

Book Review

Rasa Smite, *Creative Networks in the Rear-View Mirror of Eastern European History, Theory on Demand 11*, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2012, ISBN: 978-90-818575-0-5, 159 pp.

Reviewed by PIIBE PIIRMA,
Estonian Academy of Arts;
email: piibe.piirma@artun.ee

DOI: 10.1515/bsmr-2015-0019

Do We “Network” or Communicate? The Baltic Region’s Contribution to the Historical Development of Network Culture

Currently there are close to 2.5 billion people communicating online as the Internet has not only become a mass media tool but the greatest means of communication in human history. Therefore, it is understandable why it is important to explore and conceptualise the Internet as a medium from different disciplinary perspectives. The author of this book, Rasa Smite, a Latvian media artist, researcher, and organiser, asks several important questions in the introduction to the book. “What is so specific about digital networks that make almost everyone willing to be online? And what is the meaning of the ‘social’ in relation to these networked environments? How do networks integrate themselves into the social sphere? How does society conceptualize technology?” (Smite 2012: 38)

In her book, she seeks answers to these questions based on the experience of several art networks that emerged, and in which she participated, during the digital revolution of the 1990s. The significance of her research for the readers of this journal lies in the fact that the developments and activities she describes took place here in

the Baltic countries as well as in other Eastern and Northern European countries. The rapid development of the Internet and the fact that the Baltic Sea countries were early adopters has helped the local artists and their works to reach the international art scene. This development has not only been on a par with Western countries, but pioneering in terms of the development of the local Internet culture. A third significant reason for investigating our regional experience is that several initiatives from decades ago can be understood as forming the foundation for the emergence of contemporary social media.

Smite starts off by discussing the wider question of how to conceptualise network culture. Should it be mapped using examples from the recent past or studied as a process subject to sociological theories? Then, she does both because, firstly, it is a phenomenon where both technological progress and its users have an important role. Secondly, she argues that, as a phenomenon, network culture is connected to the evolution of human society. She suggests that network culture and especially early creative networks have been inadequately studied, and there are no specific analytical categories. Undoubtedly there are several reasons for the lack of such categories but the most direct one might be the newness – a certain distance in time is needed for objective criticism and analysis. Also linking together all the geographic, virtual/technological and sociological aspects and the speed of progress in all of this make it a complex subject to discuss and analyse.

Creative networks and the role of Eastern Europe

Smite’s analysis of the topic is based on five well-known crea-

tive networks and mailing lists, that existed most actively in the 1990s: Nettime – the origin of critical network culture and a mailing list for the Internet culture and critical discourse (1995); Faces – a cyberfeminist community founded to promote the visibility of women in the field of media art specifically and on the Internet in general (1997); Syndicate – a collaboration network for Eastern and Western European media art – artists and media art organisations (1996); 7-11 – a net.art mailing list and community, free space for net.art experiments (1998); and Xchange – a global creative Internet radio network, an experimental collaboration platform for exploring borders of “acoustic cyberspace” (1997).

Why highlight the links between artistic activities from decades ago and contemporary communications networks? According to Smite, network culture has its direct roots in these “creative networks”. She uses the term to refer to the initiatives of artists, thinkers, and theoreticians sparked by the Internet euphoria and cyber-utopian ideas of the second half of the 1990s. She points out three of the most important reasons why the roots of network culture should be investigated:

1. Creative network communities have played a role in the development of online cultures and can be used to draw conclusions about the functions of contemporary social networks.
2. The new forms of social relationships and organising communities online were manifested first in the mid-1990s. Artists who discovered the Internet as a new and unprecedented communication environment were oriented to experimentation, discussing, and using

the new technological affordances in innovative ways.¹

3. Smite posits that early e-mail lists were the predecessors of today's social networks. She argues that the period's daring communications practices crossed physical, national, and technological boundaries. This era constituted the period when the foundations for broader sub-cultural movements on the Internet were formed. These networks were independent and forward-looking, critically oriented, and, above all, independent of the rules of the corporate business world.

Yet, on top of these rationales for studying the beginnings of creative arts networks on the Internet, Smite's book also offers, in more specific terms, her valuable insights into the importance of the Baltic and Nordic countries in the evolution of the Internet culture.

Freedom and presence

Smite points out three important aspects of the creative networks: interconnectedness, openness, and simultaneity. The last of these keywords, the so-called "presence effect" refers to real time mediated interactions as a new social dynamic. Additionally, Smite suggests that the concept of "freedom" that had a special connotations for Eastern Europeans, constituted the foundation for the formation of several online initiatives in our region dur-

ing the second half of the 1990s. These initiatives played an important role both conceptually and ideologically in the development of art in the post-socialist countries, which had existed in isolation for decades. Therefore, the spread of the Internet also enabled the artists in this region to overcome physical boundaries.

The ways that the existing physical borders affected the freedoms of Eastern Europeans is expressed in author's vivid descriptions of personally experienced difficulties in travelling to other European countries, obtaining visas, purchasing expensive airline tickets, and struggling with the lack of funding for culture – these all set limits on free interaction. Eric Kluitenberg (1999: 52) also refers to this situation: "Initially, the translocal collaboration networks were of a particular importance – they were the primary connection channel through which it was possible to overcome the isolation of the post-Soviet years, as visa requirements, slow trains, dangerous bus routes and very expensive flight tickets made it very difficult for young people in the Baltic states to connect to the rest of Europe."

With the goal of crossing boundaries and connecting people, several new net initiatives were founded: for example, the culture project Open (1995), organisation E-Lab (1996), and Xchange Internet radio (1997) in Latvia. Similar developments also took place in Estonia – an electronic media centre was established at the Estonian Academy of Arts in 1994 (E-Media Centre).² Rasa Smite also

mentions the artists' initiative Jutempus in Vilnius (1993).

"The Internet was a new medium and a new soil for creative expressions for the artist who was curious about digital networks and processes in contemporary art regardless of the country of origin. It was a whole new situation – Eastern European artists were now able to participate in the rise of a new art 'genre' instead of only imitating Western artistic ideas, as often observed in Latvian contemporary art of the early 1990s." (Smite 2012: 119)

The Soros Contemporary Art Centre's initiative for developing the media culture in the Baltic states was invaluable at the time; other financing structures such as the Latvian Cultural Endowment were not established until 1998.³

Additionally, Smite mentions the significant role of the Swedish government in developing culture funding in the Baltics through the founding of the Baltic Centre – Peace Quest already in 1991 and offering support, not only for online activities or media artists, but for all sub-fields of Latvian art and culture. This launched fruitful co-operation between the Baltic Centre and Latvian media artists that has lasted for many years.

The discussions taking place in the mailing lists of various creative networks connected artists and thinkers from the East and the West. Collaboration between creative people was simplified domestically and across borders (local and trans-local movements). Therefore, it became necessary to introduce local initiatives more broadly and increase cooperation between activists. Interaction between East and West was also the

1 It should be added that not only in case of the Internet but also photography, radio, and television, it has been noted that their use was at its most creative level during the inception of these media technologies. During stabilisation and adoption, the potential became clearer, after which creative endeavours became more specific or dwindled (Smite 2012: 12).

2 It should be noted that for Estonia this was created with the support of an academic institution but the artists were nevertheless free in their endeavours. It is quite a fitting characterisation of the early days of the Internet – technical support existed but there were no direct limitations because the Internet as a new phenomenon was still very new.

3 In comparison: The Cultural Endowment of Estonia was already established in 1994.

objective for the Syndicate mailing list. A meeting in Rotterdam (1996) brought together nearly 30 media artists, curators, and Internet activists from 13 countries. The so-called Eastern Bloc countries were represented by Slovenia, Russia, Estonia, Poland, Macedonia, Slovakia, and Latvia. We should also not overlook the *Interstanding – Understanding Interactivity* held in Tallinn in 1995, which became a source of inspiration not only to the author of the book, but was the place where she first used the Internet.

The network that connected Baltic and Nordic media artists was the translocal creative network NICE. This network was established in 1999 at Helsinki's Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, where an event called TEMP (Temporary Media Lab) was organised. The attendees discussed the regional particularities, including political and economic issues, and representatives of the Baltic states attended as equal partners in this important discussion.

"As a result of this meeting the translocal creative network NICE (Network Interface for Cultural Exchange) was launched with the aim to support the development of emerging media art centers in Baltic-Nordic region. NICE included the E-media center in Tallinn falling under the Art Academy, the independent artist foundation in Riga E-Lab, the Jutempus artist initiative in Vilnius, CRAC (Creative Room for Art and Computing) in Stockholm, Atelier Nord in Oslo, BEK in Bergen, M-Cult and Katastro.fi in Helsinki and others, also involving individual new media artists. At times, such partnerships resulted in a financial benefit, like when the European Union program Culture 2000 supported the long-term cooperation project 'RAM – Re-approaching New Media.'" (Smite 2012: 90)

About boundaries and innovation

When discussing the development of network culture, Smite often refers to her post-Soviet background. She states that sometimes the ideological boundary also constituted different understandings about the functioning mechanisms of society. For example, when participating in the cyber-feminist mailing list *Faces*, her background and different goal-setting did not allow her to comprehend why questions about the role of women in society were so important. That is because she had been taught not to discuss gender differences, housework, or feminism, which at the time carried a negative connotation in the countries of Eastern Europe. The emergence of all these new issues for Eastern European artists meant crossing boundaries in every sense and it gave early online communications a particularly innovative flavour. For Eastern Europeans, participation in these networks enabled them to be involved as co-authors in the birth of a new genre of media art and not only to imitate developments in the West. As an example, Smite points out the online radio initiative *Xchange*, created in 1997 to encourage independent radio experts, media and sound artists, techno musicians, DJs, etc., to broadcast their works in real time through the Internet. This initiative was headquartered in Riga, but its members included activists from all over the world.

"The *Xchange* Internet radio network community created presence as a unique social value in the 1990s by experimenting with early streaming media technologies and collective broadcasting possibilities. During its weekly sessions with the highest activity from 1998 to 1999, E-Lab via the *Xchange* mailing list invited network participants –

artists, community radio activists and other 'creative broadcasters' from all over the globe – to join this collaborative experiment by contributing their live audio stream in this 'acoustic cyberspace' mix." (Smite 2012: 29)

The fact that knowledge about digital technology and the Internet was new made it a distinctive feature of the Internet-related initiatives of the time; virtual servers had to be "invented" on your own; there were no streaming servers or simple user guides. Each new initiative required active technological intervention, the technological infrastructure was undeveloped, server locations were random, their maintenance and activities "parasitic" at times. On the other hand, independent servers were developed that began to be called "art servers" that played a substantial role in technically servicing the emergent creative networks of the time. Today the managers of such networks have largely decided to use the services of large global platform providers (Google, Amazon, etc.) because it enables them to move from resolving practical issues (e.g., issues related to stability, security, and capacity) to more contextual issues. On the other hand, the phenomenon of independent servers continues to be an intriguing issue because it once again enables a decentralised network to be talked about and alludes to DIY⁴ activities independent of corporations.

If we observe the development of new media art toward increasingly hybrid technological solutions and related substantive discussions, it is difficult to draw direct links to connect the early creative networks and contemporary social network services. Yet, it may be suggested that the endeavours of the

4 DIY – do it yourself.

experimental artists established specific technological trajectories and also initiated important theoretical discussions that have shaped the perceptions of new generations of engineers and designers of services.

"Therefore, it is possible to conclude that today the field of activity of creative networks is not related exclusively to information technology anymore but also to energy infrastructures and to other domains of society. This brings forward a new trend – to address and to solve sustainability issues, both by referring them to networks themselves as well as to the development of society in general." (Smite 2012: 147)

The Golden Age of the Internet has ended

In what direction have the Internet and its networks of cultural debates evolved since then? Smite draws on the ideas of Pit Schultz, Geert Lovink, and Eric Kluitenberg, the activists and creators of the Nettime mailing list, arguing that the golden age of the Internet ended before it even began.

"[D]espite the fact that universal access to the nets has hardly been realized, we have already landed in the age of disappointments, cynicism and decadence for the few. Internet's Golden Age is over, before it even began." (Schultz, Lovink 1996: 5)

"The brief period when there was nobody actually planning the Internet and it simply grew out of socially dynamic communication – was short lived." (Smite 2012: 35) "Public Internet facilities (in both the real and virtual senses) that are not structured for commercial use, or regulated to exclude dangerous content, have been marginalised, or even ceased to exist. Public funding has dried up and as an effect the Net has been conceptually 'cleansed,' making

way for business. Governments who have once funded basic research into computer network standards are now merely interested in content regulation and rush to put together legislation for e-commerce." (Lovink, Kluitenberg 2000)

According to this view, the turning of the millennium changed Internet democracy into an e-commerce bubble, also known as the dot-com bubble. Allegedly, the business world quickly started to exploit the novel technologies for its own purposes. Therefore, the community of artists communicating online turned to new subjects that were no longer just about how to develop Internet technology, but about new hybrid forms of technology use and their interpretations in a wider societal context – mobile positioning, satellite experiments, and broader issues related to sustainable energy, environmental care, and the interdisciplinary or trans-disciplinary forms of collaboration of art and science.

Coming back to the question of freedom – the freedom to communicate online carries a different meaning for artists as opposed to regular communicators, because most quotidian communications in today's sense do not present any substantive challenges for Internet culture, technology, or innovation at large. If we can describe early creative networks as self-organising, dynamic, and free, then the next question is: What are the freedoms within the contemporary social networking services? Can we say that they enable similar freedoms? And what are the technological challenges left for the society/culture? It may be suggested that several issues such as hacker attacks, abundance of spam, information overload, and the related time deficit require new approaches. Also, services provided by large

corporations include control mechanisms that did not exist in the early days of the Internet. Contemporary freedoms more generally are not comparable to the freedoms experienced in the creative networks of the 1990s. Therefore, the issues related to technological progress that were relevant in the second half of 1990s are increasingly overshadowed by questions about the society's general developmental issues, and inter- and trans-disciplinary ways of thinking and acting.

I would also like to point out some linguistic issues. Whereas the sole solution for establishing mutual communication in the 1990s seemed to be the creation of English-speaking environments, today increasing emphasis is on the uniqueness of various regions and languages. Rasa Smite, in this sense, has had a very contemporary approach from the beginning: she has attempted to link together the experiences of Latvia and the rest of the world, but also highlighted the uniqueness of Latvia by pointing out in her practical work the particular initiatives created there (E-Lab, Xchange, and RIXC – the Centre for New Media Culture in Riga, which was established about at 2000 on the basis of E-Lab).

Communities or networks?

Do mailing lists constitute communities or networks? The former refers to a narrower circle while the spectrum and scale of networks could be vast. Based on an interview with Pit Schultz, Smite points out that the term "community" refers to physical communication happening in real time where, in addition to sharing thoughts, body language, and personal traits, the moment and specific situation plays an important role (Smite 2012: 73). This was all evidenced in the early creative networks, as

each network was started and received a subsequent push from the meetings of the enthusiasts and thinkers. Hence, creative networks are both communities and networks. Nevertheless, in all early creative networks a desire to contribute to the development of a critical Internet culture can be detected, as opposed to the creation of networks in the formal sense.⁵

Smite analyses these multiple effects and functionalities of the early creative communities/networks in meticulous detail and this constitutes another reason to appreciate her work.

In this regard, one of the most intriguing experiments described by Smite in her book is the Collaborative Mapping Project “Milk” (2004–2005, Ieva Auzina, Esther Polak). The aim of the project was to bring technology closer to people. Using GPS-based mapping, the route of milk from Latvian producers to Dutch cheese producers was studied. In 2005, the collaboration between the various social groups – artists and farmers, milk producers in Latvia and cheese vendors in the Netherlands, as well as subsequent exhibition visitors – was awarded the Golden Nica, the most important prize in media art, at the Ars Electronica festival.⁶

This example is well suited to characterise the present time where the human factor is the most powerful force in the creation, functioning and continuation of all kinds of communication networks. The network as a form of social organising has been used throughout history

in various societies, but it has acquired new meaning with the birth and wide adoption of the Internet. Contemporary social relationships evolve at the intersections of social and network logic, which are virtual and material. Analysing the evolutionary dynamics of such networks is a large-scale and serious job. Studies from an artist’s position only confirm that all active members of society play an important role in it. While contemporary social networks generally rely on the rather pragmatic goals of their users and designers – to transmit ever more information and to focus less on the technological aspects “underneath” – recent developments in new media art suggest that its critical interest in new technologies continues and new hybrid art forms will continue to both question the wider technological/cultural “progress” as well as contribute to it. In this regard, Smite’s work demonstrates that artists from Eastern Europe and the Baltic states have not only been moving toward deepening cooperation with new media artists of other countries, but they have also established new directions and developed deeper conversations. Yet, paradoxically, the question of whether the new media art in the Baltic States or Eastern Europe remains distinct continues to exist. And one might ask, is there indeed a need for such differentiation? There are many new challenges to finding our special contribution to those developments. As Smite points out, both local and translocal, geographical and social characteristics and relationships are equally important in this development (2012: 55).

Conclusion

The creative networks described by Smite continue to exist in their various forms, but have less to do with conceptualising

technological change and more with the broader issues predominant in society. An example is the initiatives based on peer-to-peer networks that not only exist in virtual environments, but are also increasingly intervening in real spaces and communities (e.g., flash mob campaigns). From the perspective of the need to sustain networks, Smite lists three defining fundamentals of network communication structure that are important and still applicable today:

1. “key people” – founders or directors of a network community;
2. a common and meaningful goal in order to collaborate;
3. an ability to change goals or fields of activity in order to continue its existence, to grow, and to develop.

Although Smite’s book is titled *Creative Networks in the Rear-View Mirror in Eastern European History*, she examines the selected topics mostly on an axis of “Latvia” versus “the rest of the world”. This seems justified because, firstly, Latvia has been at the forefront of these developments, and secondly, Rasa Smite herself is one of the most renowned theoreticians and practitioners in the field of Internet culture and new media art and has personally played a significant role in these developments.

Returning to the title of this review – do we “network” or communicate? – it is fair to say that Smite’s book suggests we do both. Networking is an increasingly colloquial word in everyday use that is also used ever more broadly. The popularity of the terms that are partly rooted in the interactions of the creative networks of the 1990s is understandable. We must accept the unique nature of Internet communication – it is a form of

5 The latter is most characteristic in terms of financing – collaboration between small cells in the name of collective ideas is a common practice when applying for funding for culture.

6 In comparison, Estonian artist Timo Toots was awarded the Golden Nica in 2012 for the network artwork *Memopol 2*.