

From Notepad to Cultural Resource. The Aesthetics of Crosslinking at Monoskop, Interview with Dušan Barok

<http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/from-notepad-to-cultural-resource/>

DB: 00:28 So, Monoskop started in a community of people that I have been part of. I still feel part of this loose group of people in Bratislava, Slovakia. About 13 years ago, 2004 when we ran a venue in the center of the town. And what brought us together was an interest in all new things in art but also more broadly in culture. So we were excited by the web, by what software can do with image and sound, but also we are organizing events. More kind of showing videos and doing talks, conversations, lectures and so on. And Monoskop was a one of our initiatives. The idea behind it was to make our milieu more visible. Since then, there were perhaps 10 or 15 people involved.

DB: 01:52 We still felt a little bit disconnected from the rest of culture scene in town, but there were groups, we were feeling affiliated to in Prague, in Budapest, in Zagreb, and so on. So Monoskop, as a website, was a Wiki in which we began to document this is relations and connections and write entries on what each collective is doing and develop some kind of chronology of events and show these relations between these activities. So we would be operating with terms such as network culture or media culture or media arts. And, that was the start. That was the initial initial starting point to document the network culture of Eastern Europe, but also friends in Berlin and the West. So by now, Monoskop hosts or contains hundreds or perhaps thousands of files, which includes books like .pdfs and .epubs and so on.

DB: 03:15 And I think it started with dead links. So you would a link, a publication and then a year later it would click this link and then it's gone. This is well known phenomena, like things disappear. So I would say the original impulse or the trigger to act, to actually save files are hosted by other servers or elsewhere online came through an attempt to archive or preserve these other works. And that's still the main reason why Monoskop hosts all these files. From my perspective, it became some kind of, you know, Wikipedia for certain cultural phenomena. So these media culture where culture is still present. So it's some kind of a

document it to a particular scene or culture phenomenon, but at the same time it grew to also map what's going on broadly in let's say arts and humanities. So it's scope widened dramatically and this is what it is today. So a Wiki for studies of arts and humanities.

DB: 05:10 Yeah, I keep on kind of repeating that. That is somehow notes. Notepad. It's a way to make notes. And I started with text files on my computer, but then the computer crashes and the files are gone. So then okay, I would back them up to external hard drives, but I travel and then I need a file but the hard drive is, I don't know, 200 kilometers away from me. Over the time I came to realize that the best way to keep notes is to keep them online. But as soon as they are online, they are turning into publications because others can read them as well. It serves myself as a way to remember or I remember what I read what came afterwards and a wiki has these really nice function of a history of each page and I can come back to and see, in 2005 summer I was doing this and so on or also thematically how things are connected. So in a way it's this external memory, uh, like these very like the original conception of medium as a prosthetic, a tool to kind of extend memory.

DB: 06:45 The chose of a Wiki as a website was a very deliberate at the time. Wikipedia had, I think, three years starting 2001. And, we found it very exciting as a, as a kind of a new medium, Wiki. So mates web publishing, very easy and accessible to everyone. So we chose a MediaWiki as a way to open up kind of inclusive space to reach others who where welcome to contribute. The way the website is organized, still follows the logic of the medium. So what wiki allows is to make links between pages and making particular points in pages. So we can link image to the front page, you can link any term or a person to a different page. And this came up very quickly. We realize, okay, if this is something we wanted to explore, the specificity of this way of publishing.

DB: 08:07 When we write articles or attempt to write books or when things go to paper, it's on the paper. And the only way you can navigate through it is to flip pages while. While websites are designed to be navigated from kind of across. So that's very important to for people who contribute. To think differently then in let's say, more traditional publishing. So we started with profiles. So you will have a profile of our collective, you will have a profile of a person, let's every biography and maybe some publications, the person reduced. And then over several years we began to be interested more in let's say concepts or discourses which operate across these collectives and across also institutions. So I think around 2007, 8 or 9, there began to appear pages about, about phenomena such

as I don't know, [inaudible] or sound art or cyberfeminism or you know, digital libraries as another phenomena. So what became a, even maybe main focus was to follow these phenomena in a wide cultural field.

DB: 10:01 Monoskop has now, well since 2009, two major sections. So one is Wiki and then what emerged as a kind of side project, it's a wordpress-run website called "log". And surprisingly, it became much more used or known or appreciated by people. And log was, well for me, it has always been a little extension to the main site and it contains a selection of let's say publications, which are we find of a very special interest. These are books or magazines or articles which somehow might be interesting maybe on the level of kind of general knowledge. Like they go beyond their own little fields or disciplines or collectives and they may talk to a wide audience, but still they're not bestsellers and they are not written for wide audiences are still kind of written for small groups of people. So this is maybe something other products which, which has always been interesting for me. Like how publications or phenomena which emerged through very particular, situations may talk too much wider audiences.

DB: 12:15 So the server is very important. It's I would say crucial elements in a way. That's the technical infrastructure of the project. And then at one point when we needed our own server, we started this community server as a service for our friends and friends of friends to make, to provide the hosting for artists and cultural projects. So Monoskop is one of these projects and I think today there are around 80 or 90 websites on it. It's also a part of a kind of milieu. So these servers or art servers that have been around for 20 or more years. And they are very important as an infrastructure, as a kind of alternative infrastructure to what is now called cloud. And they have their own autonomy and the decisions are taken in these communities like what we may host . And also it brings these people together because they have to take care of this shared, a tool or a shared resource.

DB: 13:48 The core milieu, our core community I still feel part of is, the era called Burundi, so it was this Burundi venue in Bratislava and we are still in touch and we are friends even though we live in different cities, but we do have our activities, and they are somehow aligned. But the one very special milieu which I and Monoskop is part of is what we now call digital libraries. And that's very crucial for continuation of the project because you support each other and there is this aspect of let's the role of librarian, which I was never really kind of thinking too seriously, but with these projects like aaarg or MemoryOfTheWorld, or UbuWeb, we can also claim this role of a web librarian or however we call it.

- DB: 15:16 So that's, that's very crucial. The whole thing is set up as a opt-out system. So if you don't want your work there, it's kind of disappeared. So we have this take down letters coming. I would say it once in a month there is an email or by a publishing house or a hired company that, okay, it there is this book, published in 1986, maybe even out of print, but we don't want to know line. So then it goes away. Compared to the size of the whole archive. This is a surprisingly very small issue. And of course also through these take-downs, I also learned which publishing house doesn't like these things happening and which one is okay with it and which one I appreciate it and so on. So it's kind of ongoing process and also conversation.
- DB: 16:34 But since we've been doing it for more than seven years, I also serve these changes in the way this publishing environment functions. It became a more viable option for authors to publish their books under copyleft and explicitly support its free distribution. And then another kind of element is of course there are people sending their books like directly or uploading them through Wiki. Also recently there are publishing houses, which may have adopted a couple of licenses. It's the early start and they're like programmatically a couple left publishing houses. So we will get a, let's say the whole zip-file with 50 books, oh, please put it on one Monoskop. And this is where this archival aspect comes to the foreground.
- DB: 18:05 So I'd have to say that it became a lot like kind of life project. I use it almost every day. And I, I did add an edit things on a daily basis and he's hard to imagine that I would stop doing it. I'm very aware that linking it to myself and my own survival, has his limits, The costs to maintain it or not so high. And we pay for the server, but it's community-run so that it's of a small contribution and then there's the domain and otherwise no money you will. It's also ongoing conversations about let's say, how to make it more distributed, in France actually. But, uh, it seems that there are still not the tools available to do that. You can, you may share files, but it's hard to share, to distribute websites and especially database-run websites.
- DB: 19:20 So this is still an open question like how to trim also kind of the extent technically to this distributed context. As an example there is a section called avant-garde and modernist magazines on Monoskop, which indexes scanned versions of very hard to find issues of artists-run magazines from 1920s, 1930s, which are scattered across national libraries or university libraries around the world. And they are, for you as a researcher, a very hard to find. If we were looking for a particular

article, like you know, that it's this journal in that year it's still very hard to locate it where it is online unless you want to travel to the archive somewhere else. You know, different countries might be different continent to find it yourself. So these particular page brings together all these titles and points to where there are archives.

DB: 20:49

So in a way, there is no library that would somehow do this since a national libraries have national interest sit libraries, university libraries at the university interest. And there are no organizations that would do it on a larger level. Well what is always exciting, is to see how new pages or new sections on, uh, on Moscow trigger things in the real world. So I talked about this magazine section and a few months after it got online, I was contacted by a museum in Budapest Kassak (?)Museum. Lajos Kassak was Hungarian avant-garde artist, active around the Second World War, they began thinking about organizing a large event visual bring together art histories but also other researchers from eastern Europe who are specializing in this interwar avant-gardes and talk about magazines like artist-run magazines and it took about a year for it to happen. And so they raise money and I kind of served as a maybe advisor, uh, got tips to people I came across to remind his magazine research and I was also invited to give a talk there and, but suddenly that there is this little field of avant-garde periodical research emerging through this event. It was during his publication and that is other event in the planning. So this was very exciting to observe how this translates into into life somehow.

DB: 23:07

If to think of commons, then I would need to think of the web and the web as a certain cultural products of a certain period, which may be around for a long time and may not be around after a while. Who knows? But the web is an infrastructure which may be the interesting to talk about in terms of commons and in this sense, yes, of course, I'm also a part of it. And then this is also its role or position to see these commons, as a whole, so it operates across cross, uh, you know, where I'm searching for this at that publication. I look like all possible upside way it could be. And probably I find it in one of those and it's online. So this is, this is kind of the media, uh, common fields on which the website is operating and it's very conscious of being part of it.

DB: 24:32

Well, this still very present in Monoskop and my own interests with it is to give more visibility to that's an excellent art or interesting cultural phenomena in eastern Europe. This is where we started and this is which is still very present there and through an a mapping or exploring, like these various phenomena or in contexts like these avant-garde

magazines or art or others and developing this online publications about them. It's always very important to have Eastern Europe represented there, but also not only Eastern Europe, but also other kind of non-west. And uh, I think this is one of the key missions of the whole project to make this a non-Western perspectives more visible.

DB: 26:06

So this role wouldn't be possible if I would be doing it as a kind of university professor somewhere, since I would be already embedded in a very particular context and be facing very particular institutional forces and grant policies and so on. And this is also why I would never go with Monoskop under the roof of an existing institution. It would simply not work anymore. It would be something different, which I would not be excited about. And this excitement is exactly that, this freedom to move, move, across institutions and places in the world and have this freedom to take various perspectives.