

## Networking Institutions, Interview with Z. Blace

<http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/networking-institutions-interview-with-z-blace/>

- 00:19        **"MultiMedia Institute (MI2)"** (subtitle)
- ZB:        00:25        MultiMedia Institute is organization based in Zagreb, registered as non-profit association working in the field of, arts, culture, technology and activism. Since it's beginning in 2000 it was involved with different phenomena around network culture, around creative commons, around free software movement, the right to the city movement. It has many activities that include festivals, human rights film festival, periodically does exhibitions, publishes translations and new books in Croatian, and serves as an archive and a research place.
- 01:29        **"MaMa Culture Club, the public space of MI2"** (subtitle)
- ZB:        01:29        MaMa started functioning as the first place, space in the city centre, that hosted many programs that were off from the mainstream cultural art scene, that were catering to different circles of activists, that were responding to kind of international media, especially tactical media scene, that hosted events from guest lectures of universities to anarchist book fairs.
- ZB:        02:09        So, in this retrospect it was for few years very unique, that it not only served all of these events and all of these contexts as a resource but also created a meeting space that previously didn't exist as a physical space. I think the initial dynamics of the space was very much of a kind of pioneering, and I would say, experimental nature because we were not fully aware of what we were doing. There were no similar spaces in the region. Our closest kind of resembling organization like Ljudmila in Ljubljana that was also with similar background, was a media lab that didn't have public space. The C3 in Budapest was of different scale and with different program. B92 or Cinema Rex or Cyber Rex were at one point doing similar activities but also at different scale.
- ZB:        03:29        So, we basically were improvising in between making these kind of intersectional activities where we tried to bridge gaps in existing civil society cultural programming. But we also tried to introduce totally new phenomena for the first time, like net politics, or kind of a cultural

perspective in free open source software, or introducing creative commons and localizing the license in Croatian. So all of these efforts that happened in the first, I would say, five years were kind of formative for the scene.

ZB: 04:20 For the moment, I think we have the most actively engaged hacker community which meets I would say twice a week, kind of very predictable way and kind of routinely. From the cultural scene there are several organizations and individual initiatives who use the space very frequently, who collaborate with MaMa on specific projects. Some of the communities that are using the space only as a facility, have maybe a history of, I don't know, 10 or 15 years of association, like the anarchist group that would just periodically use the space, but they don't necessarily commit to work with MultiMedia Institute or not beyond this. I would say in terms of people involved with theoretical production, or the publishing and guest lectures, mostly young students and few people who have taken part in previous projects. So, they keep the association alive by kind of taking part in the programs, but this is also a relatively modest group that would meet maybe once or twice a month for an event.

ZB: 06:11 There was also a period when MultiMedia Institute had a media lab that for, I would say maybe five / six years was very much involved in production and open source software, where we were developing our own Wiki platform, where we were hosting media projects, doing a lot of production be it design or art projects for the individual artist, cultural scene, the civil sector activists, that hosted indy-media websites and all kinds of activities that wouldn't be in necessarily possible to do with commercial service providers, and that wouldn't be feasible to do in any other way at the time.

07:01 **"political context"** (subtitle)

ZB: 07:07 Like, the first 10 years where we felt that the political environment and economic environment of Croatia was kind of on a relatively positive course of democratizing and kind of structuring economy in a way that we could build sustainable cultural work. Past few years have been vastly negative or worse, increased radicalization on the right and the kind of fairly opportunistic behaviour of political parties that historically claimed to be left but actually operate in neoliberal conditions. It was really difficult to work with that feeling that we are under pressure to either perform ourselves inside of the framework of political parties, which we refused for a decade, and to be active in forming movements

like right to the city to compensate for like this escalation of gentrification of Zagreb.

ZB: 08:31 So basically dealing with the fact that it was no longer possible to negotiate any kind of social contracts with political parties, any kind of permanent or semi-permanent cultural strategy, basically blocked our efforts that previously existed as cultural advocacy or kind of strategic positioning within the cultural field. We couldn't anymore rely on networking in between non-profit cultural organizations and establishing platforms and articulating ourselves as the solution to gain visibility, to gain presence, to gain kind of foothold in structuring new policies. We really needed to shift into new fields, where we would no longer be just responding to options that were presented by the existing players. But we would have to actually create movements that were explicitly critiquing, and eventually forming new political programs.

09:57 **"networking institutions"** (subtitle)

ZB: 10:03 We also invested a lot of resources in establishing first a nationwide network of cultural NGO's, the Clubture network, a lots of networking within the region of former Yugoslavia, which at that time was quite problematic. The kind of connection were very personal and very loose as the institutional kinds of connections didn't exist. So, in between cultural advocacy, activism, networking, there was a lot of pioneering efforts. With many projects or with many campaigns or initiatives, we were successful in kind of giving initial input and giving kind of strategic support for them to develop capacities to self organize. I think, the most successful was Right to the City, because they, basically it was MaMa both as a central space for organizing, physically, but also as a place of kind of reflecting on what could be strategies to do activism in public space. Many people who are in Right to the City are also board members, are active members of MaMa. And this was very fruitful, because as a direct result of these efforts for several years there was an initiative to form an independent list and then later party Zagreb Je Nas (Zagreb is ours) which now for the first time entered local elections and won 6% of votes. So this was a huge kind of step forward in going from like very marginal, I would say, activism over public space to increase visibility of issues of gentrification into more a general platform for, I would say, the new left and green activists, turning also kind of into a political party. And these articulations of these needs took quite a long time, I would say maybe three or four years, but the fact that the success on the last election was so prominent, it was based on these accumulations of previous struggles.

ZB: 12:52 One of the bigger, I would say, challenges was bringing different political or cultural players to the same level. So, for example, for coming into formation like Right to the City where, where you have people coming from backgrounds of being a well known artists on the national level, to people being like a student who are for the first time engaging with something politically this big, especially if there is this claim of, or insisting on horizontality, then you have to give space, and kind of be patient with everyone. On the national level, the fact that Zagreb is so central to how Croatia functions was always a big issue, because every other city feels like they are undervalued or underrepresented.

ZB: 14:02 So, finding those actors outside of the usual suspects, finding people who can perceive kind of holistically what is happening in a cultural and political scene, um, is always, with each new initiative, is always a struggle. But now, of course, with several years of continuity, number of people involved, who are well informed, who are skilled, who are able to take not only personal positions but also kind of articulate for the group, has grown. And I think in that way, this basic literacy of self-organizing has increased much, I would say, maybe exponentially in the past two years.

ZB: 14:55 MaMa has been involved with taking care of the independent cultural scene for a longer time, so that there are certain capacities that are very hard to replicate, and very hard to kind of transmit to others, and especially to learn. But because we are not alone in this, there are other organizations that make efforts in these directions, with whom we collaborate relatively frequently. I think, there is a kind of possible pathway to map where one can mature into a kind of cultural political activist. In Croatia, there is a green Academy for example, that is organized every two years that serves kind of as information point and kind of a training place for many of these people who are inside of the movements, but they're not necessarily involved with different scenes. There are several initiatives like, or organizations, like Centre for Peace Studies, who has even longer a history in doing this kind of work. So in between different approaches of testing and failing and educating and informing, one can maybe see that it takes maybe a year or two years for someone who is not experienced to enter the field and to kind of recognize the main tensions, the main issues, and then kind of associate with them in a kind of meaningful way. But I will never call this fixed procedure, or some kind of a toolkit, or method that we could export. It has happened organically for some people and for others it also failed.

17:08 **"commons"** (subtitle)

ZB: 17:13 We feel very close to the notion of commoning, to developing new ways of working, and new ways of organizing, new ways of protecting what has been developed within the cultural field. But in the same way, we also feel that there are certain limitations with the use of these metaphors and certain limitations in applying them in other fields, especially when it comes to issues like intellectual rights, or when it comes to access to the infrastructure. This is very hard to advocate for, still after all of these years. Especially with public sector, with the civil society organizations, I think that the presence of discourse has been continuous. We felt that the understanding of what commons could be has been expanded, and many organizations have started using commoning principles, even if they perform in relatively routine and structures in relatively classical ways as NGOs, that the kind of the value or ethos has been spread around. So there is certain amount of, I would say critical mass of adoption.

ZB: 19:09 In Croatia, the problem is that it is mostly within civil sector, that is, around the culture, like very little of organizations coming from other fields have been involved with commons. There are still very few cooperatives, there are still very few organizations who work for example in independent energy production or other systems that we see obviously flourishing in German speaking countries, in other countries of central Europe. And this will require a lot of work, to kind of switch the mentality that is very specific for the region that recently, relatively recently transitioned from socialism to re-establish this notion of necessity for structures that support shared infrastructures, shared protocols of care, shared resources in a positive way, because we have been fed by the media for over two and half decades now that kind of neoliberal thinking of individualism, of personal success, it have, uh, is the only way, all the heritage of socialism has been either wiped out or has been kind of negatively discarded. That I feel in that way much more enthusiastic over people who haven't romanticized their experience from socialism or people who have spent the nineties with this, following this very negative image of incentives, that had social and communal value as priority, to convert. Because this has been for many a lost case, we basically lost several generations in this process. The fact that we had self-organized student protests five years ago or even before, kind of keeps me kind of hopeful and optimistic, that there is a way to communicate this to new generations, without necessarily having to associate it with very specific, romanticized notions of what kind of socialism used to be, or what we could have been if we remained socialist Yugoslavia, which is very important, I think, to decouple these different ways of thinking.