

Free Cooperation: A dialogue between Geert Lovink and Trebor Scholz

This dialogue took place at the "Networks, Art & Collaboration" conference, held at the Department of Media Study, State University of New York at Buffalo, April 24-25, 2004 -- <http://www.freecooperation.org>

Geert Lovink: Collaboration, and in particular free cooperation, sounds somewhat idealistic. It's for people who are bored with themselves or who are handicapped by 'lesser capacities' in some areas. Humans remain social animals, after all. That's the cynical reading.

Another way of looking at it would be to analyze the rise of the cultural economy and the way in which creative industries force people to collaborate in teams. The fight for the recognition of group work in sectors such as literature, the visual arts, and academia will probably never be won. In general, institutions do not like to work with amorphous social structures because no one seems to be accountable. They want to deal with individuals, not groups. And often groups are not corporate or non-profit entities but lack any legal status. Groups often thrive in an informal atmosphere, much like romantic relationships. One does not start a collaboration by signing contracts. I find it useful to make the distinction between the organized network and the networked organization. It is quite easy these days to network organizations. Of course it involves a lot of security nightmares, such as firewalls. It was hard a decade ago, but became easier once e-mail and web use in the office became common features. The Internet is no longer a mystery for organizations.

The true challenge for me is the transformation of the 'organized network' model into truly virtual communities that do or do not want to interface with the real world. It's this interface between the real and virtual world that determines the form of collaboration. In my experience, it is really hard, and exhausting and frustrating, to collaborate online over long periods of time without having meetings in real life. Online work can be very ineffective and slow. If you want to succeed at that level, you need to have patience. While some people believe in the dot-com slogan "communicating with the speed of light," it does not at all describe reality if you work on a more complicated project with a group of people that is dispersed over the globe, in particular if it is voluntary work in the techno-cultural sector. In the beginning, there might be excitement but the question really is how you maintain a project after one or two years.

Trebor Scholz: In my experience, face-to-face meetings become the glue and accelerator of online projects, which are otherwise often given low priority by participants. With regard to the tools that facilitate collaboration, it is important to not mistake the rosy projections that capitalism makes for the future capabilities of these tools for what they allow us to do right now. Open content initiatives get a lot of attention right now. But it was clear that the availability of wikis or blogs alone does not guarantee that people use them. This will probably take a few more years.

Approaches to crediting in the context of collaboration in the arts and online projects, in particular, are not easily compared to the field of music or theater where specialization can be so central. In online projects, contributions reach from matters of concept to coding, the programmer may have also read theory and may contribute to concept development. This complicates the use of the hyper-specialized crediting of the commercial film world as a model.

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GL: Indeed. It gets particularly interesting when informal networks and P2P collaborations reach a critical mass, even go beyond the stage of informal collaboration and transform into something completely different. It's a marvelous, 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. I don't think that individual collaborations are geared towards creating 'historical' events. I would rather see that as a classic 20th century approach, in which political-creative work is always seen as part of a larger, metaphysical process of history-making.

TS: Do you believe in micro-politics created by small groups and networks as a contribution to a larger restructuring of society?

GL: Of course people will remain fascinated by social mechanisms. The more we understand networked technologies, the more we might find out how to mobilize people and create masses.

TS: How do you relate the now much debated notions of the swarm, the multitude, to the approach of the cell, the small network? Which one of these two models do you believe is more effective in its potential for contestation, and critique? One could also relate this to McKenzie Wark's notion of the hacker class.

GL: In the case of the World Social Forum, Indymedia, and recent anti-war protests, it is interesting to see how people deal with 'scalability.' I would say, they don't. It is extremely hard for decentralized autonomous groups, which are so used to fragmentation, to steer large and complex events. For hyper-individuals (like us), historical events have become indistinguishable from carnival (as Bakhtin described it). Making history is experienced as an interruption of everyday life -- and perhaps rightly so. This makes it so hard to see large events as an experience people can learn from. Instead of looking at the big picture, I became more interested in the micro-drama level.

TS: Micro-drama is a good starting point for talking about the format of our conference here in Buffalo. Early on, we decided that we would have no lectures or panels, and that we would experiment with formats. We talked about the problems of conferences that are based on an exclusive star system and where the measurement for success is whether everything proceeds peacefully and in agreement. Therefore we do not have keynote speakers, all sessions are grouped in circles, and we asked everyone to keep their presentations short and focus on reflections about their experiences with collaboration and projects in progress. The hope here is to break down the division between audience and speakers by not using an auditorium or the top-down panel set-up, in order to engage, and enable genuine dialogue. For me as a media artist, this event-oriented, discursive practice adds opportunities to forefront issues.

Our conference also is an opportunity to think about results in the context of a short event. At most events, positive networking occurs, people get inspired, learn, and meet future collaborators. Parties, drinks, food, sauna, and swimming make the event more inviting and set a context that encourages encounters between participants. The idea of the 'conference theory' newspaper that you introduced at many past events is an inexpensive, easy, and effective way to distribute texts. There is a local history of that, going back to Gerald O'Grady who published newspapers for small experimental conferences. Live blogging and video-conferencing as part of some sessions will make it possible to remotely follow the event. A DVD will be created. A few dialogues without audience will be recorded for this purpose. The radio session can be followed as an online webcast. The documentation becomes a more integral part of sessions than in the case of someone standing in the corner with a tripod.

GL: There is nothing new about the criticism of 'paperism' and 'panelism,' let's not overdramatize it. This critique is not shocking for those regularly attending academic conferences and feeling a certain discontent with the rituals and formats during those events. In our case, collaboration is the topic itself and that makes it much easier to explicitly experiment with form, but the urge is there anyway. New media delivery forms only speed up this process. Young people simply do not have the patience anymore to listen to someone reading a paper for forty minutes. It's that simple. It's all about meeting in real-life and having dialogues. Some occasionally have a desire to listen to keynotes by celebrities but for me that's not the essence of coming together.

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