

The Art of Electronic Dialogue A Self-Interview

Introduction to Uncanny Networks

Geert Lovink

[Below you will find the introduction to my first and so far only paper collection of interviews, Uncanny Networks, Dialogues with the Virtual Intelligentsia, which came out with MIT Press in 2002 after Pluto Press Australia didn't do anything with the manuscript for a long period of time. I wrote the self-interview in Amsterdam in July 2000 while waiting for my Australian migration visa to come through in The Hague. I had produced a large number of interviews in the years before, first for radio and then for the internet. Uncanny Networks is a who is who of the roaring nineties, covering both media theory and new media arts, showing how speculative virtuality interacted with the critical philosophy of the time, from Saskia Sassen, Sjavaoj Zizek, Bruno Latour and Guyatri Spivak to Arthur Kroker and a range of German thinkers such as Dietmar Kamper and Hartmut Winkler. Later on, in 2009, as part of the Institute of Network Cultures website I had the entire audio/radio interview archive digitized from cassette and put online (<http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/bilwet/bilwet/>).

Most of them are in Dutch, a few of them in German and more and more English towards the end of the period 1987-2000. I am still into making interviews, producing around half a dozen a year. I post them to the nettime list, as I have done since 1995, and put them on my blog. /geert]

Going through the table of contents for this book, there are a few familiar names, but not that many. How did you select them and what do the people you've exchanged ideas with have in common? What is your conceptual framework?

The people I exchanged ideas with combine a passionate pragmatism to define and shape the architecture of new media with a similar drive to investigate

these tools. They love to speculate about the coming of something yet unknown, whilst being aware that technology is not developed in a vacuum. I am interested in the beauty of digital discord. Business interests from both the Old and New Economy, in close harmony with governments and the 'moral majority' will do whatever they can to limit the potentials of new media. The right mix of speculative imagination and thorough economic analysis - and competence - could therefore have fantastic, subversive impacts. This will happen if this potential movement, if I may use my favorite concept, becomes trans-cultural, multilingual and truly global, not just Western. As this selection of interviews shows, new media culture is nowhere near global. Yes, the user base is gradually changing, but this has not yet effected the core of matters such as discourse, software and interfaces. Still, we are moving away from the narrow world of the male, geek culture and their libertarian visionaries. This book reflects this trend. I believe that it should be possible to exchange and amplify desires between different generations and social groupings and not get caught in a ghetto of terminology, identities, lifestyle or choice for this or that standard or platform.

Over the last decade much effort has been put into overcoming the differences between artists who do conceptual work, old school political activists, involved in investigative journalism and developing political arguments, theorists and critics, constantly in danger of getting stuck in structural analysis, the programmers who are writing the code, or installing and maintaining the networks, and last but not least designers shaping the media aesthetics (graphics, interfaces, etc.). An independent new media culture needs all these disciplines. We are talking here about a delicate balance between individuals, groups and companies/institutions. Even though people are increasing

forced to develop a variety of skills, multi-disciplinarity remains an idle goal, not a daily reality. The division of labor is still there, due to the highly specialized knowledge of each field. All of these people are using and contributing to the network (not just their own) and this is one place where they meet, and converge. At least that's my utopian drive. This book is an expression of tactical and temporary synergies and tries to further encourage cross-fertilizations of concepts and experiences, not only between professions but also between different cultures and social groups, worldwide.

This all sounds inspiring and idealistic. I am not sure if the cultural networks you are referring to here have a long term goal. Certainly they have pasts. What would these suggest?

Unlike most of their predecessors, the artists and critics featured in this book are working with the technology itself. There is no outside position anymore, nor is this perceived as something desirable. The laity has become engaged in the fight over the rules and tools we communicate and work with. For decades the research and development of these media spaces was in the hands of politicians, companies and their engineers. It is only in the nineties that we see a democratization of new media, world wide. It is no longer about rejecting or embracing the new media. Computers had become what they had originally been envisioned as: general computational devices. They come in all shapes and sizes, to be used for any possible purpose, including global surveillance and virtual sex.

In retrospect, the eighties in Europe look like one crisis-prone, apocalyptic age, dominated by conservative postmodernists, privatization and budget cuts, fading social movements and new wave 'guitar' music. There was a hardware revolution taking off, with the rise of VCRs, fax machines, PCs. Despite the personal computer's reputation of being a hippie invention, the self-satisfied '68 generation had a rather hostile stance towards the introduction of computer networks. They did not want another revolution. Re-working their own New Left past was time consuming enough. New media did not fit in their traditionalist concept of culture. This inward-looking intellectual cli-

mate, dominated by deconstructivist historicism, caused a considerable delay for the cultural and academic sector in the West to start dealing with these issues. Both the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise of computer networks took the post-war generation by surprise.

The rise of institutional cultural studies wasn't much more than a petite salon revolution. Identification with media consumers and their small pleasures was still situated in the realm of broadcast media, television, radio and film. Cultural studies was all about creating meaning, not data. It is only in the mid-nineties that we find ourselves in the middle of heated debates over software piracy, the heroic Netscape, privacy issues, telecom pricing, the monopoly of Microsoft, cool and bad interface design. New media had become an issue you could exchange arguments about with perfect strangers, on the streets of Melbourne, in a Bucharest cafe, at a bus stop in Montreal, on a suburban train gliding over Osaka.

Where does your fascination with this 'secondary' text genre of the interview originate? Wouldn't time be better spend writing original pieces? You are not a journalist. Shouldn't a media theorist stick to theory?

It is certainly easier and more rewarding for today's intellectual to withdraw into his or her own work than it is to engage. Interviews are all about creating contexts, together with chats and debates, reviews, links and other reference systems. The genre fits very well into the general tendency to break down the text and create a social-technological knowledge environment. Interviews are one amongst many sorts of imaginative text one can use in creating common, networked discourses.

I started making interviews around 1980-82 while working on two books as a student research group on the Dutch anti-nuclear movement. In that same period I co-edited the weekly of the squatters movement, called bluf!, for about two years in which I also published interviews. One of the best interviews from that period was an exchange between me and Eveline Lubbers. We wrote our masters thesis together and included a self-reflexive 'conversation between

two typewriters'. This both serious and funny work on squatting, alternative media strategies and their economic models even had a guest researcher who wrote a chapter. The day our supervisors rejected the thesis, while we were selling printed versions outside, certainly counts as the height of my academic career. We rewrote the thesis a bit and in the end got our MA degree. Still, a lot of my later work as a media theorist, doing research into the economic dynamics and social psychology of new media culture can be traced by to that 1983 study.

I really got the taste, and routine of doing interviews when I started a weekly radio show in 1987 called The Portrait Gallery, first at Radio 100, then Radio Patapoe, both free, pirate stations in Amsterdam. I made around 120 of these one-hour programs. The idea was to give weird, fringe thinkers and researchers from both inside and outside academia the 'royal space' to talk about their topic. A space they would normally not get in the mainstream media, not even in academic journals, especially not in an anti-intellectual culture such as Holland where everyone is forced to speak in a 'normal way.' There is an amazing consensus, from conservative liberals to radical squatters that sophisticated intellectual discourses do not belong in the public domain. Theory is perceived deep elitist. You can do that perhaps amongst your peers (if you can find them) but not in public. The attitude of most science and humanities journalists was, and still is, to behave in a pseudo-critical way, complain about typos, mistakes in footnotes and other nonsense details, ridiculing the person they would talk with in the name of the imagined 'average listener' who was portrayed to be too stupid to understand anything. In response to this organized innocence I offered PhD students, theorists and lay thinkers the possibility to talk freely and encouraged them push the envelope in front of the microphone. I hardly edited the programs. Instead, I learned to listen patiently and encouraged the interviewees to create a shared space of immense density--and freedom of thought.

The introduction of the PC and word processing programs around that same period gave a similar possibility to create dense, 'compact texts'. When

did you start with online interviews? Are they that much different to face-to-face conversations?

I got access to the Internet in early 1993 after having played with Bulletin Board Systems earlier on. Conducting interviews online, sending questions and answers back and forth, thereby composing a common text over a period of time, is a surprisingly recent phenomena. It may be hard to comprehend, but people really had to get used to e-mail. It took a while for everyone to discover its potential, which, in my view, is still not entirely unveiled. It is being said that people are more open, straight forward in e-mail. This is why flame wars so easily start. Fights over nothing, which seem to come out of the blue, with sometimes tragic, fatal consequences. Real-life conversations create trust, in a quick way but that's no guarantee for a better reflection. Online interviews in this book usually took weeks or months to accomplish. That's terribly slow of course, compared to the speed of light in which we are supposed to communicate. You need to be really patient and not be bothered with deadlines. The good thing is that the result will not simply be a snapshot full of timely references.

Could you explain what exactly is being exchanged during an interview?

Certainty not arguments; in most cases not even information. I am more curious about opening new possibility-spaces than in having a polemic. Unlike its public image, most of the cybertribes, whether organized as company, newsgroup, list or 'virtual community' are not keen to enter dialogue with outsiders. Libertarian thinkers, instrumental in creating the Internet hype in the mid nineties have been preaching 'value creation,' not the creation of public discourse. Like the big guys in the corporate world they knew that dialogue with some wacky outsiders could potentially endanger one's market position. In volatile times, one bad remark in the (online) press can bring down your stock or postpone your IPO to infinity. Playing down your critics could have the opposite effect and might be too late anyway. It is much wiser to ignore them altogether. New Age gurus unanimously promote 'positive' thinking and strongly advise today's

leadership to route around 'negative' sources. Cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary dialogues on the Net are still a rare, despite the common belief that cross borders is what the Internet is all about.

This very principle has so far prevented any real debate over the future of the 'information society'. There is simply no time, and as Paul Virilio and other have pointed out, reflection needs time, which is the scarcest of all commodities in the Society of Speed. With unaccountable companies, incompetent politicians and isolated artists and researchers, not familiar with the language of the mainstream, no wonder we end up with the 'eternal repetition of the same'. In general there are no big ideological debates in society. The Internet is no exception there. I am not enough of a believer in technological determinism to think that the global dissemination of a dialogical medium will eventually spur real discussion, guaranteeing social change. Technology itself is the change.

At numerous occasions you have used the term 'old' and 'new' media. What do they mean to you?

First of all they are to be used in an ironic way. We have warm, nostalgic feelings for authentic photo cameras, rusty magic lanterns and valve radios, even though they were as virtual and alienating, fascinating and global in their time as 'new' media are in ours. Still, we are such human, simple creatures who love to forget and are easy to impress with the 'new new thing'. The promises of the New is tapping into amazing, undiscovered sources of libidinous energy. It is a lazy, even cynical intellectual exercise to deconstruct the New as an eternal repetition of the Old. Scientific and historical 'truth' in these cases is not empowering today's tinkering subjects. I am all for a passionate form of Enlightenment which is willing to cross borders. The absolute, radical new is a deeply utopian construct, which should not be condemned because of its all too obvious shortsightedness. It is only when the mythological story telling is getting reduced to a rigid set of ideas that vigilance needs to be exercised for a belief system in the making. So, through redefining categories such as the old and new, we get a better understanding where analysis and critique could start in order to be productive.

What examples of famous interviews did you have in mind while putting together this book?

I have always loved reading interviews, starting with the Bibeb interviews in Vrij Nederland, a Dutch weekly. In the late eighties, when I got involved in the new media scene, I got acquainted with the work of the German critic Florian Roetzer, who interviewed most of the contemporary French and German philosophers, artists, architects and scientists. He published two collections of interviews, both in German. I suppose I was influenced by him, namely the issues of Kunstforum he edited in the late eighties and the collection of essays he edited called Digitaler Schein. Then there are the interviews in Mondo 2000, and the early issues of Wired, which for example have been brought together in the collection of interviews by John Brockman called Digerati. Uncanny Networks could be read as Brockman's shadow.

Be careful, though. It would be wishful thinking to start making up some global opposition against techno-libertarianism. I have never seen what is often most visibly represented by Wired magazine as a true enemy. There are lots of common roots. I think it was mainly used as a virtual punching bag, for those in need of a reference system. It would be a tactical mistake to position ones self on the opposite side of 'freedom'. It would be ideal to be uncontemporary, completely out-of-context. I have practiced postmodern metaphysics, 'deep irrelevance' European style myself for years. At some stage I started to miss the challenge and political context. It had gotten too safe, too easy to constantly be in theory-fiction mode speculating about the end of the digital age. I got tired of the 80s rhetoric to start one's philosophy with the End. Deconstruction and postmodernism fulfilled their function. Even though much of the criticism of Western rationalism remains valid I experienced a lack of strategy amongst cultural critics who we unable to effectively do something against the hegemony of global neo-liberalism. By 1995 I thought it was time to get into practicality again. As Kodwo Eshun says: "Everything was to be done." That's the spirit I am working in.

Who is in and who is out?

I don't think I have selected any interview partners because of their alleged subcultural, pop theory 'celebrity' status. I only wish they had it. I think that they need more publicity, much more glamor. Perhaps unlike others I did not experience the nineties as the Golden Age of Theory. By and large intellectuals are artists are being marginalized, and have, in response, isolated themselves. Within their small scenes there might have been a rise of the celebrity phenomena, yes. Unfortunately, neither media theory nor new media arts have this social status. The scenes these people are operating in are small. Way too small if you compare it to the hyper growth of the IT (information technology) sector as a whole. It makes you wonder whether, against the will of its participants, this new media culture isn't unconsciously reproducing the highbrow-lowbrow divide. This is a sophisticated 'developers community' which is incorporating critical discourses in its work, unwilling to simplify just for the sake of the market. Their concepts will spread like memes (cultural viruses), I am sure about that. Ideas have to grow and do not immediately spread. It is a modern marketing myth that ideas travel at the speed of light. At some stage they do, yes, supported by huge advertisement budgets. Most concepts in the IT branch have a long and rich history - and so do the ideas voiced in *Uncanny Networks*.

I noticed that you haven't made many interviews with media activists or programmers.

True, the choice could be much more balanced. The same could be said about gender and geography. I have a slight preference for my colleague media theorists, who, paradoxically, become known because of the books they put out. This must be a transitional phenomena. The figure of the 'virtual intellectual' whose reputation solely exists within the Net, is still one of the many utopian promises and perhaps even one the many 'unlike futures.' Valuable knowledge about new media culture is still usually stored in book form. 'Ideas are cheap, what's valuable is their implementation.' Those who manage to administrate the implementation of ideas, with the help of lawyers and accountants, are today's role model. Yes, Michel Fou-

cault, you are right: ideas are tools. Some will design them, others will use them. Claiming intellectual property doesn't help much in such a case. It seems better to conceptualize and start building other economic models for the distribution of content.

Author

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