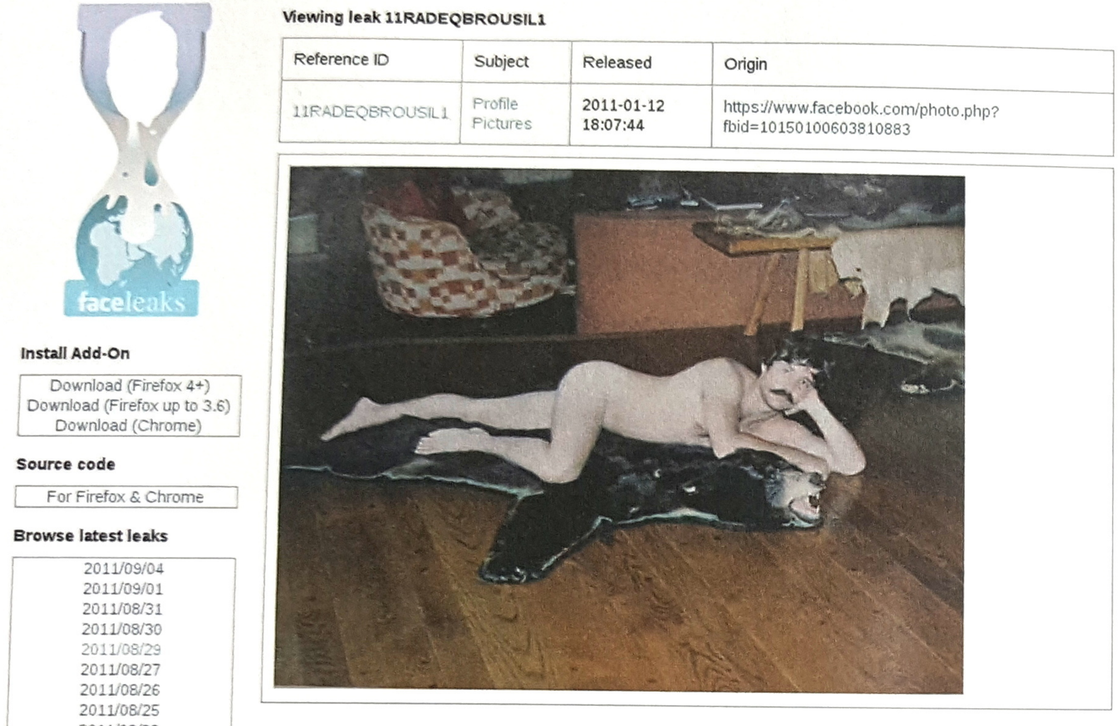


With Dušan Barok about art and the internet

BY MATEJ VAKULA

Matej Vakula: *You have a long history of working with web design and website development. Many of your works are unconventional and experiment with the nature of the web as a medium. To what extent were you inspired by net art?*

Dušan Barok: I got into creating websites in 1999, when the web was different than today. There was no Wikipedia, no torrents, not even "social media." It was a world of Napster, Geocities, and Google, which at the time was nothing more than a search engine. For e-mail, we used pobox.sk, which looked like an online noticeboard with part-time job offers, and instead of YouTube we watched animated gifs. We couldn't afford laptops, and mobile phones were only just beginning – and besides, they were only good for sending expensive text messages. Despite all this, people placed great hopes into the web. The internet fever was reaching a peak, and investors poured billions into start-ups, only to have them burst soon after, and the stock market spectacularly with them. The "net" attracted much attention – for some it was Klondike, but for us in post-communist Bratislava in the late nineties it was synonymous with freedom, a gateway to the unknown.

Websites resembled one another a lot, although perhaps less than in today's era of user interface templates, with their white backgrounds, serif text and sans-serif headers, subdued colors, and the dominant use of images, all wrapped in a responsive design and modular content. Back then, we had ten basic fonts, lots of colors, websites made using tables and columns, and

Dušan Barok
website of the Faceleaks *project, 2011.*

no central sites like Facebook. Instead, we clicked between different websites. I clicked my way onto works such as jodi.org and other "net art" that showed me how HTML is a distinctive artistic medium with possibilities and limitations that had not yet been fully explored. Although I wasn't particularly interested in making art, net art encouraged me to experiment with design and with the visual presentation of content.

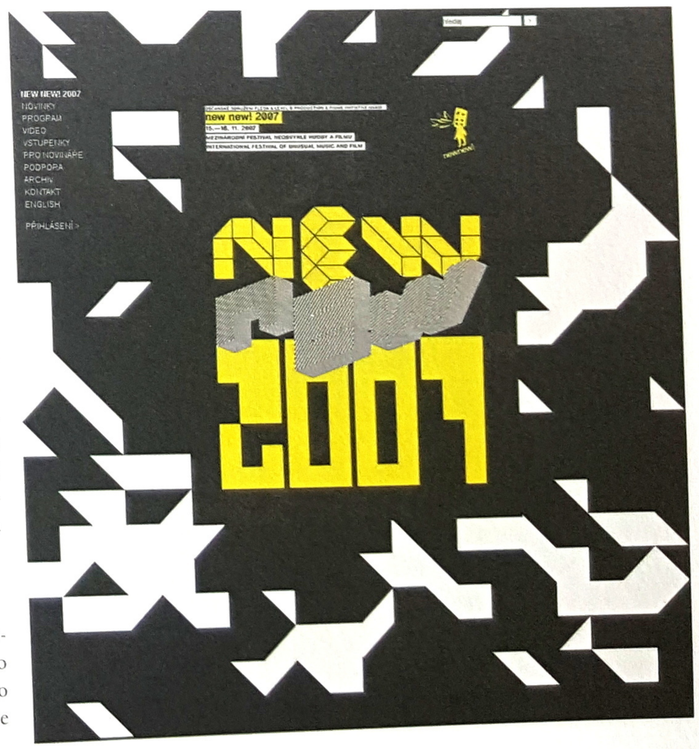
MV: *Which of your web-based works do you consider the most interesting from this point of view?*
DB: I redid the visual design of my first website, Koridor.sk, every few months. I started to discover the possibilities and limitations of the web and database languages (HTML, CSS, PHP, SQL). In an attempt at understanding the principles of designing web interfaces from a theoretical standpoint as well, I studied books on graphic design and typography and worked for graphic design studios, where people continued to stubbornly defend the tradition of print-based design, which they wanted to apply to LCD screens. I was more interested in the specific characteristics and poetics of electronic images programmed using the languages of the web. Over the next several years, I created perhaps 80 websites. I worked with curved designs (the early Koridor.sk), modular layout (a later version of Koridor: web.archive.org/web/20010416232226/http://koridor.factory.sk/indexe.php), and later with 360-degree navigation (multiplace.org/2003), semi-randomly generated structures (multiplace.org/2005, nextfestival.sk/2005), semi-randomly generated visual blocks (multiplace.org/2006), dual-panel layout (memoir.okno.be), the merging of background and content (2007.newnew.cz), a navigation menu in the form of a media player's progress bar (nextfestival.sk/2008), and a participatory design (multiplace.org/2008). These were all websites for festivals, galleries, artists, and cultural organizations, most of which are still online. Some of them need to be restored, since parts of the code are incompatible with today's standards. Later, I focused more on large databases and created web applications for the study of art and film – for foundations, universities, and museums.

Faceleaks, which was created shortly after the release of Manning's documents on Wikileaks, could be considered net art. This was a Facebook plugin that added a "Leak" button next to the "Like" button. In this way, the Faceleaks.info website, whose visual design mirrored that of Wikileaks, collected thousands of personal photographs over the course of several months. But only their addresses: at the time, Facebook allowed access to private images based only on their web addresses.

MV: *How does Monoskop fit into all this?*
DB: Monoskop was created in 2004 as a website in support of the Burundi media lab, which had begun to keep track of similar projects. The original idea was to create a Wikipedia for media art, with a focus on the scene in Central and Eastern Europe. Gradually, the project expanded geographically as well as thematically to include art and the humanities. Its current visual form was created in 2012 as part of my graduation project at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam.

MV: *Many post-internet artists started as the next generation of net artists. What is your view of these developments? Do they in some way affect your current activities?*
DB: Net art is primarily a phenomenon of the second half of the nineties, whereas post-internet art emerged at the beginning of this decade and reached its most recent peak at the Berlin Biennale in 2016. If we place them next to one another, we can see the span of twenty years expressed in the changing social role of the internet.

Net art of the nineties meant an attachment to the internet as a free world in which art could function outside of market mechanisms. Soon, Inke Arns and other curators began to think about how to present this work – basically websites – differently within a gallery setting, how to adapt them to the gallery in the form of a computer exhibition of monitors displaying a web browser window, with the address bar and functions blocked. After all, these works could just as easily be "exhibited" online as part of a collection of links, and the gallery added nothing except tearing them out of the context of the web, establishing a beginning and an end, and declaring them singular works of art. All this was alien to artists of the free internet. It took



Dušan Barok
website of the 2007 New New *Festival.*

Dušan Barok
Website of Monoskop, *2016.*

many long years before early net art found its way into exhibition spaces, for instance in 2006 when Inke Arns curated a retrospective of the group Irational.org. But by then it was a different era already.

The formative experience for many artists who soon began to be called post-internet artists was "non-final," fluid, ephemeral work in the form of group blogs. The most interesting such "surf clubs" (Nasty Nets, Spirit Surfers) began in 2006 as something like online channels of strangeness, animated gif collages made from artifacts found in various corners of the web, built on the tradition of the most obscure humor and memes from 4chan. These artists worked informally and under pseudonyms, and their blog posts contained images that had been quickly altered in a graphics editor. Their work was created and consumed over the course of seconds. It was tuned in to the culture of surfing and scrolling, with living references to pop culture, consumerism, and "spectacle," which in this setting was perhaps even more banalized. They existed as a counterpoint to "social media," which even then were tools for spreading the banalities of everyday life and conspiracy theories. Soon, however, platforms such as Tumblr (2007), Pinterest, and Instagram (2010) came along. Image-based communities became more widespread, and surfers began to exhibit in galleries. The contact with the gallery scene was mediated in particular through the blog VVORK, which had been created by students from Vienna's Die Angewandte, and which published photographs from exhibitions around the world which resonated with this community, usually without context, as distinctive online works. They later said that they considered online works to be an authentic experience and not a documentation, which is one of the keys for understanding post-internet objects, sculptures, and installations. The definition of "online" also underwent radical changes. At a time when, thanks to revelations of the immense scope and extent of online tracking, we again see the internet as a technological infrastructure of cables, server farms, data centers, and proxy channels with their own interests, even an ordinary website becomes tangible, material, and takes up space. A computer image displayed on an LCD screen and a polyurethane sculpture with a soft-touch cover are both part of a spectrum of materials, and both have a physical presence.

Many post-internet works are created as consumer products, presented on demand in exhibition spaces in the same way that websites obediently let themselves be displayed in browsers. Many are created for a particular place and situation in the same way that websites are bound to their internet domains or in the way that posts in surf clubs are created in relation to earlier posts and are placed next to each other. Net art, surf clubs, and the post-internet can be seen as existing along the same continuum of internet art. They even overlap generationally. For instance, the net art pioneer Alexei Shulgin has been running the artistic start-up Electroboutique since 2004, and its assortment of objects could easily be a part of any post-internet exhibition, as could the many works created by the originally net art duo 0100101110101101.org. Internet art implicitly functions in the context of the Internet's promise of freedom, the free market, and online tracking. All this affects us as well.

MV: *You're currently working on a doctorate in the conservation of contemporary art in Amsterdam. How did you get from "non-material" web art to something so different and simultaneously very material as art conservation? I see here a certain parallel to the trajectory followed by post-internet art, which is also characterized by the transition from a non-material medium, the internet, towards material objects.*

DB: That's thanks in particular to Kristian Lukić, who forwarded me an email with a call for applicants. My research was going to be about the digital documentation of contemporary art as part of a European research project focused on art conservation (nacca.eu). I was attracted by the idea of spending three years at a faculty of humanities in Holland, despite the fact that I had previously not published in any peer-reviewed journals. The only thing I knew about conservation was that it involved repairing damaged paintings, sculptures, and buildings.

To be honest, I never expected that I would ever work in a museum environment, let alone with conservators. But contemporary art's traditionalism is only a semblance. Modern and avant-garde art has already come up with photographic film, new types of paints, metals, and plastics – i.e., new materials that require new forms of treatment. Indeed, conservators have consistently understood the paramount calling of their discipline – fidelity towards the original state of a work – as a question of the material restoration of an artistic object. In the 1990s, however, problems arose with works from the most recent decades: All of a sudden, many works of video art and multimedia art stopped working, the image disappeared from the tape, or the data from the diskette. Museums also started to collect performance art and installation art. It wasn't clear which components of a work were important and which could be interchanged, how to exhibit an installation in a different space, how to deal with outdated technology, or how to present a work of performance art. In these cases, the work's original state is impossible to grasp or is otherwise inaccessible. All of a sudden, the material aspects of a work are just one of a wide range of problems that conservators now have to face Over the past fifteen years, many research projects have been launched on this subject, many books and journals published. Naturally, the greatest initiative has been on the part of museums – Tate, Guggenheim, MoMA, SFMOMA – but also smaller organizations such as Canada's Daniel Langlois Foundation, New York's Rhizome.org, and Amsterdam-based LiMA (originally Montevideo), which manages the media components of works for basically all public collections in the Netherlands.

An interesting phenomenon are media labs, an invention of the educational hacking lab at MIT in the 1980s, which in the 1990s and first decade of the new millennium found new life in the form of independent initiatives throughout Europe (including our lab, Burundi, in Bratislava). In recent years, they have undergone a Renaissance at museums of contemporary art, which have been establishing specialized conservation labs for multimedia works. Besides working with original materials, conservators also work with video, film, software, and hardware – migrating formats, converting codecs, working with long-term data storage devices, creating replicas, collecting documentation from previous exhibitions, recording interviews with artists about their intentions when creating specific works, etc.

Dušan Barok
Website of the 2005 Next Festival.

I personally am studying the role of a work's documentation for its presentation in the unspecified future. I ask how collecting institutions and conservators interpret recordings, videos, photographs, floorplans, and texts in their effort at making contemporary art "eternal." For a long time, it was a rigorous profession, but art is currently moving into uncharted territory, towards the re-assessment of the durability and duration of the work of art, closer to poetics and creating.

Matej Vakula is an artist.

Dušan Barok works with art, theory, and software. He is founding member of Monoskop, an initiative for the collaborative study of art, media, and the humanities; a graduate of the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam, and a member of La Société Anonyme. He currently works as a researcher at the University of Amsterdam.