# NOTHING IS SPECTACULAR IF YOU AREN'T PART OF IT

Welcome. Bienvenue. Guten Tag. This is an anthology of Nettime, an internet mailing list—an attempt to transform thousands of emails, articles, and comments into book form. But what is "Nettime"? Once upon a time, an unlikely group of people gathered around a table in a house somewhere in a German forest. Around the table sat a group of men, all eating, talking, drinking, sampling each other's ideas. The language was German. The hours passed, and the table burgeoned under a mass of papers, notes, books. At the end, they cleared the table, taking various notes with them as they returned to their own desks, scattered across Europe, from Amsterdam to Budapest. The months passed; email was exchanged. Another meeting was planned for late spring 1995—this time in Venice, the floating city, during the Biennale in the Teatro Malibran. By night it housed an imported Berlin club scene; by day, the men—and now a few women—gather. The languages are English, fast and slow, sometimes broken, and also some Italian. The days pass, and once again the table disappears under the papers, notes, books, scribbles. `It was at this second meeting of the Medien Zentralkomitee (ZK) that the Nettime mailing list is conceived. The ZK itself was a parasite attached to the main body of the Biennale; it had a small budget to invite a eclectic group of international activists, artists, organizers, theoreticians, and writers, all involved with the net, for an intense three-day, closed meeting. The name: Nettime. The topics: the city metaphor versus the life metaphor, the labyrinths of real and virtual worlds, wandering websites, the city-state, a critique of the political agenda that would come to be called the "Californian Ideology," and the perennial question of art. Nettime became a reality at this meeting. Or so one version of the story goes. Since this is the story of a network, there is a network of stories about the its multiple beginnings. Some day someone will think of a way to write a history of such a network. For the time being, this fable will have to do.` The Venice group cleared the table and departed for the desks and screens back home. The passing days turn into weeks, then a month—traffic began to rise on the Nettime list. Over a series of meetings, festivals and events—in Budapest, Amsterdam, Madrid, New York, Ljubljana, and countless railway stations in between—the social networks began to self-organize to launch a new type of discourse for probing the space of the media networks, carving out niches for mixed modes of autonomous living and working. The list grew from 20 to 30 and to 100, 300, on to 850 subscribers as of November 1998. Not a whole lot, now that the internet hits the final curve on the

way to mass-medium status, but Nettime never really cared about numbers. Nettime isn't much concerned with the mass distribution of a product. It's more about the self-organization of a process. We tentatively call the process "collaborative text filtering." Who are we? Who is Nettime? A saloon? Journal? Bulletin board? Billboard? Web archive? Community? System? Soapbox? Warehouse? Parasite? Real-time oral history? Spittoon? Bitbucket? Open-mike night? A small world after all? A splintery glory hole? A modest means of self-promotion? A dead weight oppressing fresh blood? Net.crit chicken hawks? An invisible dictatorship? A typing pool? All of those and more. It's a collective subjectivity with no fixed identity, made up of the people who come and go from the Nettime list, who contribute more or less to its characteristic ideas and expressions. Nettime is always different from what it was a moment ago; it's always discovering something new about itself. As such, it is a working implementation of what subjectivity might become in an online environment. Then again, some or many of the participants whose ideas form parts of Nettime will almost certainly dispute this. Nettime is made up of the differences between the ideas as to what it is or might become. Send a message to the majordomo software that runs the Nettime list and it will promptly respond with this very out-of-date message in reply: "Nettime is not only a mailing list, but an attempt to formulate an international, networked discourse, that is neither promoting the dominant euphoria (in order to sell some product), nor to continue with the cynical pessimism, spread by journalists and intellectuals working in the 'old' media, who can still make general statements without any deeper knowledge on the specific communication aspects of the so-called 'new' media. We intend to bring out books, readers and floppies and web sites in various languages, so that the 'immanent' net critique will not only circulate within the internet, but can also be read by people who are not on-line" Geert Lovink, Pit Schultz, 27th February, 1996 `Another version of this trajectory might go like this: Once upon a time there was a rather tired and ailing political agenda called leftism. It had some fixed ideas in its collective head about the media, about the arts, about theory and practice. It got itself stuck in academic ways of thinking sometimes, and other times it snorted too much art. The mash of papers on the tables, the lives of the people around them and the emails going between them pointed toward something else. The purpose of the undertaking, was "net critique," a species of radical pragmatism (or perhaps of pragmatic radicalism) for working late and deep in the "information age." This type of critique would seek—in a way that is by no means necessarily an innovation—involvement at the root level rather than getting stuck in endless repetitions of formal introductions and quack diagnoses.` The

theories of the media the leftism relied upon were the product of a certain kind of history, with political, cultural, intellectual, and technological dimensions. Net critique aimed to rethink the legacy of leftist media theory and practice. Nettime was a vector for experimenting with net critique that would confront it with the possibility of inventing new forms of discourse and dialogue in a new medium. Consensus is not the goal. There's no governing fantasy according to which the differences within this "group" will on some ever-deferred day be resolved. The differences are Nettime; they might be dialectical, implying each other, or they might be differential, making absolutely no reference whatsoever to each others' terms. Net critique, if understood as a shared practice in and against a never pre-defined techno-local environment, contains many modes of possible participation. Conventional cultural criticism, as an academic discipline, contains no imperative to actually do anything beyond the continuation of polite footnoted complaint. Nevertheless, libraries contain sources of knowledge that can be newly selected and contextualized to gain momentum. Nettime will always contain the writings of genuine insects trapped in the amber of their own writing-habit, but it is also very much about the examination and development of other bugs in the system. One discovery is that the relatively closed system of a moderated mailing list can be a good environment for developing a rich set of ideas. It is a certain kind of milieu, a plane upon which certain kinds of work flourishes. The best moments on Nettime are perhaps those when contributors cultivate and differentiate their language and internal reference system without becoming completely obscure. The discursive interactions on Nettime appear as a fluid process that can't be simulated or staged. The list is a milieu that encourages a certain radicalism of approach: miscellaneous ex-East going on ex-West ancien-regime misfits turned NGO-perfect-fits, fun-guerrilla playgirls, connected autonomists, entrepreneurial molto-hippies, squatters turned digital imperialists, postcynical berks, slacktivists and wackademics, minimalist elitist subtechnodrifters, name-your-cause party people, name-your-price statists, can-do cyberindividualists, can't–won't workers, accredited weird-scientists, and assorted other theoretical and practical avant-gardeners, senders, receivers, and orphans. Over the years, Nettime has mutated, survived, and escaped its Oedipal relations to leftism by oozing along new vectors. Nettime always distanced itself, sometimes dialectically, sometimes absolutely, from the "cyberhype" propagated by *Wired* magazine, which in any case exhausted itself and declined intellectually. Neither the emergency rhetorics of the old militants about the threat of the internet, not the technoboosting of the military-entertainment complex appeared, in the end, to be all that intellectually interesting. As Nettime continually suggests, the ac-

`tion is elsewhere.` Instead, Nettime has created a milieu in which a collective process of thinking, or sometimes just a collective migraine, could pose again some questions of itself and to itself. What is actual? What is possible? What can we hope for? What seemed important was to maintain of a milieu that enabled a certain continuity and reliable instability. Full-time, or even part-time, Nettime requires a certain intellectual modesty. It avoided the sillier behavior of the net's "teen years"—flamewars, axe-grinding, and the spiraling noise of chat—through light moderation semidemocratized (or at least randomized) by a rotating group. It's hardly the first list to work through issues of openness and closure, democracy and justice, free speech and fair speech; but it doesn't seem as though most participants have fetishized these issues. Since its early days as a parasite event on various art festivals, Nettime has thrived as a mixed economy. It isn't a commercial project, although its participants certainly have mixed motives for contributing, and those motives don't at all exclude gain. Various kinds of economy sustain it, and this hybridity may be a contributing factor to its sustainable autonomy. The way to avoid capture by the state or the market is to be neither one thing nor the other. Not every kind of difference can be accommodated directly within Nettime. Projects dip in and split off. Cyberfeminism logs in and logs out, a sometimes parallel, sometimes intersecting project. Ideas, concepts, experiences are given away in large quantities and uncertain results. Rarely new, sometimes stolen, and often borrowed, ideas, concepts, and experiences are given away in large quantities, with uncertain results. Some fall on deaf ears and spark no reaction whatsoever; others drift off into other channels, and disappear from the radar for a while, to return morphed as something else; still others provoke heated debates, some of which have been quickly quoted in the mass media as "the voice of the net." But the voice of the net is a silly idea: it has much more to do with broadcasters' need to represent than with what is represented. The Nettime project moves in the opposite direction: not a voice, but voicings, less a melody, than a sound. Net Critique isn't dogmatic—it can't be, because it isn't even a synthetic set of ideas, let alone a twelve-step program for instant cyberculture. Rather, it's a series of interventions, some theoretical, some aesthetic, some technical, even some with a soldering iron—a network of ideas-in-process. `As a topology, the Nettime network is a mix of a ring and a star—it's hybrid in many ways. Open and closed, academic and nonacademic, bits and atoms, theory and practice. Most Nettime subscribers are in Europe. In the U.S., Nettime is stronger in New York than on the West Coast. There are also many active subscribers in Australia. Asia is coming on line, and subscribers from Japan, Taiwan, India, even China are dropping in.` There is a different style in using language online, which has mostly to

do with the fact that English isn't the native language of many subscribers. English becomes Englishes, and different norms for writing it rub against each other. A plural standard, emerges where nonnative Englishes are recognized as valid and coherent standards of English, rather than a hierarchical one, where native English is assumed superior to other variants. One hope early on was that Nettime could help to shift media theory and practice into a new communication vectors, to see how they might perform itself differently in a different spaces. Part of the purpose of this book is to shift some of the results of that experiment back into the vector of print media, to see how these efforts looks when re-imagined at a different speed. The practices of collaborative filtering developed on Nettime became the basis for a practice of editing and publishing. This book was produced as a collaborative process, by people working on different continents, in different time zones, at different intensities. It documents the process not just of Nettime but of net critique applied to itself. It follows the twists and folds in the information landscape as it is being created, discovering that things which were remote have suddenly become strange neighbors. This is what a bottom-up, international, networked discourse might look like. `A book of Nettime might seem retrograde. Between old and new media, it cultivates a zone of fertile textuality which can take the form of a book, a xerox publication, a private collection of printouts, or an electronic archive of Nettime emails. Vectors of different texts intersect at surprising places. Different aggregates of etexts, interviews, announcements, essays, replies, commentaries, reports, calls, letter, letters, lists, poems, ascii art, articles, reviews, manifestoes, sermons, have been cut and remixed. The joy of text finally results in an eclectic blend of the elements of discourse and dialogue. Social intensities find a common platform, to differentiate, articulate into an alchemy of desires. Giving away time spent on the net and into text, it becomes a collective source of social, immaterial labor, a "text mine," as well and a source of elements for new ideas.` This book is the transformation of Nettime as a time–space into a different level, where the relative fixity of print allows one (or many) to measure time in months and years, rather than the minutes and hours of the net. What this book is *not* is an adequate representation of Nettime. Some of the authors included have never participated Nettime. Some are dead. They belong to Nettime because they provide important reference points, historical depth, and continuity. Nettime still has centers and peripheries. It has not solved the structural inequality of global information flows, nor could it. But it is at least a space that tries to learn through experiment how to overcome the imperial past of the architecture of global media vectors. Part of the impetus

for Nettime was the desire, after 1989, to create a milieu for that could pass between Eastern and Western Europe, and to some extent, as this book shows, that process has produced results. Nettime is part of the practice of realizing the potential of the net as a means of communicating otherwise. Nettime has often been accused of being a white Eurocentric boys' club. And so it is, to a certain degree. But this perception is superficial. It is certainly beyond even Nettime's pragmatic utopian capability to solve all problems of difference and representation. Nettime's open structure encourages participation and a variety of voices, expressions, lines of flight. Whoever wants to do the work and share in the joys of text can simply join in. The male culture of scientific-, business-, and military-based structures and biases built into communications technology is daunting and alien to many people from different cultural, racial, and class sectors. The kind of intellectual and critical text-based virtual communication represented by Nettime may be wholly unsatisfying and irrelevant to many whose voices we need to hear. Even women with full online access, good educations, and excellent English writing skills, can find Nettime a difficult forum to crack. Yet Nettime has made a strong effort to include and address cyberfeminist issues and texts. The Nettime editorial group has strong feminist representation and this is reflected in the quality and variety of texts by women included in the book, as well as in texts from other cultural constituencies which deal with issues of difference, work, net politics, access, and the struggle against discrimination of all kinds. Nettime will never be politically correct; to practice its process it will travel along vectors, desires, political liquidities, inventive interventions—rich texts of all kinds. READ ME! is structured into several sections which represent some of the major whirls in the text flows of Nettime. *Software* examines the tools with which we build our media environments, not all of them are computer-based. *Markets* is a collection of theory and experiences of living in and out of the grip of this ambiguous and poorly understood beast. *Work* presents new theoretical approaches to knowledge production and some tales from the shady underbelly of the brave new world of the knowledge workers. *Art* presents reflections on art and what it licenses going on and through the net. *Local* samples the diversity of living realities, of struggles that are carried out in specific places along trajectories that are influenced as much by local history as they are by global media. *Neighbors* presents other lists, some of which overlap, some of which are friendly. *Sound* examines the acoustic properties and potentials of the net. *Subjects* ranges across the translucent landscapes of overlaid histories. *Maze* is a collection of third-person eat-em-ups for first-person thinkers. *Virus* is where critique finally gives up, kicking off its boots into pure invention.