



DECONSTRUCTING NEW MEDIA ANXIETY GEERT LOVINK

Geert Lovink (1959, Amsterdam), Dutch/Australian media theorist and Internet critic, studied political science at the University of Amsterdam (M.A.) and holds a Ph.D. at the University of Melbourne. In 2003 he was a postdoc fellow at the University of Queensland in Brisbane. Amongst his books are *Dark Fiber* (2002), *Uncanny Networks* (2002) and *My First Recession* (2003). In 2004 he was appointed Research Professor at the Hogeschool van Amsterdam (interactive media) and Associate Professor (new media) at the University of Amsterdam. There he founded the Institute of Network Cultures (www.networkcultures.org). In 2005 his institute organized international new media conferences on the history of web design, alternatives in ICT for Development, urban screens and the art and politics of netporn. During his year at the Wissenschaftskolleg he finished the third volume of ongoing research on Internet culture entitled *Zero Comments*, to be published by Routledge New York in 2007. – Address: Institute voor Interactieve Media, Hogeschool van Amsterdam, Weesperzijde 190, 1097 DZ Amsterdam, Netherlands.
E-mail: geert@xs4all.nl

Applying for the Wissenschaftskolleg from remote Brisbane, Australia seems a wild card, in particular for a new media theorist. For outsiders the Wissenschaftskolleg doesn't look like a buzzing centre of innovation and social change, but I tried anyway – and got accepted! What an amazing opportunity. After having spent a year as a post-doc at the Centre for Cultural and Critical Studies at the University of Queensland, this was going to be my second experience at an academic research centre. It was through the work of the US lawyer Lawrence Lessig that I found out about the existence of the Wissenschaftskolleg. Please

correct me if I am wrong, but I consider “Creative Commons” Lessig the first “new media” scholar at the Wissenschaftskolleg, with me in second and Lisa Parks, the 2006/07 Fellow, in third position. Is there a trend emerging here?

Our fabulous residency that I spent together with my wife, the Australian new media artist Linda Wallace, and our four-year old son Kazimir was their first and my third one in Berlin. In 1983/84 and 1990/1991, I stayed in (West) Berlin, also for two ten-month periods each, then as a freewheeling unemployed intellectual with eager ambitions to explore, think and shape the emerging media landscapes. During the Wissenschaftskolleg residency, there was little time for me to get out and explore the city that I consider my second hometown, but that didn’t matter. In fact, I often forgot I was in Berlin, such a familiar environment it was for me. Luckily I travelled little overseas and was able to fully focus on my work. I saw some old friends, made new acquaintances and met some pretty amazing Fellows in an informal atmosphere that I never experienced before. My area, new media and Internet research, is modestly interdisciplinary. At least, that’s what you think, until you make the Wissenschaftskolleg experience.

Apart from necessary online engagements with my own research centre in Amsterdam, the Institute of Network Cultures, I was able to sit down and get a lot of writing done. During my stay I completed a third volume in a series of studies on critical Internet culture. *Zero Comments* will be published by Routledge New York and upgrades concepts and inquires about the latest Web 2.0 hype around blogs, wikis and social network sites. During the long winter months, including the dark and quiet days around Christmas, I spent all my time formulating a “general theory of blogging”, a thesis that I presented for the first time during my Tuesday colloquium in late March 2006. Unlike most contemporary publications on weblogs, I did not focus on the dynamics between bloggers and the mainstream news media. Instead of celebrating “citizen journalism”, I analyzed blogs and their “nihilist impulse” to empty out established meaning structures. In my view, blogs are bringing on the decay of the 20th-century broadcast media and are proud of their in-crowd aspect in which linking, tagging and ranking have become the main drivers. The book also deals with the silent globalization of the Net, in which no longer the West, but also countries like India, China and Brazil are becoming main players in new media culture. It is not only the latest that Internet enthusiasts should focus on. *Zero Comments* upgrades concepts such as global Internet time, tactical media, the crisis of new media arts and the problematic relationship between architecture and the Net. The book ends with speculative notions on concepts such as organized networks, free cooperation and distributed aesthetics.

Besides working on the book, I also spent time to set up my own (Wordpress) weblog (www.networkcultures.org/geert), assisted by Alexander Klosch from the media design faculty, Bauhaus University in Weimar. Together we also got my podcasting facility up and running, which makes it possible to record, edit and upload audio interviews to the weblog. In close collaboration with Andreas Broeckmann of the new media festival Transmediale, I organized a series of monthly debates and screening at Podewil, behind Alexanderplatz. Amongst other things, we discussed Internet governance with Jeanette Hoffmann and Iraqi blogs with Wiko-Fellow Catherine David, Linda Wallace showed her video work in dialogue with Diana McCarty and we screened Stefan Römer's history of conceptual art ("Conceptual Paradise: There is Place for Sophistication") and discussed this two-hour film in the presence of the filmmaker. Apart from this, there were also lectures that I gave at the Humboldt University (organized by Wolfgang Coy) and a blogging seminar during an UdK (Universität der Künste) summer school.

How should we judge German academic life from the perspective of Internet studies? It is fine to have a good laugh at the Wissenschaftskolleg as a conservative Gutenberg-style monastery where research is being done in 19th-century style. The Wissenschaftskolleg staff tried to apologize to me for the procedures and rituals. "Sorry, we don't use wikis here and have never heard of blogs." I was quite surprised about this attitude. *Reformstau* in the Wallotstraße? Maybe. The Wissenschaftskolleg itself is probably not "flexible" enough, but I have to disagree with such talk. The fact is, there is plenty of technology and expertise at the Wissenschaftskolleg. From an Internet perspective, the institute is not outdated at all. Its technical infrastructure is superb and the IT staff is extremely helpful and well-informed. The thick firewall may be a nuisance, and so is Microsoft's iron grip on the organization. Free software and open source have yet to arrive. But that's common in most institutions, worldwide. A similar positive judgment should be made for the library, which is completely up-to-date when it comes to electronic documents, online searches and the networking of library catalogues, both worldwide and within Berlin. What is behind is not the Wissenschaftskolleg, but the education of the visiting scholars. What for instance should be discussed – but wasn't – is the impact of the collaborative free Internet encyclopaedia Wikipedia on scholarship, the issue of open access and the use of licenses. Publishers' rigid policies on copyright frighten researchers from contributing to the Internet. The Internet is seen merely as a tool. The result of this attitude is "interpassivity": scholars download like mad but rarely give back. This attitude turns researchers into passive consumers and observers instead of actors who steer the direction of our techno-culture. If the

public domain is in danger, it is up to scholars who gather in centres such as the Wissenschaftskolleg to redefine what the role of the public intellectual could be in the digital age. What is needed is a redefinition of scholarship.

As I worked fiercely to meet the book deadline, time passed way too quickly. In May 2006 the Wissenschaftskolleg gave me the opportunity to organize a very lively and intense expert meeting on one of my topics, distributed aesthetics. In that same month of May, I celebrated 25 years of being connected to Berlin (it was in early May 1981 that I came to visit fellow squatters in Kreuzberg when I was 21), the year in which the Wissenschaftskolleg was opened. I am ready for the next 25 years and hope to contribute to the Wissenschaftskolleg in whatever way possible.