With Dušan Barok about art and the internet

BY MATEVAKULA

MatejVakula: You have a long history of working with web design and website development. Many of your works are unconventional and experimental with the nature of the web as a medium. To what extent were you inspired by media 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 pohopc.sk, which looked like an online notepad 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 startups, 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 bars of fonts, lots of color, websites made using tables and columns, and no central sites like Facebook. Instead, we clicked between different websites. I clicked my way onto works such as j Dob.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 retool the visual design of my first website, Kotoradok, 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 Kotoradok), modular layout (a later version of Kotoradok), modular layout and later with 360-degree navigation (multiplace.org, 2001), semi-randomly generated structures (multiplace.org, 2005), nextfestival.sk, 2005), semi-randomly generated visual blocks (multiplace.org, 2006), dual-panel layout (memotokno, the merging of background and content (2017, newzcze2), 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 reworked, 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
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 bio-photographs, 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 such as 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 Montreuil), which manages the media components of works for basically all public collections in the Netherlands.

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 "external"? For a long time, it was a rigorous profession, but art is currently moving into uncharted territory, toward the reassessment of the durability and duration of the work of art, closer to politics and creating.

Matúš Valášek is an artist.

Dusan Banek 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.