COPYING AS A WAY TO START SOMETHING NEW
A Conversation with Dušan Barok about Monoskop

Annet Dekker

Dušan Barok is an artist, writer, and cultural activist involved in critical practice in the fields of software, art, and theory. After founding and organizing the online culture portal *Koridor* in Slovakia from 1999–2002, in 2003 he co-founded the BURUNDI media lab where he organized the Translab evening series. A year later, the first ideas about building an online platform for texts and media started to emerge and Monoskop became a reality. More than a decade later, Barok is well-known as the main editor of Monoskop. In 2016, he began a PhD research project at the University of Amsterdam. His project, titled *Database for the Documentation of Contemporary Art*, investigates art databases as discursive platforms that provide context for artworks. In an extended email exchange, we discuss the possibilities and restraints of an online 'archive'.

ANNET DEKKER

You started Monoskop in 2004, already some time ago. What does the name mean?

DUŠAN BAROK

'Monoskop' is the Slovak equivalent of the English 'monoscope', which means an electric tube used in analogue TV broadcasting to produce images of test cards, station logotypes, error messages but also for calibrating cameras. Monoscopes were automatized television announcers designed to speak to both live and machine audiences about the status of a channel, broadcasting purely phatic messages.

AD

Can you explain why you wanted to do the project and how it developed to what it is now? In other words, what were your main aims and have they changed? If so, in which direction and what caused these changes?

DB

I began Monoskop as one of the strands of the BURUNDI media lab in Bratislava. Originally, it was designed as a wiki website for documenting media art and culture in the eastern part of Europe, whose backbone consisted of city entries composed of links to separate pages about various events, initiatives, and individuals. In the early days it was modelled on Wikipedia (which had been running for two years when Monoskop started) and contained biographies and descriptions of events from a kind of neutral point of view. Over the years, the geographic and thematic boundaries have gradually expanded to embrace the arts and humanities in their widest sense, focusing primarily on lesser-known phenomena.[1] Perhaps the biggest change is the ongoing shift from mapping people, events, and places towards synthesizing discourses.

A turning point occurred during my studies at the Piet Zwart Institute, in the Networked Media programme from 2010–2012, which combined art, design, software, and theory with support in the philosophy of open source and prototyping. While there, I was researching aspects of the networked condition and how it transforms knowledge, sociality and economics: I wrote research papers on leaking as a technique of knowledge production, a critique of the social graph, and on the libertarian values embedded in the design of digital currencies. I was ready for more practice. When Aymeric Mansoux, one of the tutors, encouraged me to develop my then side-project Monoskop into a graduation work, the timing was good.

The website got its own domain, a redesign, and most crucially, the Monoskop wiki was restructured from its focus on media art and culture towards the much wider embrace of the arts and humanities. It turned to a media library of sorts. The graduation work also consisted of a symposium about personal collecting and media archiving,[2] which saw its loose follow-ups on media aesthetics (in Bergen)[3] and on knowledge classification and archives (in Mons)[4] last year.

AD

Did you have a background in library studies, or have you taken their ideas/methods of systemization and categorization (meta data)? If not, what are your methods and how did you develop them?

1
See for example https://monoskop.org/Features. Accessed 28 May 2016.

2
https://monoskop.org/Symposium. Accessed 28 May 2016.

3
https://monoskop.org/The_Extensions_of_Many. Accessed 28 May 2016.

4
https://monoskop.org/Ideographies_of_Knowledge. Accessed 28 May 2016.

DB

Besides the standard literature in information science (I have a degree in information technologies), I read some works of documentation scientists Paul Otlet and Suzanne Briet, historians such as W. Boyd Rayward and Ronald E. Day, as well as translated writings of Michel Pêcheux and other French discourse analysts of the 1960s and 1970s. This interest was triggered in late 2014 by the confluence of Femke's Mondotheque project and an invitation to be an artist-in-residence in Mons in Belgium at the Mundaneum, home to Paul Otlet's recently restored archive.

This led me to identify three tropes of organizing and navigating written records, which has guided my thinking about libraries and research ever since: class, reference, and index. Classification entails tree-like structuring, such as faceting the meanings of words and expressions, and developing classification systems for libraries. Referencing stands for citations, hyperlinking and bibliographies. Indexing ranges from the listing of occurrences of selected terms to an 'absolute' index of all terms, enabling full-text search.

With this in mind, I have done a number of experiments. There is an index of selected persons and terms from across the Monoskop wiki and Log.[5] There is a growing list of wiki entries with bibliographies and institutional infrastructures of fields and theories in the humanities.[6] There is a lexicon aggregating entries from some ten dictionaries of the humanities into a single page with hyperlinks to each full entry (unpublished). There is an alternative interface to the Monoskop Log, in which entries are navigated solely through a tag cloud acting as a multidimensional filter (unpublished). There is a reader containing some fifty books whose mutual references are turned into hyperlinks, and whose main interface consists of terms specific to each text, generated through tf-idf algorithm (unpublished). And so on.

AD

Indeed, looking at the archive in many alternative ways has

5
https://monoskop.org/
Index. Accessed
28 May 2016.

6
https://monoskop.org/
Humanities. Accessed
28 May 2016.

been an interesting process, clearly showing the influence of a changing back-end system. Are you interested in the idea of sharing and circulating texts as a new way not just of accessing and distributing but perhaps also of production—and publishing? I'm thinking how Aaaaarg started as a way to share and exchange ideas about a text. In what way do you think Monoskop plays (or could play) with these kinds of mechanisms? Do you think it brings out a new potential in publishing?

DB

The publishing market frames the publication as a singular body of work, autonomous from other titles on offer, and subjects it to the rules of the market—with a price tag and copyright notice attached. But for scholars and artists, these are rarely an issue. Most academic work is subsidized from public sources in the first place, and many would prefer to give their work away for free since openness attracts more citations. Why they opt to submit to the market is for quality editing and an increase of their own symbolic value in direct proportion to the ranking of their publishing house. This is not dissimilar from the music industry. And indeed, for many the goal is to compose chants that would gain popularity across academia and get their place in the popular imagination.

On the other hand, besides providing access, digital libraries are also fit to provide context by treating publications as a corpus of texts that can be accessed through an unlimited number of interfaces designed with an understanding of the functionality of databases and an openness to the imagination of the community of users. This can be done by creating layers of classification, interlinking bodies of texts through references, creating alternative indexes of persons, things and terms, making full-text search possible, making visual search possible—across the whole of corpus as well as its parts, and so on. Isn't this what makes a difference? To be sure, websites such as Aaaaarg and Monoskop have explored only the tip of

the iceberg of possibilities. There is much more to tinker and hack around.

AD

It is interesting that whilst the accessibility and search potential has radically changed, the content, a book or any other text, is still a particular kind of thing with its own characteristics and forms. Whereas the process of writing texts seems hard to change, would you be interested in creating more alliances between texts to bring out new bibliographies? In this sense, starting to produce new texts, by including other texts and documents, like emails, visuals, audio, CD-ROMs, or even un-published texts or manuscripts?

DB

Currently Monoskop is compiling more and more 'source' bibliographies, containing digital versions of actual texts they refer to. This has been very much in focus in the past two or three years and Monoskop is now home to hundreds of bibliographies of twentieth-century artists, writers, groups, and movements as well as of various theories and humanities disciplines.[7] As the next step I would like to move on to enabling full-text search within each such bibliography. This will make more apparent that the 'source' bibliography is a form of anthology, a corpus of texts representing a discourse. Another issue is to activate cross-references within texts—to turn page numbers in bibliographic citations inside texts into hyperlinks leading to other texts.

This is to experiment further with the specificity of digital text. Which is different both to oral speech and printed books. These can be described as three distinct yet mutually encapsulated domains. Orality emphasizes the sequence and narrative of an argument, in which words themselves are imagined as constituting meaning. Specific to writing, on the other hand, is referring to the written record; texts are brought together by way of references, which in turn create context, also called discourse. Statements are 'fixed' to paper and meaning is constituted by their contexts—both

7 See for example https://monoskop.org/Foucault, https://monoskop.org/Lissitzky, https://monoskop.org/Humanities. All accessed 28 May 2016.

within a given text and within a discourse in which it is embedded. What is specific to digital text, however, is that we can search it in milliseconds. Full-text search is enabled by the index—search engines operate thanks to bots that assign each expression a unique address and store it in a database. In this respect, the index usually found at the end of a printed book is something that has been automated with the arrival of machine search.

In other words, even though knowledge in the age of the internet is still being shaped by the departmentalization of academia and its related procedures and rituals of discourse production, and its modes of expression are centred around the verbal rhetoric, the flattening effects of the index really transformed the ways in which we come to 'know' things. To 'write' a 'book' in this context is to produce a searchable database instead.

AD

So, perhaps we finally have come to 'the death of the author', at least in so far as that automated mechanisms are becoming active agents in the (re)creation process. To return to Monoskop in its current form, what choices do you make regarding the content of the repositories, are there things you don't want to collect, or wish you could but have not been able to?

DB

In a sense, I turned to a wiki and started Monoskop as a way to keep track of my reading and browsing. It is a by-product of a succession of my interests, obsessions, and digressions. That it is publicly accessible is a consequence of the fact that paper notebooks, text files kept offline and private wikis proved to be inadequate at the moment when I needed to quickly find notes from reading some text earlier. It is not perfect, but it solved the issue of immediate access and retrieval. Plus there is a bonus of having the body of my past ten or twelve years of reading mutually interlinked and searchable. An interesting outcome is that these 'notes' are public—one is motivated to formulate and frame them

as to be readable and useful for others as well. A similar difference is between writing an entry in a personal diary and writing a blog post. That is also why the autonomy of technical infrastructure is so important here. Posting research notes on Facebook may increase one's visibility among peers, but the 'terms of service' say explicitly that anything can be deleted by administrators at any time, without any reason. I 'collect' things that I wish to be able to return to, to remember, or to recollect easily.

AD

Can you describe the process, how do you get the books, already digitized, or do you do a lot yourself? In other words, could you describe the (technical) process and organizational aspects of the project?

DB

In the beginning, I spent a lot of time exploring other digital libraries which served as sources for most of the entries on Log (Gigapedia, Libgen, Aaaaarg, Bibliotik, Scribd, Issuu, Karagarga, Google filetype:pdf). Later I started corresponding with a number of people from around the world (NYC, Rotterdam, Buenos Aires, Boulder, Berlin, Ploiesti, etc.) who contribute scans and links to scans on an irregular basis. Out-of-print and open-access titles often come directly from authors and publishers. Many artists' books and magazines were scraped or downloaded through URL manipulation from online collections of museums, archives and libraries. Needless to say, my offline archive is much bigger than what is on Monoskop. I tend to put online the files I prefer not to lose. The web is the best backup solution I have found so far.

The Monoskop wiki is open for everyone to edit; any user can upload their own works or scans and many do. Many of those who spent more time working on the website ended up being my friends. And many of my friends ended up having an account as well :). For everyone else, there is no record kept about what one downloaded, what one read and for how long... we don't care, we don't track.

AD

In what way has the larger (free) publishing context changed your project, there are currently several free texts sharing initiatives around (some already before you started like Textz. com or Aaaaarg), how do you collaborate, or distinguish from each other?

DB

It should not be an overstatement to say that while in the previous decade Monoskop was shaped primarily by the 'media culture' milieu which it intended to document, the branching out of its repository of highlighted publications Monoskop Log in 2009, and the broadening of its focus to also include the whole of the twentieth and twenty-first century situates it more firmly in the context of online archives, and especially digital libraries.

I only got to know others in this milieu later. I approached Sean Dockray in 2010, Marcell Mars approached me the following year, and then in 2013 he introduced me to Kenneth Goldsmith. We are in steady contact, especially through public events hosted by various cultural centres and galleries. The first large one was held at Ljubljana's hackerspace Kiberpipa in 2012. Later came the conferences and workshops organized by Kuda at a youth centre in Novi Sad (2013), by the Institute of Network Cultures at WORM, Rotterdam (2014), WKV and Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart (2014), Mama & Nova Gallery in Zagreb (2015), ECC at Mundaneum, Mons (2015), and most recently by the Media Department of the University of Malmö (2016).[8]

The leitmotif of all these events was the digital library and their atmosphere can be described as the spirit of early hacker culture that eventually left the walls of a computer lab. Only rarely there have been professional librarians, archivists, and publishers among the speakers, even though the voices represented were quite diverse.

To name just the more frequent participants... Marcell and Tom Medak (*Memory of the World*) advocate universal access to knowledge informed by the positions of the Yugoslav

8
For more information see, https://monoskop.org/ Digital_libraries# Workshops_and_ conferences. Accessed 28 May 2016.

Marxist school Praxis; Sean's work is critical of the militarization and commercialization of the university (in the context of which Aaaaarg will always come as secondary, as an extension of The Public School in Los Angeles); Kenneth aims to revive the literary avant-garde while standing on the shoulders of his heroes documented on UbuWeb; Sebastian Lütgert and Jan Berger are the most serious software developers among us, while their projects such as Textz.com and Pad.ma should be read against critical theory and Situationist cinema; Femke Snelting has initiated the collaborative research-publication Mondotheque about the legacy of the early twentieth century Brussels-born information scientist Paul Otlet, triggered by the attempt of Google to rebrand him as the father of the internet.

I have been trying to identify implications of the digital-networked textuality for knowledge production, including humanities research, while speaking from the position of a cultural worker who spent his formative years in the former Eastern Bloc, experiencing freedom as that of unprecedented access to information via the internet following the fall of Berlin Wall. In this respect, Monoskop is a way to bring into 'archival consciousness' what the East had missed out during the Cold War. And also more generally, what the non-West had missed out in the polarized world, and vice versa, what was invisible in the formal Western cultural canons.

There have been several attempts to develop new projects, and the collaborative efforts have materialized in shared infrastructure and introductions of new features in respective platforms, such as PDF reader and full-text search on Aaaaarg. Marcell and Tom along with their collaborators have been steadily developing the *Memory of the World* library and Sebastian resuscitated *Textz.com*. Besides that, there are overlaps in titles hosted in each library, and Monoskop bibliographies extensively link to scans on Libgen and Aaaaarg, while artists' profiles on the website link to audio and video recordings on UbuWeb.

9
For more information see, `www.sciencemag.org/news/2016/04/whos-downloading-pirated-papers-everyone`. Accessed 28 May 2016.

It is interesting to hear that there weren't any archivist or professional librarians involved (yet), what is your position towards these professional and institutional entities and persons?

DB
As the recent example of Sci-Hub showed, in the age of digital networks, for many researchers libraries are primarily free proxies to corporate repositories of academic journals.[9] Their other emerging role is that of a digital repository of works in the public domain (the role pioneered in the United States by Project Gutenberg and Internet Archive). There have been too many attempts to transpose librarians' techniques from the paperbound world into the digital domain. Yet, as I said before, there is much more to explore. Perhaps the most exciting inventive approaches can be found in the field of classics, for example in the Perseus Digital Library & Catalog and the Homer Multitext Project. Perseus combines digital editions of ancient literary works with multiple lexical tools in a way that even a non-professional can check and verify a disputable translation of a quote. Something that is hard to imagine being possible in print.

AD
I think it is interesting to see how Monoskop and other repositories like it have gained different constituencies globally, for one you can see the kind of shift in the texts being put up. From the start you tried to bring in a strong 'eastern European voice', nevertheless at the moment the content of the repository reflects a very western perspective on critical theory, what are your future goals. And do you think it would be possible to include other voices? For example, have you ever considered the possibility of users uploading and editing texts themselves?

DB
The site certainly started with the primary focus on east-central European media art and culture, which I considered

myself to be part of in the early 2000s. I was naive enough to attempt to make a book on the theme between 2008–2010. During that period I came to notice the ambivalence of the notion of medium in an art-historical and technological sense (thanks to Florian Cramer). My understanding of media art was that it is an art specific to its medium, very much in Greenbergian terms, extended to the more recent 'developments', which were supposed to range from neo-geo-metrical painting through video art to net art.

At the same time, I implicitly understood art in the sense of 'expanded arts', as employed by the Fluxus in the early 1960s—objects as well as events that go beyond the (academic) separation between the arts to include music, film, poetry, dance, design, publishing, etc., which in turn made me also consider such phenomena as experimental film, electro-acoustic music and concrete poetry.

Add to it the geopolitically unstable notion of East-Central Europe and the striking lack of research in this area and all you end up with is a headache. It took me a while to realize that there's no point even attempting to write a coherent narrative of the history of media-specific expanded arts of East-Central Europe of the past hundred years. I ended up with a wiki page outlining the supposed milestones along with a bibliography.[10]

10 https://monoskop. org/CEE. Accessed 28 May 2016. And https://monoskop. org/Central_and_ Eastern_Europe_ Bibliography. Accessed 28 May 2016.

For this strand, the wiki served as the main notebook, leaving behind hundreds of wiki entries. The Log was more or less a 'log' of my research path and the presence of 'western' theory is to a certain extent a by-product of my search for a methodology and theoretical references.

As an indirect outcome, a new wiki section was launched recently. Instead of writing a history of media-specific 'expanded arts' in one corner of the world, it takes a somewhat different approach. Not a sequential text, not even an anthology, it is an online single-page annotated index, a 'meta-encyclopaedia' of art movements and styles, intended to offer an expansion of the art-historical canonical prioritization of the western painterly-sculptural tradition

11 https://monoskop. org/Art. Accessed 28 May 2016.

to also include other artists and movements around the world.[11]

AD

Can you say something about the longevity of the project?

You briefly mentioned before that the web was your best backup solution. Yet, it is of course known that websites and databases require a lot of maintenance, so what will happen to the type of files that you offer? More and more voices are saying that, for example, the PDF format is all but stable. How do you deal with such challenges?

DB

Surely, in the realm of bits, nothing is designed to last forever. Uncritical adoption of Flash had turned out to be perhaps the worst tragedy so far. But while there certainly were more sane alternatives if one was OK with renouncing its emblematic visual effects and aesthetics that went with it, with PDF it is harder. There are EPUBs, but scholarly publications are simply unthinkable without page numbers that are not supported in this format. Another challenge the EPUB faces is from artists' books and other design- and layout-conscious publications—its simplified HTML format does not match the range of possibilities for typography and layout one is used to from designing for paper. Another open-source solution, PNG tarballs, is not a viable alternative for sharing books.

The main schism between PDF and HTML is that one represents the domain of print (easily portable, and with fixed page size), while the other the domain of web (embedded within it by hyperlinks pointing both directions, and with flexible page size). EPUB is developed with the intention of synthetizing both of them into a single format, but instead it reduces them into a third container, which is doomed to reinvent the whole thing once again.

It is unlikely that there will appear an ultimate convertor between PDF and HTML, simply because of the specificities of print and the web and the fact that they overlap only in some respects. Monoskop tends to provide HTML formats

next to PDFs where time allows. And if the PDF were to suddenly be doomed, there would be a big conversion party.

On the side of audio and video, most media files on Monoskop are in open formats—OGG and WEBM. There are many other challenges: keeping up-to-date with PHP and MySQL development, with the MediaWiki software and its numerous extensions, and the mysterious ICANN organization that controls the web domain.

AD

What were your biggest challenges beside technical ones? For example, have you ever been in trouble regarding copyright issues, or if not, how would you deal with such a situation?

DB

Monoskop operates on the assumption of making transformative use of the collected material. The fact of bringing it into certain new contexts, in which it can be accessed, viewed and interpreted, adds something that bookstores don't provide. Time will show whether this can be understood as fair use. It is an opt-out model and it proves to be working well so far. Takedowns are rare, and if they are legitimate, we comply.

AD

Perhaps related to this question, what is your experience with users engagement? I remember Sean (from Aaaaarg, in conversation with Matthew Fuller, Mute 2011) saying that some people mirror or download the whole site, not so much in an attempt to 'have everything' but as a way to make sure that the content remains accessible. It is a conscious decision because one knows that one day everything might be taken down. This is of course particularly pertinent, especially since while we're doing this interview Sean and Marcell are being sued by a Canadian publisher.

DB

That is absolutely true and any of these websites can disappear any time. Archives like Aaaaarg, Monoskop or UbuWeb are created by makers rather than guardians and it comes

as an imperative to us to embrace redundancy, to promote spreading their contents across as many nodes and sites as anyone wishes. We may look at copying not as merely mirroring or making backups, but opening up for possibilities to start new libraries, new platforms, new databases. That is how these came about as well. Let there be Zzzzzrgs, Ůbŭwebs and Multiskops.

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Online digital libraries

Aaaaarg, `http://aaaaarg.fail`.
Bibliotik, `https://bibliotik.me`.
Issuu, `https://issuu.com`.
Karagarga, `https://karagarga.in`.
Library Genesis / LibGen, `http://gen.lib.rus.ec`.
Memory of the World, `https://library.memoryoftheworld.org`.
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Textz.com, `https://textz.com`.
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LOST AND LIVING (IN) ARCHIVES
Collectively Shaping New Memories

Annet Dekker (ed.)