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# THE PRINCIPLE OF NETWORKING

## Concepts in Critical Internet Culture



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THE PRINCIPLE OF NETWORKING  
Concepts in Critical Internet Culture

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# THE PRINCIPLE OF NETWORKING<sup>1</sup>

## Concepts in Critical Internet Culture

### *Introduction*

In this essay I present ongoing theoretical work, developed throughout 2004, the year I took up the position of 'lector' at the Hogeschool van Amsterdam. I will focus on three conceptual fields: the relation between multitude, network and culture, the art of collaboration and 'free cooperation', and finally present elements of a theory of 'organized networks'.

After having finished *My First Recession*<sup>2</sup> (mid 2003) I found myself, again, emerged in practices, of which the move from Brisbane to Amsterdam was by far the most challenging one. With the support of Emilie Randoe, the director of the interactive media school at HvA, I set up a research agenda related to the 'digital public domain' and out of this emerged the Institute of Network Cultures, a venture that is unfolding as we speak.<sup>3</sup> It might be premature to present a Theory of Network Culture. Instead, the work of the Institute should be seen as a wide ranging series of interventions, combining elements of engaged action research, critical reflection on (net) practice and, last but not least, speculative propositions.

### *1. Multitude, Network and Culture*

George Yudice states in his study *The Expediency of Culture*<sup>4</sup> that we have moved from the attitude of suspicion towards culture, and with the danger of its 'inherent fall', towards the so-called 'productive view'. Yudice proposes to

1 - The title refers to the saying 'networking is notworking', meaning that chatting keeps one away of important work that needs to be done. I first heard of it in the early nineties, used by the billionaire George Soros, who was sceptical of creating cultural networks as part of his own charity organization.

2 - Geert Lovink (2003). *My First Recession: Critical Internet Culture in Transition*. Rotterdam: V2/NAi.

3 - See [www.networkcultures.org](http://www.networkcultures.org) (the Institute of Network Cultures' website plus weblog). Besides a lecture series (in Dutch) on new media in the Netherlands and curriculum planning for the theory part of the Interactive Media program, the Institute scheduled five international conferences for 2005: A Decade of Webdesign, German Media Theory, Alternatives in ICT for Development, Curating for Public Screens and Art & Politics of Netporn.

4 - George Yudice (2003). *The Expediency of Culture*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

analyse culture as a resource rather than a commodity. Culture is an active and, potentially, innovative sector with the capacity to mobilize forces. This in particular counts for Internet culture. The failed dotcom models of the late nineties have shown how hideous – and wrong – commercial attempts were that tried to validate online communication as ‘value’, measured in ‘page views’. The translation of social activities into financial figures proved to be a bumpy ride. This is where Yudice’s culture-as-resource as the new epistemic framework comes into play. Against the Darwinian model of the winner-takes-it-all, advocated by libertarian ‘first movers’, culture-as-resource trades on the currency of diversity. Culture cannot thrive in a monopoly situation. Net culture does not fall out of the sky, and like other resources needs to be cared for in a sustainable manner. It needs slight distances, autonomous spaces in which clusters of groups and individuals can develop their own practices. Infrastructure plus access will not do the job. Culture does not equal leisure that locals and tourists ‘consume’ but is a strategic asset. In that sense Richard Florida with his ‘creative class’ theory is right.<sup>5</sup> The question is just how much of ‘creative industries’ policies is a hype in order to cover up structural problems within the Western labour market.<sup>6</sup> Culture Inc. is not working. It produces, at best, McJobs and mainly runs on voluntary labour. The rise of creative industries cannot be discussed outside of the broader issues of ‘precarious’ work (no contracts, ‘flexible’ hours, low payments, no health insurance, etc.).<sup>7</sup> If ‘creative industries’ as a concept wants to be meaningful, and avoid being a policy version of the nineties’ ‘new economy’ craze (only without the venture capital), it will have to seriously address the issue of sustainability. Otherwise there is no need to speak of new conditions caused by digital technologies. Instead we could better speak of rearrangements within existing institutions and drop the claim of the emergence of a new sector.

5 - Richard Florida (2002). *The Rise of the Creative Class*. New York: Basic Book.

6 - For a critique of creative industries, see the work of Ned Rossiter and Danny Butt, for instance <http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0212/msg00057.html>. See also Ned Rossiter (2004). Creative Industries, Comparative Media Theory and the Limits of Critique from Within, in: *Topia, Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*. Number Eleven. Spring 2004. Toronto, Canada.

7 - See [www.precairforum.nl](http://www.precairforum.nl).

Internet culture is in a permanent flux. There is no linear growth, neither up nor down. The only certainty is the steady rise, both in absolute and relative numbers of users outside of the West.<sup>8</sup> This is the 'cultural turn' most Western Internet experts have yet to come to grips with, in particular with the declining importance of the English language and the rise of 'intranets' for Japanese, Chinese, etc. Against nostalgic characters that portray the Net as a medium in decline ever since the rise of commercialism, and eternal optimists, who present the Internet as a holy thing, ultimately connecting all human synapses, radical pragmatists (like me) emphasize the trade-offs, misuses and the development of applications such as wikis, P2P and weblogs that reshape the new media field. The main enemy of 'net criticism' still is the PR sales talk and the religious nature of most theory and educational material in the new media field.

The culturalization of the Internet is at hand, and both the offline elite and techno geeks and media activists look at this slow but steady process with dismay. Culturalization, as Yudice indicates, is not an innocent process but comes with the 'mobilization and management of populations.'<sup>9</sup> This cannot merely be understood in terms of control. For Yudice democratic inclusion of 'communities of difference' is a necessary and desirable aim. What Yudice coins the 'expediency of culture' underpins performativity as the fundamental logic of social life today.<sup>10</sup>

Culturalization within the broader context of information technology (IT) can also be read as a moment of anticipation, a tactical sidetrack in response to the long-term decline of the engineering class in the West. The hegemonic role of computer scientists as inventors can easily be understood, but wasn't going to last forever. Different fields of knowledge, from human computer interaction to usability and new media studies, have all in their own ways proclaimed the coming of the cultural turn. With the massive outsourcing of IT jobs to countries like India we may have finally reached this point. At last, there is an economic reason to pay more attention to the economic possibilities of techno culture. There is a growing urgency felt, at least in the educational sector, to start integrating 'soft' knowledge into the hardcore IT

8 - See [www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm](http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm).

9 - George Yudice (2003). *The Expediency of Culture*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, p. 20.

10 - Idem, p. 28.

workforce. Until recently it seemed as if programmers and multi-media designers were from Mars and Venus. The genderized identity building imposed on male coders and female designers and communications staff still had an economic base in the division of labour within firms (IT versus marketing departments). With IT outsourcing happening at such a fast pace the dominance of the male geek coder is no longer a given and there is a chance of 'cultural mingling'.

The rise of multimedia design and communication courses, such as Interactive Media at HvA, forms a key response to this global transformation. So far, the educational sector has been slow in terms of adapting network technologies. Institutional infighting between existing disciplines has prevented higher education to become truly innovative. Universities worldwide are in the iron grip of Microsoft. The use of free and open source software is marginal, if not straight-out forbidden. Whereas academia played a key role in the development of the Internet, it lost ground over the years and is now desperately trying to catch up with a computer games course here or there. Speaking of 2005, the study of mobile devices is still in a premature phase. Part of the culturalization process would be to study, in detail, how users interact with applications and influence their further development. Network cultures come into being as a 'productive friction' between inter-human dynamics and the given framework of software. The social dynamics that develop within networks is not 'garbage' but essence. The aim of networks is not transportation of data but contestation of systems.

It is no longer enough, as Yudice argues, to prove that everyone's culture has its value. This also counts for Internet researchers and their, currently popular, 'ethnographic' approach.<sup>11</sup> The Internet is no longer a marginal phenomenon that has to be studied, and presented, like an alien tribe. The study of the 'everyday life' of net culture has been useful, but nowadays seems incapable of providing us with a bigger picture. User-centred methodologies tend to overlook changes at the level of infrastructure, software, interface and organization. Sudden changes within mass markets of consumer electronics are not taken into account, nor are global conflicts over intellectual property regimes. What we instead see happening is the collapse of the distinction between the 'micro' level of 'users' and the 'macro' level of

11 - See the website of the Association of Internet Researchers: [www.aoir.org](http://www.aoir.org).



society. Research into net cultures entails more than the study of ‘virtual communities’.

It is time to look for elements that can make up a network theory outside of post-modern cultural studies and ethnographic social sciences. What new media studies needs is a ‘language of new media’, to speak with Lev Manovich,<sup>12</sup> not a science-centred ‘General Network Theory’. The notion that networks are not random but have underlying structures, can be a ground-breaking insight for scientists, but should not come as a surprise for critical Internet scholars.

It is interesting to see how ‘multitude’ theorists deal with the notions of users and networks. The term ‘multitude’ is used as an alternative for ‘the people’, a term closely associated with the project of the nation state. Much like the cultural studies shift from passive consumers and watchers towards ‘prosumers’ and users, the multitude expresses the diversity within the workforce, away from the homogeneous notion of class and the fixation on ‘the proletarians’. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri use the multitude concept to describe today’s social formations in a globalized world.<sup>13</sup>

Whereas networks hardly played a role in their popular book *Empire* (2000), in *Multitude* (2004) the network form of organization has reached centre stage. According to Hardt and Negri ‘the multitude must be conceived as a network, an open and expansive network in which all differences can be expressed freely and equally, a network that provides the means of encounter so that we can work and live freely in common.’<sup>14</sup> Beyond good or evil, Hardt and Negri see networks everywhere we look – military organizations, social movements, business formations, migrations patterns, communication systems, physiological structures, linguistic relations, neural transmitters, and even personal relationships.’

After September 11, 2001 the enemy is not a unitary sovereign state, but rather a network. The enemy, in other words, has a new form. And according to planners of the War against Terrorism the Internet is not well equipped to

12 - ‘The Language of New Media’ is the title of the influential study by media theorist Lev Manovich. Lev Manovich (2001). *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press.

13 - Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri (2004). *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: The Penguin Press.

14 - Idem, p. xiv.



face up to the networked enemy.<sup>15</sup> The multitude authors present distributed networks as a general condition. Hardt and Negri: 'It is not that networks were not around before or that the structure of the brain has changed. It is that network has become a common form that tends to define our ways of understanding the world and acting in it. Most important from our perspective, networks are the form of organization of the cooperative and communicative relationships dictated by the immaterial paradigm of production. The tendency of this common form to emerge and exert its hegemony is what defines the period.'<sup>16</sup> The network form is imposed on all facets of power strictly from the perspective of the effectiveness of rules, as large top-down organizations have proved to be inflexible and a managerial nightmare. Distributed relationships are more open to change. 'It takes a network to fight a network', Hardt and Negri write.<sup>17</sup> But networks might be an unsuitable form to win a fight. Hardt and Negri present the network as the logical follow-up of the guerrilla struggle. 'Network struggle does not rely on discipline: creativity, communication and self-organized cooperation are its primary values.'<sup>18</sup> Its focus is primarily on the inside, not on the enemy. Hardt and Negri rightly note that organization becomes less a means and more an end in itself. Networks are the best guarantee that no isolated cells emerge dreaming of armed struggle, suicide bombing, etc. Network struggles first and foremost question all present and contemporary forms of organization, from the political party and its Leninist model to the peoples army and, in my opinion, even the social movement and its residual form of the NGO. Networks undermine, but not entirely eliminate, authority and make decision-making next to impossible. They deconstruct power and representation, and cannot simply be used as a tool by self proclaimed avant-

15 - Former CIA Director George J. Tenet called for new security measures to guard against attacks on the United States that use the Internet, which he called 'a potential Achilles' heel'. 'I know that these actions will be controversial in this age when we still think the Internet is a free and open society with no control or accountability', he told an information-technology security conference in Washington, 'but ultimately the Wild West must give way to governance and control.' *Tenet calls for Internet security* by Shaun Waterman, UPI report, December 2, 2004.

16 - Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri (2004). *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: The Penguin Press, p. 142.

17 - Idem, p. 58.

18 - Idem, p. 83.

garde groups. In fact, networks prevent a lot of events from happening. This may not always be the right activist strategy but that's where we are: preventing the repetition of tragic patterns in history. There are enough stories of lost struggles and organized idealism resulting in genocide. But then: networks do not only end histories, they also produce with their own set of politics.

Where are the 'virtual intellectuals'<sup>19</sup> that have incorporated the technological conditions into their way of operating? How much of the libertarian values will they incorporate? How long will it take until the roaring nineties, from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the fall of the dotcoms, have been thoroughly digested? To what extent will they be aware of the debates around free software and open source? The deeper computer networks penetrate the academy, the more this is becoming an urgent issue. Browsers, operating systems and search engines are not neutral tools but come with specific built-in social, cultural and aesthetic agendas. To emphasize the importance of being networked is one. Understanding network architectures is another. It is the task of new media activists, artists and theorists to take the lead and not only undertake critical probes but also mediate the outcomes to a multitude of audiences.

In his book *Protocol, How Control Exists after Decentralization*, Alex Galloway takes network theory a step further. Starting out with roughly the same theorists as Hardt and Negri, Galloway utilizes his insightful knowledge of the workings of the network in order to formulate his 'protocol' theory. According to Galloway we should get rid of the myth of Internet as being chaotic. Protocol is based on two contradicting machines: 'one machine radically distributes control into autonomous locales, the other machine focuses control into rigidly defined hierarchies.' Networks may dissolve old forms of power, the hierarchies and bureaucracies, but also install a new regime, what Gilles Deleuze coined 'the control society'. Networks constantly undermine the stable boundaries between inside and outside. While networks provoke a sense of liberation they install themselves into everyday life as ideal machines for control.

Let's face it: friction free capitalism is not in need of networks. It may not even need Galloway's protocols. All it requires is seamless data transport

19 - More on the role of the virtual intellectual in: Geert Lovink (2002). *Dark Fiber*. Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, pp. 30-40.

(from client to server, that is, no p2p, please). It aims for distribution without the network. What makes out today's networking is the *notworking*. There would be no routing if there were no problems on the line. Spam, viruses and identity theft are not accidental mistakes, mishaps on the road to techno-perfection. They are constitutional elements of yesterday's network architectures. Networks increase levels of informality and also pump up noise levels, caused by chit-chat, misunderstandings and other all too human mistakes. The theory of protocols is retro-garde, in the sense that it tries to explain how networks were designed during the past decades. But like so many new media theories, it did not anticipate the backlash fight between libertarian principles (of openness, self-regulation, etc.) and the neo-conservative take-over after 9/11, which overruled the 'protocol' with its War on Terrorism security discourse.

A key question of my recent work has been how networks deal with the 'frustrated', those who breach the consensus culture. After 9/11 and the following instalment of a global security regime, this is no longer such an odd question. The age of the 'true believer' is over, as amateur mass psychologist Eric Hoffer described this twentieth century figure in his study on mass movements.<sup>20</sup> Networks are ultimately an obstacle for those who want to sacrifice their lives for a holy cause. To use networks for propaganda purposes is possible but not as effective as old school broadcast media. Unlike a century ago, the frustrated no longer predominate among the early adherents of movements. Today's frustrated are nihilists, equipped with a perfect technical knowledge of the available machinery. Frustration, as Hoffer described it, may generate the characteristics of the true believer, but the 'frustrated mind' is a bad partner in online dialogues.

It is desire rather than discontent that lies at the core of the network. Today's refusal of martyrdom pushes the 'frustrated' to the margins of networks and excludes them access. This poses the question of the 'outside' of networks. If all power is disseminating into networks what happens to the deleted, the 'trashed' subjects of the network society? It is hard to imagine that such individuals network themselves. The obsession of Western elites and their mass media with Islamic fundamentalism does not answer any of the passions and tensions that surround today's network society. The only thing it does

20 - Hoffer, E. (1951). *The True Believer*. New York: Harper and Row. See also my chapter in *Dark Fiber*, which calls for a 'mass psychology of the Net'.

achieve is creating the illusion of an alien and outside, hostile to the global civilization – yet cleverly infiltrating its infrastructure. Radical morality is not concerned with opinion. This is where the discourse of the network society meets its Waterloo. The reason for this is that network discourse cannot integrate – let alone imagine – outside point of views. This is where Castells meets his Marxist fellows Negri and Hardt, and Jesuit bonds blend into the larger Third Way spin machine. Networks have a certain post-human quality. The ‘most natural human behaviour’ cannot be found there. Networks are complex techno-social environments that defy simplistic reductions. They are large-scale power transformation mechanisms in place. If networks were to dissolve power as such, the first such network has yet to be built. At best we can start describing network cultures beyond good and evil, in the best possible tradition of the novel, having yet to reach the psychological depth of Proust, the social drama à la Victor Hugo or the deep linking of hypertext master James Joyce.<sup>21</sup>

## 2. *Theory of Free Cooperation*

Academics and journalists often reduce the potential of the Internet to an additional medium for publishing, besides books and journals. But the Internet is not just used for self-promotion. It wasn't even primarily designed for that task. There is a Net beyond the obligatory homepage and weblog. For many Brazilian users the Internet equals chat rooms (dating sites) plus online TV guide. But let's not focus on such reductions of the medium. In countless cases people interact and work together on specific tasks and exchange opinions and materials online. Or they assist each other in technical matters and write code together. What defines the Internet is its social architecture. It's the living environment that counts, the live interaction, not just the storage and retrieval procedure.

21 - An introduction to the 'politics of the information age' can be found in Terranova, T. (2004). *Network Cultures*. London/Ann Arbor: Pluto Press. Disappointing in this context is Steven Shaviro's book (2003), *Connected, or what it means to live in a networked society*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Shaviro flirts with the idea of network cultures but at a closer look only refers to nineties' Hollywood science fictions. Shaviro fails to make the connection between the realm of real existing social interactions on the Internet and the cyber imaginations of Hollywood – a widespread problem amongst literary scholars that enter the field.

Together with New York artist Trebor Scholz I organized a conference on 'free cooperation' that took place on the Buffalo campus of the State University of New York, April 23-24, 2004.<sup>22</sup> We decided to further investigate the art of (online) collaboration from media activist/artist perspectives. From cell phones to e-mail, and multiplayer online games, mailing lists, weblogs, and wikis our everyday lives are increasingly enmeshed with technology. The necessity to examine what happens when we collaborate in these technological channels through which we communicate, will soon become more apparent. How can we find independence and enhance freedom in the context of networked collaboration? How do you collectively manage and own a shared resource such as a network?

We invited the Bremen-based media critic Christoph Spehr who coined the term 'free cooperation' in his essay 'Gleicher als andere' [More Equal Than Others]. In 2003 I did an online interview with Spehr.<sup>23</sup> Most of Spehr's writings are not translated into English and this event was an opportunity to introduce his ideas into Anglophone media discourses. Spehr's writings use references to 1960s sci-fi movies to think about contemporary cooperation insisting on the option of refusal, independence, negotiation and renegotiation with 'alien' corporate or state monsters. Focusing on these ideas of equality and freedom the conference asked how they could be made useful for alternative networks of learning and the university. Spehr's key concept is that everyone should have the freedom to dissolve collaboration at any given time. It is important to define a language in which we can openly talk about difference and power within groups or teams. Or networks, for that matter. The option to bail out is the sovereign act of network users. Networking is their a priori, the very foundation all online activities are built upon. If you do not know how to log out, you're locked in.

Another angle I would like to discuss is the relation between the multitude and collaboration. In *A Grammar of the Multitude* Paolo Virno attempts to describe the 'nature of contemporary production'.<sup>24</sup> The questions raised

22 - See the conference website [www.freecooperation.org](http://www.freecooperation.org) for the archive of the mailing list and the program. Also a .pdf of the free newspaper, which was produced at the eve of the event in a circulation of 10,000 can be downloaded from this site.

23 - Nettime, June 6, 2003, Science Fiction for the Multitudes, [www.nettime.org](http://www.nettime.org).

24 - Virno, P. (2004). *A Grammar of the Multitude*. Cambridge (Mass.): Semiotexte.

there are subjective and come up after the very act of 'refusal'. What is collaboration once we conclude that life is being reduced to work? I would argue that it is important, at some point, to leave behind the initial, decisive stage of refusal because one otherwise ends up in individual anarchism or a Max Stirner-type of egoism in which there is nothing left to collaborate on. Notworking has to remain an option. It is not the aim. There must be a basic consensus on what's on the agenda, what is to be done. The collaboration question follows from there and cannot either be discussed in a political vacuum, otherwise it gets reduced to a managerial issue. Collaboration itself is not generating issues that can be translated into (political) campaigns. Key to our effort to theorize individual and collective experiences, is the recognition that there must be a freedom to refuse to collaborate. There must be a constitutive exit strategy. At first instance this may be a mysterious, somewhat paradoxical statement. Why should the idea of the refusal be promoted as the very foundation of collaboration, as Christoph Spehr has suggested? It almost sounds like a new dogma, a next rule, notworking as yet another human right. The question of 'free cooperation' is, in essence, one of organization and comes up after the crisis of the (Fordist) factory model and its political mirror, the political party. This may be obvious. The obsession with (post-)Fordism may be too much focussed on specific Italian subjectivities (needless to say, a wildcat culture of spontaneous strikes is not universal). It is up to us to update and modify the Italo concepts and come up with specific case studies of, for instance, depressing NGO office cultures, power relations within 'social software', dotcom leisure styles, 'precarious' freelance contracts, call centre blues or the boredom of project management. The focus on 'new social movements' may already be outdated and should perhaps be replaced with much more temporary ruptures. With Galloway we can ask: what is politics after its decentralization? Perhaps it is not even useful anymore to talk about 'movements' (as in 'movement of movements'). Movement might suggest too much unity and continuity to describe today's event on the streets and the Net. There is no movement without a timeline, without collective memory of landmark events. While the term is accurate if we want to express political and cultural diversity, it still has that promise of continuity in it – and with it comes the suggestion that decline and disappearance can be upheld. The movement should never stop. The energy of the Event that gave the movement its character and direction ought not to die.

This is where the gestalt of the 'true believer' enters the story. Rituals will be invented to bring back the masses to the street, no matter at what price. According to Paolo Virno the crisis of the society of labour is reflected in the multitude itself. We could extend this and say that multitudes are a highly problematic category, not for capital or the 'control society', but for the multitudes themselves. It will take a while to get used to the fact that there is no consciousness in and for itself, that revolutionaries can be wary – and bored – of their own revolutions. There is talk of a collective ecstasy without a Grand Resolution. Fragmentation is not a romantic agony but a prime condition of political life, and the networked condition only further transcribes this process, into software, into database structures.

Paolo Virno writes: 'Social wealth is produced from science, from the general intellect, rather than from the work delivered by individuals. The work demanded seems reducible to a virtually negligible portion of a life. Science, information, knowledge in general, cooperation, these present themselves as the key support system of production – these, rather than labour time.' This puts cooperation in a state of exception. It's not the rule, not the everyday life condition; it's rare, uncertain and always on the verge of being dissolved. For Virno the difference between labour time and non-labour time falls short. This is exactly why there is so much uncertainty (and curiosity) about collaboration. In what act, work, gesture, idea, are no traces of collaboration included? The distinction between collaboration and non-collaboration becomes more and more difficult to make. The opposition of the lonesome genius and the multi-disciplinary team sounds like an odd lifestyle choice and is not relevant.

What is at stake is the way in which negotiations take place inside each particular 'credit' economy. Which traces remain visible of a collaboration? Can terms of ownership be (re)negotiated further along the line or have forms of ownership and division of labour been fixed at day one? How many 'defeated collaborations' can one bear? Humans may once have been 'social animals' but that doesn't mean they act like ants. There is enough herd mentality and this makes it hard, even impossible to promote collaboration as a virtue. Yet, both wisdom and knowledge have blocked the road back to the land of Zarathustra. It is not society that keeps us away from individuation. The main issue is the method of evaluation. Do we look back in anger once the group has fallen apart?



It is hard to distinguish between the necessity to work in groups, for instance to produce large and complex artworks, conferences, festivals, protests or publications, and the desire to overcome isolation when you do individual work. For many of the new media artworks, collaboration is an absolute must because the individual artist simply does not have all the skills to do the visuals, 3D, sound, editing, and performance and manage the whole process in terms of human resources and finance. A question here would be one of 'economy of acknowledgement' (which is a whole topic in itself...) and whether works are produced under the name of a single video artist (let's say Bill Viola) or, more in accordance with reality, a group name. The film industry must have a whole history about the composition of the credits, and the battles that were fought in order to get included. The word 'collaboration' reminds me of anonymous early renaissance painting workshops and the way 'individuals' emerged out of that studio system. That is considered as a process of enlightenment. Yet, in our times, individuals working together in a group are regarded as something unique.<sup>25</sup>

Over the years I have noticed how curious people are about the internal group dynamics. Collaboration provokes voyeurism, because friction within the group is taken for granted. According to the prejudice, working together is difficult and has to end in a drama. For over fifteen years a few friends and me produced 'extramural theory' under the group name Adilkno (or *Bilwet* in Dutch/German), the Foundation for the Advancement of Illegal Knowledge.<sup>26</sup> Adilkno explicitly wrote about collaboration in the sense of a 'third mind', which is inherently different from the individual mindsets. Out of the Adilkno experience grew an intensive four years collaboration with Pit Schultz during the mid-nineties, the golden age of 'net criticism', when we built up the *Nettime* project. These days 99 per cent of my collaborations are

25 - Relate this to what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write in *Multitude* (2004) about collaboration: 'We are more intelligent together than any one of us is alone. Open source, collaborative programming does not lead to confusion and wasted energy. It actually works. One approach to understanding the democracy of the multitude, then, is an open-source society, that is, a society whose source code is revealed so that we all can work collaboratively to solve its bugs and create new, better social programs' (*Multitude*, Penguin Press 2004, p. 340).

26 - The online archive of Adilkno, with texts in Dutch, English and German, can be found at <http://thing.desk.nl/bilwet>.

virtual. Working in real life is a luxury and big fun. Collaborating with a group in your own town is unique, as is continuing to do so. However, the more computer networks are being utilized, the less likely it will be that you will find people to collaborate with in your vicinity.

The more work is done online, the more important it is to understand the techno-social architectures of the tools we use. Think for instance about the gender-machine aspect, that is, the productive power relationships of male-male, male-female and female-female collaborations. Two German media theorists, Friedrich Kittler and Klaus Theweleit, have written about this. During the eighties Theweleit worked in the same department as Friedrich Kittler, in Freiburg. Their work on gender, media and collaboration has striking similarities. Both Theweleit and Kittler stress the importance of the (Deleuzian) productive element of the male-female-machine triangle. This can also be a male-medium-male connection or a female-medium-female one, but obviously, in male dominated heterosexual societies, the male-female-machine one is the dominant one. Theweleit looks into the oppressive aspect, in which males 'sacrifice' female bodies as their medium in order to create 'high culture' of eternal meaning.

We could ask ourselves if such gender stories are still out there. If I think about the Internet and the computer it is the bachelor's machine that I think of, not the male genius author who is dictating his work to his secretary/lover – but I might be wrong there. Was the shift from the typewriter to PC-based word processing that crucial in this respect? Perhaps we need a cultural history of the present that could describe the gender condition of online text/knowledge production. Despite the fact that half of the Internet users are female, geeks/programmers remain predominantly male.

Collaboration, and in particular free cooperation, sounds somewhat idealistic. Would it perhaps be intended for people that are bored with themselves, handicapped with 'lesser capacities'? Humans are social animals, in the end. We have to remain techno-realists in this respect. Let's not dig too deep into a cynical reading of the topic. Another approach would be to investigate the rise of the cultural economy and the way in which creative industries force people to collaborate in teams. Economic innovation in networks is one of the principle conditions of the multitude, after all. So much in new media, computer engineering but also architecture and design is teamwork that it is actually astonishing to see how poorly developed the general understanding of this topic is.

The fight for the recognition of group work in sectors such as literature, the visual arts and academia will probably never be won. Institutions dislike working with amorphous social structures because no one seems to be accountable. Here we need to make the distinction between organized networks (see below) and the networked organization. It is quite easy to network organizations and to start a collaboration between institutions. The real challenge is the transformation of the 'organized network' model, the truly virtual communities out there not interfacing directly with the real world. It's that interface between the real and virtual world that determines the type of collaboration. It is hard, and exhausting to collaborate online without having meetings 'in real life'. Online work can be really ineffective, and slow. One needs to have patience to succeed. Some still believe that we are 'communicating with the speed of light' but that's not at all the case if you work on a more complicated project with a group that is dispersed around the globe. Collaboration gets particularly interesting when informal networks reach a critical mass, go beyond the initial stage of excitement and transform into something completely different. It's a marvellous, mysterious moment when small and dispersed groups converge into a larger social movement and cause an event (as Alain Badiou calls it). But that's exceptional. Individual collaborations do not aim to create historical events.<sup>27</sup>

In the case of the World Social Forum, Indymedia and the 2003 anti-war protests it is interesting to see how these movements have a hard time dealing with 'scalability'. It is extremely hard for decentralized autonomous organizations, so used to fragmentation, to scale up and build large size sustainable structures. For hyper-individuals like us, historical events have become much like carnival (as Bakhtin described it). Making history is experienced as a festive interruption of the everyday. This makes it so hard to see such large events as an experience that can be passed on.

### 3. *Dawn of the organized Networks*

At first glance the concept of 'organized networks' appears oxymoronic. In technical terms, all networks are organized. There are founders, administrators, moderators and active members who all take up roles. Think back to the early work on cybernetics and the 'second order' cybernetics of Bateson and

27 - This is a classic 20th century approach, in which political-aesthetics is framed within a larger, metaphysical process of history making.

others. Networks consist of mobile relations whose arrangement at any particular time is shaped by the 'constitutive outside' of feedback or noise. The order of networks is made up of a continuum of relations governed by interests, passions, affects and pragmatic necessities of different actors. The network of relations is never static, yet is not to be mistaken for some kind of perpetual fluidity. Ephemerality is not a condition to celebrate for those wishing to function as political agents.

The theory of organized networks is to be read as a proposal, a draft, a concept in the process of becoming that needs active steering through disagreement and collective elaboration.<sup>28</sup> What it doesn't require is instant deconstruction. Everyone can do that. Needless to say, organized networks have existed for centuries. Their history can and will be written, but that doesn't bring us much further. The networks we are talking about here are specific in that they are situated within technical media. They can be characterized by their advanced irrelevance and invisibility for old media and p-in-p (people in power). General network theory might be useful for enlightenment purposes, but that doesn't answer the issues that new media based social networks face. Does it satisfy to know that molecules and DNA patterns also network?

Truism today: there are no networks outside of society. Like all human-techno entities, they are infected by power. Networks are ideal Foucault machines: they undermine power as they produce it. Their diagram of power may operate on a range of scales, traversing intra-local networks and overlapping with trans-national insurgencies. No matter how harmless they seem, networks bring on differences. Foucault's dictum: power produces. Translate this to organized networks and you get the force of invention. Indeed, translation is the condition of invention. Mediology, as defined by Régis Debray,<sup>29</sup> is the practice of invention within the socio-technical system of networks. As a collaborative method of immanent critique, mediology assembles a multitude of components upon a network of relations as they coalesce around situated problems and unleashed passions. In this sense, the network constantly

28 - See the discussion on the Fibreculture mailing list about list governance, censorship and organized networks in November/December 2004: [www.fibreculture.org](http://www.fibreculture.org), go to: list archive.

29 - Régis Debray (1996). *Media Manifestos: on the Technological Transmission of Cultural Forms*. London & NY: Verso.

escapes attempts of command and control. Such is the entropic variability of networks.

Network users do not see their circle of peers as a sect. Ties are loose, up to the point of breaking up. Thus the ontology of the user, in so many ways, mirrors the logic of capital. Indeed, the 'user' is the identity par excellence of capital that seeks to extract itself from rigid systems of regulation and control. The user increasingly has become a term corresponding with the auto-configuration of self-invention. Some would say the user is just a consumer: silent and satisfied, until hell breaks loose. The user is the identity of control by other means. In this respect, the 'user' is the empty vessel awaiting the spectral allure of digital commodity cultures and their promise of 'mobility' and 'openness'. Let us harbour no fantasies: sociality is intimately bound within the dynamic array of technics exerted by the force of capital. Networks are everywhere. The challenge for the foreseeable future is to create new openings, new possibilities, new temporalities and spaces within which life may assert its insistence on an ethico-aesthetic existence.

Organized networks should be read as a proposal, aimed to replace the problematic term 'virtual community'.<sup>30</sup> It should put the internal power relations within networks on the agenda and break with the invisible workings that made out the consensus era. Organized networks are 'clouds' of social relationships in which disengagement is pushed to the limit. Community is an idealistic construct and suggests bonding and harmony, which often is simply not there. The same could be said of the post-9/11 call for 'trust'. Networks thrive on diversity and conflict (the networking), not on unity, and this is what community theorists were unable to reflect upon. For them disagreement equals a disruption of the 'constructive' flow of dialogue. It takes an effort to reflect on distrust as a productive principle. Indifference between networks is a main reason not to get organized, so this aspect has to be taken seriously. Interaction and involvement are idealistic constructs.

Passivity rules. Browsing, watching, reading, waiting, thinking, deleting, chatting, skipping and surfing are the default condition of online life. Total involvement implies madness to the highest degree. What characterizes networks is a shared sense of a potentiality that does not have to be realized.

30 - See also the introduction and conclusion of Geert Lovink (2003). *My First Recession*. Rotterdam: V2/NAi. The theory of organized networks should be read as a follow up of this book.

Millions of replies from all to all would cause every network, no matter what architecture, to implode. Within every network there is a long time of interpassivity, interrupted by outbursts of interactivity. Networks foster, and reproduce, loose relationships – and it's better to face this fact straight into the eye. They are hedonistic machines of promiscuous contacts. Networked multitudes create temporary and voluntary forms of collaboration that transcend, but not necessary disrupt the Age of Disengagement.

The concept of organized networks is useful to enlist for strategic purposes. After a decade of 'tactical media', the time has come to scale up the operations of radical media practices. We should all well and truly have emerged from the retro-fantasy of the benevolent welfare state. Networks will never be rewarded and 'embedded' in well-funded structures. Just as the modernist avant-garde saw itself punctuating the fringes of society, so too have tactical media taken comfort in the idea of targeted micro-interventions. Tactical media too often assume to reproduce the curious spatio-temporal dynamic and structural logic of the modern state and industrial capital: difference and renewal from the peripheries. But there's a paradox at work here. Disruptive as their actions may often be, tactical media corroborate the temporal mode of post-Fordist capital: short-termism.

It is retro-garde that tactical media in a post-Fordist era continue to operate in terms of ephemerality and the logic of 'tactics'. Since the punctuated attack model is the dominant condition, tactical media have an affinity with that which they seek to oppose. This is why tactical media are treated with a kind of benign tolerance. There is a neurotic tendency to disappear. Anything that solidifies is lost in the system. The ideal is to be little more than a temporary glitch, a brief instance of noise or interference. Tactical media set themselves up for exploitation in the same manner that 'modders' do in the game industry: they both dispense with their knowledge of loop holes in the system for free. They point out the problem, and then run away. Capital is delighted, and thanks the tactical media outfit or nerd-modder for the home improvement.

But make no mistake, the emergence of organized networks amount to an articulation of info-war. This battle currently revolves around the theme of 'sustainability'; neo-liberal governments and institutions wish to extricate themselves from responsibility to annoying constituencies. Organized networks are required to invent models of sustainability that go beyond the

latest Plan of Action update, which is only then inserted into paper shredders of member states and 'citizen friendly' businesses.

Organized networks compete with established institutions in terms of branding and identity building, but primarily as sites of knowledge production and concept development. These days, most bricks and mortar institutions can only subtract value from networks. They are not merely unwilling but in fact incapable of giving anything back. This is where the real potential of virtual networks lies. Virtual networks are not yet represented in negotiations over budgets, grants, investments and job hiring. At best they are seen as sources of inspiration amongst peers.

The organized network is a 'hybrid' formation: part tactical media, part institutional formation. There are benefits to be obtained from both these lineages. The clear distinction of the organized network is that its institutional logic is internal to the socio-technical dimensions of the media of communication. This means there is no universal formula for how an organized network might invent its conditions of existence. There will be no 'internationalism' for networks. While we have outlined the background condition of neo-liberalism as integral to the emergence of organized networks, it also has to be said that just as uneven modernities created vastly different social and national experiences and formations, from the East to the West, from the North to the South, so too does capital in its neo-liberal phase manifest itself in a plurality of ways. The diversity of conditions attached to free-trade agreements is just one example of the multiple forms of capital. From the point of analysis, the understanding of capital is always going to vary according to the range of inputs one defines as constituting the action of capital.

Eventually organized networks will be mirrored against the networked organization. But we're not there yet. There will not be an easy synthesis.

Roughly speaking, one can witness a 'convergence' between the informality of virtual networks and the formality of institutions. This process, however, is anything but harmonious. Clashes between networks and organizations are occurring before our very own eyes. Debris spreads in every possible direction, depending on the locality. The networked multitude, one could say, is constituted – and crushed – as a part of this process. It is naive to believe that, under the current circumstances, networks will win this battle (if you want to put it in those terms). This is precisely why networks need their own form of organization. In this process they will have to deal with the following three aspects: accountability, sustainability and scalability.



Let's start with the question if who and if networks represent and what form of internal democracy they envision. Formal networks have members but most online initiatives don't. Let's face it. Networks disintegrate traditional forms of representation. This is what makes the question 'Did blogs affect the 2004 US-election?' so irrelevant. The blogosphere, at best, influenced a hand-full of TV and newspaper editors. Instead of spreading the word, the Net has questioned authority – any authority – and therefore was not useful to push this or that candidate up the rating-scale of electoral appeal. Networks that thrive higher up will fail. No matter what you think of Derrida, networks do deconstruct society. It is deep linkage that matters, not some symbolic coup d'état. If there is an aim, it would be to parallel hegemony, which can only be achieved if underlying premises are constantly put under scrutiny by the initiators of the next techno-social wave of innovations. The rise of 'community informatics'<sup>31</sup> as a field of research and project building could be seen as an exemplary platform that could deal with the issues treated here. For all the interest community informatics has in building projects 'from below', a substantial amount of research within this field is directed toward 'e-democracy' issues. It is time to abandon the illusion that the myths of representational democracy might somehow be transferred and realised within networked settings. That is not going to happen. After all, the people benefiting from such endeavours as the World Summit of the Information Society (WSIS) are, for the most part, those on the speaking and funding circuits, not people who are supposedly represented in such a process. Networks call for a new logics of politics, not just based on a hand-picked collection of NGOs that have identified themselves as 'global civil society'.

Networks are not institutions of representative democracy, despite the frequency with which they are expected to model themselves on such failed institutions. Instead, there is a search for 'post-democratic' models of decision making that avoid classic models of representation and related identity policies. The emerging theme of non-representative democracies places an emphasis on process over its after-effect, consensus. Certainly, there's something attractive in process-oriented forms of governance. But ultimately the

31 - One of the many crossovers between computer science and humanities, as proposed by Michael Gurstein and others. Some of their texts can be found at [www.netzwissenschaft.de/sem/pool.htm](http://www.netzwissenschaft.de/sem/pool.htm).

process model is about as sustainable as an earthworks sculpture burrowed into a patch of dirt called the 1970s. Process is fine as far as it integrates a plurality of forces into the network. But the primary questions remain: Where does it go? How long does it last? Why do it in the first place? But also: Who is speaking? And: Why bother? A focus on the vital forces that constitute socio-technical life is thus required. Herein lie the variability and wildcards of organized networks. The persistence of dispute and disagreement can be taken as a given. Rational consensus models of democracy have proven, in their failure, that such underlying conditions of social-political life cannot be eradicated.

Organized networks will increasingly be concerned with their own sustainability. Networks are not hypes. They may look temporary but are here to stay. Individual clusters might die off sooner rather than later but there is a Will to Contextualize that is hard to suppress. Links may be dead at some point but that's not the end of the data itself. Nonetheless networks are extremely fragile. This all may sound obvious, but let's not forget that pragmatism is built upon the passions, joys and thrills of invention. Something will be invented to bridge time and this something we might call the organized network. Time has come for cautious planning. There is a self-destructive tendency of networks faced with the challenge of organization. Organized networks have to feel confident about defining their value systems in ways meaningful and relevant to the internal operations of their socio-technical complex. That's actually not so difficult. The danger is that of ghettoization. The trick is to work out a collaborative value system able to deal with issues such as funding, internal power plays and the demand for 'accountability' and 'transparency' as they scale up their operations.

Let's get monetary. Organized networks first and foremost have to keep their virtual house in order. It is of strategic importance to use a non-profit provider (ISP) and have backups made, or even run a mirror in another country. Also, it is wise not to make use of commercial services such as Yahoo!Groups, Hotmail, Geocities or Google as they are unreliable and suffer from regular security breaches. Be aware of costs for the domain names, e-mail addresses, storage and bandwidth, even if they are relatively small. Often conflicts arise because passwords and ownership of the domain name are in the hands of one person that is leaving the group in a conflict situation. This can literally mean the end of the project.

Networks are never hundred per cent virtual and always connected at some point with the monetary economy. This is where the story of organized networks starts. Perhaps incorporation is necessary. If you do not want to bother the network with legal matters, keep in mind what the costs of not going there will be. Funding for online activities, meetings, editorial work, coding, design, research or publications can of course be channelled through allied institutions. Remember that the more online activities you unfold, the more likely it is that you will have to pay for a network administrator. The inward looking free software world only uses its paradise-like voluntary work rules for its own coding projects. Keep in mind that cultural, artistic and activist projects do not fall under this category, no matter how politically correct they might be. The same counts for content editors and web designers. Ideally, online projects are high on communitarian spirits and are able to access the necessary skills. But the further we leave behind the moment of initiation, the more likely it will be that work will have to be paid. Organized networks have to face this economic reality or find themselves marginalized, no matter how advanced their dialogues and network use might be. Talk about the rise of 'immaterial labour' and 'precarious work' is useful, but could run out of steam, as it remains incapable of making the jump from speculative reflection to a political program that will outline how networks can be funded over time.

Let's end with the perhaps least investigated aspect of scalability. Why is it so difficult for networks to scale up? There seems to be an immanent tendency to split up in a thousand micro conversations. This also counts for the 'social software' blogs like Orkut, Friendster and LinkIn, in which millions from all over the globe participate. For the time being it is only the geeky Slashdot that manages to centralize conversations amongst the tens of thousands of its online users. Electronic mailing lists do not seem to get above a few thousand before the conversation actually slows down, heavily moderated as it is. The ideal size for an in-depth, open discussion still seems to be somewhere between 50 and 500 participants. What does this mean for the networked multitudes? The question would be: to what extent is this all a software issue? Could the necessary protocols being written up by women? Can we image very large-scale conversations that do not only make sense but also have an impact? What network cultures can transform large institutions?

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## Online Resources

- <http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0212/msg00057.html>
- <http://thing.desk.nl/bilwet>
- [www.aoir.org](http://www.aoir.org)
- [www.fibreiculture.org](http://www.fibreiculture.org), go to: list archive.
- [www.freecooperation.org](http://www.freecooperation.org)
- [www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm](http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm)
- [www.nettime.org](http://www.nettime.org)
- [www.networkcultures.org](http://www.networkcultures.org)
- [www.netzwissenschaft.de/sem/pool.htm](http://www.netzwissenschaft.de/sem/pool.htm)

## Dutch summary

### *Principes van de netwerkcultuur*

De vraag die in deze Openbare Les centraal staat is hoe internetcultuur een duurzame grondslag gegeven kan worden, aan gene zijde van hype en speculatie. De toekomst is immers aangebroken en het tijdperk van de inleidingen ligt achter ons. Nu de 'nieuwe media' algemeen verspreid zijn, gaat het niet langer om de vraag hoe deze cultuurtechnieken werken, maar om wat ermee gedaan kan worden, en wie het voor het zeggen heeft binnen de netwerkachitectuur. Dit roept belangrijke vragen op, zoals: Wie heeft toegang tot welke kennis? Hoe wordt er omgegaan met conflict? Wat is de invloed van gebruikers? Wat betekent de opkomst van niet-westerse landen zoals India, China en Brazilië voor de internetcultuur in het algemeen? Kan de claim dat cultuur en creativiteit de rol overnemen van de computer-ingenieurs wel waargemaakt worden en wat is de economische grondslag van deze 'creatieve industrie'? Wordt het networking, of notworking?

## Biography Geert Lovink

Dr. Geert Lovink (1959, Amsterdam), media theorist, net critic and activist, studied political science at the University of Amsterdam (MA), and holds a PhD at the University of Melbourne. Besides his lectureship at IAM (since January 2004), he works as a senior researcher at the University of Amsterdam, Media & Culture.

Geert Lovink is a member of Adilkno, the Foundation for the Advancement of Illegal Knowledge, a free association of media-related intellectuals established in 1983 (Agentur Bilwet in German). From Adilkno the following books appeared: *Empire of Images* (1985), *Cracking the Movement* (1990) on the squatter movement and the media, *Listen or Die* (1992) on free radio, the collected theoretical work *The Media Archive* (1992 – translated into German, English, Croatian and Slovenian), the collection of essays *The Datadandy* (1994 – in German) and the book/CD *Electronic Solitude* (1997). Most of the early texts of Lovink and Adilkno in Dutch, German and English can be found at <http://thing.desk.nl/bilwet>. Geert Lovink's recent online text archive is: [www.laudanum.net/geert](http://www.laudanum.net/geert).

Geert Lovink is a former editor of the media art magazine *Mediamatic* (1989-94) and has been teaching and lecturing media theory throughout Central and Eastern Europe. He is a co-founder of the Amsterdam-based free community network 'Digital City' ([www.dds.nl](http://www.dds.nl)) and the support campaign for independent media in South-East Europe Press Now [www.dds.nl/pressnow](http://www.dds.nl/pressnow). He was the co-organizer of conferences such as Wetware (1991), Next Five Minutes 1-3 (93-96-99) [www.n5m.org](http://www.n5m.org), Metaforum 1-3 (Budapest 94-96) [www.mrf.hu](http://www.mrf.hu), Ars Electronica (Linz, 1996/98) [www.aec.at](http://www.aec.at) and Interface 3 (Hamburg 95). In 1995, together with Pit Schultz, he founded the international 'nettime' circle [www.nettime.org](http://www.nettime.org) which is both a mailing list (in English, Dutch, French, Spanish/Portuguese, Romanian and Chinese), a series of meetings and publications such as zkp 1-4, 'Netzkritik' (ID-Archiv, 1997, in German) and 'Readme!' (Autonomea, 1998). From 1996-1999 Lovink was based at De Waag, the Society for Old and New Media ([www.waag.org](http://www.waag.org)) where he was responsible for public research. Since 1996, once a year Lovink has been coordinating a project and teaching at the IMI mediaschool in Osaka/Japan ([www.iminet.ac.jp](http://www.iminet.ac.jp)). A series of temporary media labs was started in 1997 at the arts exhibition Documenta X in Kassel/Germany called Hybrid Workspace (for archive see



www.medialounge.net) which continued in Manchester (1998) and Helsinki, in the contemporary arts museum Kiasma (<http://temp.kiasma.fi>).

A conference he organized was Tulipomania Dotcom conference, which took place in Amsterdam, June 2000, focusing on a critique of the New Economy [www.balie.nl/tulipomania](http://www.balie.nl/tulipomania). In early 2001 he co-founded [www.fibrecluture.org](http://www.fibrecluture.org), a forum for Australian Internet research and culture which has its first publication out, launched at the first fibrecluture meeting in Melbourne (December 2001). Since 2000 Lovink is a consultant/editor to the exchange program of Waag Society (Amsterdam) and Sarai New Media Centre (Delhi). He co-organized Dark Markets on new media and democracy in times of crisis (Vienna, October 2002, <http://darkmarkets.to.or.at/>) and Crisis Media, Uncertain States of Reportage (Delhi, March 2003, [www.sarai.net/events/crisis\\_media/crisis\\_media.htm](http://www.sarai.net/events/crisis_media/crisis_media.htm)).

Three books document Lovink's collaboration with the Dutch designer Mieke Gerritzen which he co-edited: *Everyone is a Designer* (BIS, 2000), *Catalogue of Strategies* (Gingko Press, 2001) and *Mobile Minded* (BIS, 2002). Together with Mieke Gerritzen he co-founded the Browserday events ([www.browserday.com](http://www.browserday.com)), a competition for new media design students in 1998. In 2002 The MIT Press published two of his titles: *Dark Fiber*, a collection of essays on Internet culture (translated into Italian, Spanish, Romanian, German and Japanese) and *Uncanny Networks*, collected interviews with media theorists and artists. V2 in Rotterdam published his most recent study on Internet culture, *My First Recession*, in September 2003.

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