

> interview



Dušan Barok (photo Tomislav Medek)

I You have collected around 100 gigabytes of various original materials (including films, music, scanned version of early computer art artworks and books) covering the development of media arts and culture since the beginning of 20th Century. What specific criteria do you employ in your selection process and why did you start to accumulate them?

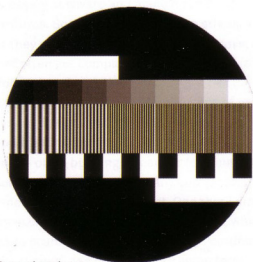
The idea for Monoskop Library is intertwined with an older initiative, Monoskop wiki ([monoskop.org](#)). I have been active in Bratislava's media culture scene since the early 2000s, working on and off a media lab, a cultural magazine and a new media festival, experimenting with software, internet projects and images in an informal and collaborative environment. Our work attracted certain people but we kept noticing limitations in our ability to expand discussions to a wider cultural sphere. This was part of a larger phenomenon that was being discussed in new media circles at the time —partly fed by the hope of escaping the technologist ghetto while at the same time preserving a secure distance from the art market —which produced some autonomist avant-gardist attitudes but mostly resulted in synchronising practices with the gallery-based art system. This was happening at the same time as some media, especially “new” ones, were beginning to phase out. I was very much interested in the history of this debate and began researching correlations to our efforts in Bratislava that might in turn give us some kind of legitimacy

within a wider cultural spectrum. I set up a wiki website in August 2004 and started to invite more people. From the beginning, Monoskop has been shaped to serve as a resource and collaborative platform for researchers of history of media art and culture who are not necessarily from academia. The original aim of researching the history of “media art” slowly expanded into looking into wider cultural connotations of a whole range of media practices. After (re)discovering particular computer art pioneers, intermedia collectives, and various experimental practitioners in my region and elsewhere (with the findings continuously documented on the wiki [1]), the scope became extremely diverse but yet amazingly interesting. It also became clear that there haven't been many attempts to see these fragmented developments in a wider context before. “100-gig” collection you mention was organised along the lines of this research, around the white spots in history of art and culture in East-Central Europe. It spans dozens of CDs, DVDs, publications, as well as the recordings of long interviews I did with various people I approached, considering them forerunners to what I have experienced in the field of media arts in the last decade or so. The collection was originally not meant to be published online. Impetus and advice came primarily from Aymeric Mansoux and Marcel Mars during my studies at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam. Its fragmentary character was not ideal for publishing as a whole so in the end I decided to stick to the

already extensive wiki and start embedding video, audio and image files within the artist pages [2]. Many works were not available online earlier, which also had a significant role in selection. The other motivation, as I mentioned, has to do with where I come from. For a Central European it is mind-boggling to realise that when meeting a person from a neighbouring country, what tends to connect us is not only talking English, but also referring to things in the far west. Not that the west should feel foreign, but it is against intuition that an East-East geographical proximity does not translate into a cultural one. The project aims to elevate fragmented remnants of the things past to actual cultural memory, reviving forgotten memories. A good example was last year's traveling exhibition Remake organised by Barbora Šedivá and Katarína Gataliová who brought together international artists to dig up works from the Library [3].

One of your best-known projects is the “Monoskop Log” blog where you post links to (mainly) books and catalogues in various formats (pdf or html for example) about media culture at large. Do you personally find all the material or do you also receive information from others? And is there any plan to share it as a whole?

Monoskop Log is rooted in a circle of internet-savvy friends in Bratislava. The main impetus to start a blog came from a friend who had access to PDFs of books I wanted to read but could not afford to buy as they were not available in public libraries. Despite being hidden from the search engine bots its user base grew at a slow pace, far beyond what we originally imagined as art and media students. Along with the audience the scope also expanded, possibly a legacy of 90s net culture and the independent media cultures of East-Central Europe. It is astonishing how diverse online distribution channels for e-book publishing are. There are mailing lists where people post interesting reports, mostly related to internet culture, dozens of e-book torrent trackers [4], DC++ networks, extensive repositories such as Library Genesis and Aaaaarg, personal FTP and cloud directories,



Monoskop logo

document-sharing websites (Scribd, Issuu), digital libraries (Internet Archive, Project Gutenberg). All of them are more or less accessible to anyone to distribute their files. Aside from these there are platforms which serve as publication producers and for various reasons offer their works in electronic format on their websites, as is the case with open-access publishers (re.press, Open Humanities Press) and the digital libraries of public institutions: libraries, museums and galleries. I have developed a certain way of navigating these spaces, which constitute the primary sources for what appears on Monoskop Log. People quickly began contacting us directly, sending us links to things they found online or scanned. Sometimes we receive entire e-book libraries, which required a large amount of scanning and editing work, which, of course, saves labour for others. I myself usually scan works that are related to my actual research. And it is very encouraging when we are contacted by the authors themselves, as was the case with your book *Post-Digital Print* [5]. Running a Wordpress blog with many files stored on unstable third party websites certainly has limits for longer-term sustainability. For a while we thought torrents would be a help here, but we hit disadvantages too: problems of continuous updates, as well as the fact that the files are too heterogeneous (HTML and wiki books) and too scattered among other files on my hard drives to put together as a whole. For the time being the broken links are fixed on demand, and further distribution very much encouraged. But when

we talk about "a whole", it is important to add that Monoskop Log itself is not sufficient for functioning as a digital archive of literature on media culture per se. It does not contain many crucial single articles and papers that could only appear as mailing list posts or are scattered on blogs or exist only in the Internet Archive backup. Here it serves as an extension of Monoskop wiki where the literature is included in pages along with biographies, works and places.

Were you inspired by previous efforts like Textz.org or Aaaaarg.org? And are there any alternative digital or physical libraries that also motivated you?

Certainly. Textz and Aaaaarg are inspiring mostly for the delicate way they operate as media. It's tempting to use the word "tactics", but after Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey's *Evil Media*, "stratagematics" feels more appropriate. Textz is not online anymore, but to an extent it pioneered the exploration of grey zones of text-sharing in an expanded way. Only recently I heard Sebastian Lütgert mentioning this piece of software for embedding the complete text of a book within an image file of its cover. Aaaaarg has accommodated people who share the impetus to actually scan, undertaking a laborious process that still lacks proper theoretical reflection in the somewhat novel reputation-based economy. The website lacks the function of being able to navigate through user profiles, forcing peers to remember each other's nicknames. I should also mention UbuWeb and its provocative, radical approach to providing no-barrier access to its collection, which is stored in pure HTML, upholding to net poets of the 90s. One may not find translations of all these examples on Monoskop Log, but is not the experience of such singularities the most inspiring? What is perhaps more apparent is format borrowed from (rare) music download blogs. Interestingly, these reached a saturation point a few years ago after running out of actual, tangible records which were not already online [6]. After creating unprecedentedly varied music library scattered over the web, most of the blogs now have non-functional download links

or have disappeared from the web completely. Here the problem of sustainability is not solvable through getting rid of cyberlockers, because a similar thing has been happening with (private and public) torrent trackers. This connects to your previous question and I have no better answer other than mirroring and creating redundancy across media.

The obvious question: have you ever had legal problems with Monoskop Log?

There were several takedown notices over the four years but generally I think people do appreciate unrestricted access to the kind of literature we are posting, whether they are authors or publishers. Many authors fail to open license their books because it is impossible to contact the copyright owners of all the material (although some do nevertheless). At the tip of the iceberg are those anti-piracy organisations using copyrighted images on their websites without permission. We all operate in grey zone, which I think of as zone of fair use.

You also work for the "3/4" Slovak music and digital arts magazine. How has your publishing experience influenced the Monoskop Log project?

Aside from editorial help, my role in 3/4 has been that of a technologist, translating the issues to online presence, which connects with my previous involvement in web publishing. But 3/4 is firmly embedded within a larger cultural scene in Bratislava that has had formative influence on most of what I do.

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Notes:

- [1] http://monoskop.org/Media_art_in_CEE
- [2] <http://monoskop.org/Library>
- [3] <http://monoskop.org/Remake>
- [4] <http://filesharingtalk.com/what-trackers-offer/e-Learning>
- [5] <http://monoskop.org/log/?p=4165>
- [6] <http://www.theawl.com/2012/11/the-rise-and-fall-of-obscure-music-blogs-a-roundtable>