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Post-Platform Desires: Build 1, 2, 3 New Beginnings

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The text below is written as an introduction to a week-long discussion on the [empyre email list](#) in which I participate, with the topic STAY UNFINISHED, YOURS SINCERELY, moderated by Shulea Cheang. The debate happens in conjunction with STAY UNFINISHED, the 5th edition of Stadtwerkstatt's 48 hour showcase extravaganza held in association with Ars Electronica (Linz), curated by Tanja Brandmayr, Shu Lea Cheang and Franz Xaver.

"STWST48x5 titled STAY UNFINISHED aims to look at the art of the past and the projects of today. It's about history and now, it's about process and transformation. It's about not being finished, not getting finished, and mostly about moving forward, thinking ahead. With STAY UNFINISHED, we seek coalition with art and societies who remain in constant development and perpetual movement towards a possible utopia of open society in ever-expanding modes."

The event culminates into a 48 hour radio event, webcasted from Linz (18:00 September 6 to 18:00 September 8, 2019) in which [STWST48x5](#) will bring together critical producers, artists, activists, networkers, archivists and visionists. I am taking part in the radio event, on Sunday September 8 from 4-5 pm in which we discuss the topic below: what's next for lists and networks? What tools should we use? How do we relate to the platform logic?

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On this somewhat dull Sunday morning, here in Amsterdam, I present the empyre list with a few theses on the status of lists and networks. In part this is a continuation of my chapter 'Media, Network, Platform' in my recent book *Sad by Design* in which I am trying to position these three key concept that defined by own work as an activist and theorist over the past 40 years. Another context would be the upcoming [End2End Transmediale festival](#), early 2020 in Berlin, which is dedicated to a re-assessment of networks in the age of platforms (I am part of an ad hoc advisory group). Lists, networks and communities are terms that have rapidly disappeared from the agenda. Did this happen for the right reasons?

Our work with mailinglists started 25 years ago. Shulea referred to the first period of nettime (1994-95) when I worked on this with Pit Schultz. We can be nostalgic about the excitement of that early cyber period. When a medium opens up, people see endless opportunities. This is the power of what Hannah Ahrendt describes as 'new beginnings'. But how can we can create

new beginnings today? Should older alternative infrastructures disappear first to make way for these new beginnings? Is empyre standing in the way? Are email lists becoming part of the problem? Do we maintain these lists out of some sort of artisan appreciation of authentic form of horizontal communication that once worked, much like people that re-establish telegraph connections, start sending faxes again, write airmail letters and travel the ocean by sailing boat to make a point? What means UNFINISHED in this context? Finish the unfinished job of finally drawing consequences of our senseless 'culture of complaint' and open up new channels, new forms of organization? What's the art of regrouping?

Ever since the rise of Web 2.0 and the introduction of smart phones, the world has moved on and rendered the email galaxy irrelevant. Young people associate email with authority (parents, institutions, school teachers). So far, the aging new media arts and activist community has been unable to find an appropriate answer to this shift. Most of us somehow try to accommodate and use this or that dominant social media platform without the feel of community. This is leaving us with the feeling of a gap; maybe different from the existential feelings of younger generations such as depression, sadness and boredom, but still... We all know the diagnosis by now but what's to be done? Why are so many of us stuck? Why didn't a new cool and amazing killer app just wipe out Facebook overnight? Why can't alternative search engines compete with Google? This is not what was supposed to happen. Wasn't this going to be the age of true markets?

The 1990s promise of tactical media was one of flexibility, to switch from one medium to the next. We combined the analogue with the digital, the local with the global, the arts with the activism, yet this perverse poly-sexual 'multi-media' dream has somehow been fulfilled and, in a weird dialectical move, jailed us inside one-dimensional centralized platforms that are actively preventing us from self-organization. Should we read the email nostalgia (or dogmatic inability to move on) as a somewhat subversive gesture? I doubt. Another platform is possible. We have to come together, in ever greater numbers. A re-assessment of the relation between networks and platforms is a highly urgent matter.

What's communication with consequences? We know it exists. Look at [Hong Kong](#), Khartoum, but also India, where the widespread use of Whatsapp groups is fueling hatred. We do not just conspire, exchange ideas and debate them but want this to happen in a productive context that responds to

contemporary challenges. Remember the birth of the Italian five star movement out of the Web 2.0 participatory blog culture. More and more political parties and movements start small by using the new medium of its time. Many of them turn out to become a platform for right wing populist movements. That's the Zeitgeist and it would be foolish for us to ignore this.

To grow seeds of concepts is subversive. It may seem futile but history is proved the opposite, time and again. Communication of these new ideas, if done in an innovative and appealing way, can have and will have consequences—one is ready to grow, to create networks, multiply, be in dialogue, and yes. Organize meetings (like the one this week in Linz?). Are we? Discussions, like this one, have consequences, despite the feeling of isolation and the fear of irrelevance.

“The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”, Audre Lorde wrote at the height of the second feminist movement in 1979. Why is this so hard for us to apply to Silicon Valley? Facebook, Google and all the rest are part of the problem. The evidence is overwhelming. We should not use their ‘free’ services anymore in our search for solutions. Let’s take back control of the internet infrastructure. We discuss how do get rid of plastics, fly less, feel guilty about this and that, but strangely enough the medium in which all these concerns are expressed manages to remain out of sight. The medium has become invisible. Nothing is as frustrating than raising the Facebook issue in contemporary struggles. People get annoyed. We may agree that we should use alternatives but there are none so we continue to update and like and follow (three useless gestures in terms of organization). How do we exit these vicious circles and make new beginnings?