIAL]?

Geert Lovink: In my experience it is vital to have graphic designers and video artists on board, not so much visual artists. The convergence you are talking about is possible, but what is really needed is the excitement of a growing social movement. The crowd has to grow. Campaigns and actions just happen. The events have to be under way. In the case of an emerging movement there is lots of place for experimental media aesthetics. It's much harder if you have to build bridges between already existing communities and have to struggle against a political climate that is against you. Counterculture and underground media are fine, but that's not what tactical media are all about. They live off growth and seek for opportunities to intervene. In that sense they are not 'against the currents'.

PAULO HARTMANN: HOW TO PROMOTE ACTIVISM AND ENLARGE ITS SCOPE? SHOULD IT BE KEPT ONLY IN THE GHETTO OF THE "INSIDERS"? IS IT HYPOCRITICAL OR TACTICAL TO PROMOTE ACTIVISM VIA MAINSTREAM MEDIA?

Geert Lovink: There is not much room to act if you're struggling for 'attention'. It is prove of a servant mentality. Tactical media, in my view, have a 'sovereign' position towards the mainstream monopolies. This doesn't mean they have to hide in a ghetto. You can work with however you like, build temporary coalitions, create interesting collaborations, without having to compromise. And if a journalist shows up, well, than it is up to you to do that royal gesture and answers their questions in a polite, compassionate and professional manner.

MARCUS BASTOS: IS A MILITARY TERM LIKE "TACTICAL" REALLY APPROPRIATE TO DESCRIBE COUNTER COMMUNICATION ACTIONS?

Geert Lovink: No, it is not and that's a problem. The word tactical was chosen to stress the short-term, flexible approach after 1989, amidst a technological revolution of PCs and camcorders. During my lecture at SENAC in São Paulo someone suggested to talk about 'tactful media'. That's OK for me, but perhaps a bit too polite, too Christian. Tactical media are in the offensive, they do not apologize.