Defining the synthetic self

Creating Tomorrow

NXS Interview with Geert Lovink: Defining the Synthetic Self

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Unpacking Geert Lovink's Library, or: Defining the Synthetic Self (for NXS #2, Amsterdam, November 2017)

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In order to investigate this issue's theme of the Synthetic Self Geert Lovink was an obvious choice to provide us with the relevant theoretical background. Indeed, Lovink, who specialises in the study of social media and internet cultures, is a pretty essential reference point when it comes to investigating online behaviours. As such, we went to meet him in his office at the Hogeschool van Amsterdam, where he shared with us some of his best references on the topic. Specifically, we came to him with three big questions to clarify some aspects of our research.

NXS: First of all, how does this idea of the "synthetic self" relate to earlier philosophical concepts? And, more generally, what do you make of the term?

Geert Lovink: The term "synthetic self" warrants further exploration. Considering my own writing in this area, much of it is related to an older work: Sherry Turkle's 1984 book *The Second Self.* It expresses an idea that has led to a lot of other works: that, on the one hand, our daily life is boring and our natural identity is very restrictive but, on the other hand, we have a parallel, virtual space to which we can go in order to liberate ourselves, experiment with identities and where we can become someone else in a playful environment.

'Synthetic self' shares affinity with the second self as kind of a parallel universe idea, but it is more ambivalent, since it is obviously not just artificial but also somehow chemical. Some people will immediately ask "is there a truth in the synthetic self?". Is it merely a protective layer? To protect the subject against what? The self becomes a membrane, and as any porous material, it has certain rules and restrictions. In short, the synthetic self can let through certain things and protect against others.

One of the problems is that we need to get rid of this dialectic between first and second self. This is the current problem that most young people have when they go online. They want to be someone else but the system doesn't allow them that opportunity any longer. Only very specific online services let you use them without a profile, or anonymous. Generation Online is thrown back into well known and well defined identities. The idea of liberation, of defining who you are, that possibility has been removed. Marc Zuckerberg forbids us from designing our identities, otherwise he cannot sell the stolen data to third parties such as advertisers, NSA and CIA (and their counterparts elsewhere in the world).

Good luck if you think you can become someone else online. The idea of overcoming your background these days requires a lot of effort. You need to find a space where this is possible, where other people encourage you to do this. The idea that you can do that completely on your own in a somewhat hostile environment is very unlikely. It requires quite a lot of knowledge if you want to go in explore the possibility of multiple selves.

It's the task of today's designers to think about the shapes of the synthetic self. Most programmers and technical people would not be bothered, at best they spend some thought on the privacy settings, but this will always be privacy inside an existing system. Designing something entirely new is not what we can expect from our technical friends.

The radical imagination that is necessary to get there will have to come from elsewhere.

NXS: The idea of synthetic self obviously relates to narcissism, and the cult of the self, what works have dealt with this, particularly as

something that needs to be overcome?

GL: There are the classic texts such as *The Culture of Narcissism* by Christopher Lasch that was published in 1979 which defines today's culture of narcissism; then, there is Foucault with his lectures in America *The Hermeneutics of the Self*, *The Technologies of the Self*, and his works on the birth of neoliberalism. These works are absolutely related, although I do not know if Foucault read or knew about Lasch's work. I read Lasch's book when it got out and remained fascinated by the idea that Foucault and Lasch worked on the same topic precisely in the same period that is known in the Netherlands as 'Het ik tijdperk' (The I Age).

Considering more recent works, there is Kristin Dombek's book which came out in 2016: a pamphlet called *The Selfishness of Others.* A comparatively young theorist, she explores the reasons why there is this fear of narcissism in our dominant culture, why is everyone warning against it? This is an interesting new starting point when we are talking about "selfie culture".

The question here is not whether we like it or can describe it, what we see or what the history is. Rather, the central question is: should we overcome in a Nietzschean sense the "cult of the self" as we know it right now? Are we stuck in it? If not, how can we overcome it?

We recently published a book about the history of the selfie, placing it alongside the history of the self portrait. So, from the Renaissance to the selfie age. From a design perspective there are more strategic questions that have to be addressed. Maybe the synthetic self can help us in that process.

One of the other starting points could be Andrew Keen – with his book *Digital Vertigo* – who really describes the very dark side of the self in the neoliberal age, where everything you do, and everything you express has to be calculated in reference to the overarching idea of self-promotion. Keen says that everything that is happening online is more or less done within that larger context – even if you want to destroy your reputation.

Other people may say that there is also a vitalist, more existentialist element in there: not only promotion in the sense of self-marketing but even in a more

vital sense, namely just showing that you exist. "Yes I am, Yes I exist!". And that has to be done on a daily basis. So there is this necessary continuous repetition even if you don't have to promote anything. That's also the dangerous side, asking yourself: "what can I offer?" The existential vitalist element of just being present amongst others in the social network is a better reading than that of marketing (although that is also valid of course).

There is also the work of Eva Illouz, who is writing about the making of emotional capitalism. She comes from a long psycho-analytic tradition of theorising the self. To my mind, her book *Cold Intimacies* comes quite close to the idea of synthetic self. How do the membrane function? Should the synthetic self protect us, keep us warm against the cold outside? Is its protective quality effective? Or is it perhaps possible to overcome it and design a more vulnerable yet more desirable self?

One can also turn the synthetic self into a weapon. When you are in a situation of vulnerability, is it even possible to achieve a common peace and harmony? Is that even a function of human nature or nature in general…? Eva Illouz is working in the tradition of Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of the Self* which is a classic on this topic. Another classic text from 1983 in that field would be Arlie Russell Hochschild's *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*.

NXS: It's often assumed that new forms of social media have increased the possibility for multiple truths to exist simultaneously, and also increased the possibilities for people to construct a narrative for themselves, where do these tendencies sit in a wider historical context, and how do you see it developing?

GL: For some, the idea of temporary truth is a local truth, something that is only valid here and now between us. The equivalent of this would be 'social truth', a reality that we create that maybe falls apart when we leave the room… a temporality. A lot of people are looking for that – what in what Hakim Bey in the late 1980s coined "temporary autonomous zone" – something that exists but still falls apart and is aimed to fall apart. Its disappearance is something that we could mourn about after its

disappearance or feel nostalgic about, but rest assured that it was known, that it existed. Some work on the idea of the festival, for a lot of young people the festival is an expression of that. In philosophical terms this is referred to as the "event". In that way one moves from the Temporary Autonomous Zone to the Festival to the Event.

Regarding narratives, there are a lot of people who withdraw into a narrow outlook. The nationalist narrative is well known. It is appealing because it is well defined and its borders are quite rigid. If we want to design new spaces, this must be accompanied by the design of new borders. Those new borders will be quite uncertain and porous. This is why a lot of young people think that withdrawing to the common, well-known borders, would give them new safety in an uncertain world. When it comes to the self, this withdrawal to known borders is lately discussed as the opposites of regression vs. progression: going somewhere new, a better place, I don't want to say it but maybe an utopia. These days people say our culture is no longer defined by an idea of progress but defined by regression.

This idea is brought up in the book *The Great Regression*. If we are talking about the synthetic self, we have to be fully aware of the environment in which we are proposing this. How do we relate to this very real existing idea of regression? From a psychoanalytic perspective, regression is an important concept.

NXS: Do you think it is possible to overcome the negative aspects of mainstream social media, should we repurpose these social media or create new autonomous networks that could last?

GL: I study social media so I need to be involved. I use Twitter every now and then. Once a month I visit LinkedIn. I am not on Facebook or related services. Although I left Facebook in 2010 and remain involved in the "Unlike Us" movement–I don't want to be moralistic. It is difficult to remove oneself from the social media platforms. The Institute of Network Culture was still on Facebook until we did the "Quit Facebook" event in 2016 in Amsterdam. I don't want to police anyone, so what my colleagues do is up to them. In fact, they decided that the Institute should also leave Facebook. Since then we've

moved to other channels, intensifying our work on the newsletter and the website and all sorts of other things. It is interesting because you can see from the analytics that it has had some effect to our visibility.

The idea of overcoming mainstream social media is something we have been dealing with at the Institute for Network Cultures since 2011 when we started the Unlike Us network.

We realised that there is a very broad, diverse and interesting internet culture, but that the question of social media was becoming narrower, and becoming *the* defining question. For us, at first there were many questions. But over the last five years there has been an overwhelming tendency to define or reduce these questions to this one question of overcoming social media, we call it the "social media question". If we don't take care it will be the follow up of the so-called "social question" of the 19th century: defining everything about the emancipation of the proletariat and everything that happened in the 20th century. We are fighting to prove that there is a multiplicity of issues and possibilities.

What NXS proposes and what others propose shows that people are not ready to give up! They still have faith in the possibility of designing an alternative social media architecture. With that, comes the question of what the design of such an architecture could look like. Who is going to decide that? Is it only Mark Zuckerberg or can there be other players too?

Now we are in these strange times where it is all about manipulation and fake news and where this question is now reaching the political level of elections. Manipulation by marketing, marketing through ways that ordinary politicians have no idea about. For instance: Cambridge Analytica shows that there are already firms in the world that own literally all the data of all the people and the tools exist to use those analytics for very specific political agendas. Of course, there are many other fields besides politics in which this will become important.

The development of these concepts can't be accelerated. They need a protective space for their development and for experimentation. Otherwise, a new rhythm is never going to emerge. If we are forced to immediately react

we will fail. Our ideas need some time and protection but also some critical mass. That's why a place like Amsterdam is important, a lot of young people come here because of that. To do that entirely on your own in your own environment is very likely not going to work because it needs productive exchanges. Maybe we can entice people to secret spaces on the net where these exchanges take place but I tend to believe that they should be complemented by real time ecologies in particular spaces or cities. That's why cities are still very important in our story. We need to meet, to conspire, to sit down and work together over a longer period of time to tackle the challenges that you map here. This can only be addressed in a multi-cultural multi-disciplinary environment where we bring ideas from many people together.