Art organization

Interview with Tomislav Medak and Petar Milat, Multimedia Institute mi2,

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Establishment

Tomislav Medak: The Multimedia Institute originated from the Foundation - Open Society Institute in Zagreb, in the late 1990s it emanated from an Internet programme, which during the foundation's activities was focused primarily on the development of Internet infrastructure - donations in computer equipment to civil society organisations, social initiatives and the like. And then, shortly before the end of the foundation's activities, which was planned because of the change of government, and so on, they decided to create spin-offs and allocate different programs, namely the Internet Development Program. In fact, it was at that point that they started working first with Marcel (Nenad Romić), who brings Teo (Celakoski), who brings the rest of us who had known each other from the Faculty of Philosophy and the philosophy studies. Very shortly after, we took over the organization, it became independent from the infrastructure of the Open Society Foundation.

Upon their departure, there was the issue regarding what the Foundation needed to do in order to continue the programme, and it seemed to us that it was more important to create a space in which different cultural, political and human rights initiatives can be found and from which a transversal policy can be built rather than further developing digital network infrastructure or providing organizations with computers.

I think that the opening of the venue largely determined our further work, because the venue gave us a material dimension of action that is primarily related to material resources. The moment when we opened MAMA in the early 2000s, it is one of the few venues available to independent culture, but also to social organizations in general. There was also a Močvara in Zagreb, but in fact the rest was in the hands of institutions, which were at that moment in transition from a nationalist model of governance to a managerial model of governance.

And we had the opportunity to equip that space, the MAMA space, and offer that resource to others. An implicit material policy emanated from there which, in addition to what our programmes were, was then initially concerned with the new-media culture, which was largely related to the Eastern European context, and even the work of kuda.org. We also started dealing with philosophy and political theory, and on top of that we were dealing with anti or alter-globalization politics. Various actors and initiatives were gathering around us, and we did let them into the organization, that is, they were part of the organization. In addition, there was an acute awareness of the position of these actors in the wider social environment. First of all, seen as the material aspect of access to resources.

So that MI2 changes over time and the structure of inner functioning changes over time. At that first moment, Marcell, Teo and Vedran Gulin set out to bring together different people and the initiatives that function around them, in their context in which they see interesting actions. We

can say that four to five people were with the organization all the time. Some came, some left. Maybe to mention some names: Marcel Mars, Teodor Celakovski, Petar Milat, Vanja Nikolić, Emina Višnjić, Željko Blaće, who was very important in the first period of development of the organization - he shaped the new media artistic sensibility and orientation of the organization. Vedran Gulin, who shaped the approach to digital design, digital communication in the earlier period. These were the people who were in the organization at the start. Later, Seka Ružica Galić-Kulijašević came in as administrator. Igor Čolić, as administrator. Ranko Vučinić, as administrator. Emina Višnjić doing programmes. Nina Kovačević doing design. I've probably missed a lot of names.

The dynamics changed greatly structurally over this period. From this almost spontaneous gathering a collective organization was formed. And all the time we continued being a collective organization with some specific focuses. Let's say we had a software development team run by Marcel and comprised of Aleksandar Jakalović, Miran Božičević, who were important persons at some time. Ivana Pavić who set up the entire network structure and taught us Linux. That was the whole technological dimension.

All these different groups of people were more or less involved in the collective management of the organization. In addition to these people, we had different communities, groups and initiatives that came together and the people who were active in these initiatives were also members of the assembly. In a way, we tried to keep their involvement organic. Then there were various associates, such as Ana Hušman, who was also a member of the assembly because she was constantly cooperating with the organization.

So, in that period of organization its form was the outcome of the organic settings. Then, for ten years, there was the core of the organization, which we all called core, that gathered regularly and actively led the organization. But there was also a broader context that had its organizational character called the assembly, but in essence people daily shaped what the organization dealt with and how the programmes looked.

Name / Manifesto / Form

Petar Milat: Regarding the name and what we are one has to say that the Multimedia Institute sounds very technical, sounds serious, even academic. Igor Marković cleverly noted that we should define ourselves as an institute yet be non-academic or para-academic scholars. That all we do is some kind of knowledge production which comes from another, unexpected sector. If we define ourselves as MAMA then we have a socialization function, although it was more pronounced at the very beginning. Today, after various changes more women are included, which is not unimportant. I mean having a club or premises called MAMA run by guys. That's also ironic.

I think that function, the motherly function, was there from the start when we're talking about the Multimedia Institute as MAMA. On the one hand, we have an elitist and snobby research focus where we didn't care too much about what others expect of us, and on the other we have this (mama) moment expressed ... maybe even incompatible with each other, which really matters to us what others want from us and what we want with others. So here we have ambivalence about

that name, we thought for a long time whether to kill one of those names - Multimedia Institute or MAMA. In the meantime, we often refer to it as the Multimedia Institute MAMA.

There was one idea at the beginning, something we never did, which was to make MAMA the centre of internet radio station RADIOACTIVE, even the Soros Foundation (Open Society Institute) was willing to make it, and then to apply for a concession to have an internet radio, but at some point to try to get a concession, for a local Zagreb radio. But it didn't work.

The only equivalent in our personal mythology, something that was closest to a manifesto or modelling of what we wanted to do was the discussion we had in the autumn of '99/spring 2000, the moment we wanted to establish a website that still has the same domain as mi2.hr. We wanted to make our site a place that would also be a potential portal to the emerging radio station. And then we came to the important issue of how to classify news. At that moment tagging was still not in use So, we, geeks of the Faculty of Philosophy and the Academy of Arts and other studies suddenly started to talk about classifying news.

And we were tinkering for 2-3 months about what ten conceptual pairs can determine news about politics, art, theory, everything. We wanted to do a universal classification. And at that moment, it was important to us to think up a classification to encompass let's say Tomislav and I were for art news, our dichotomy was Greenbergian Avant-garde and Kitsch, so now you can imagine the other ten pairs that could have evolved. And of course, we never did it. We realized that there was nothing to conclude as well as this insanity because wanted to do everything in ten conceptual pairs. Marcel's experience in psychology studies helped in structuring: when we thought of something similar, for example, it is also our manifesto, our work on classification, failed work, or unfinished work. We couldn't do anything binary in 1s and 0s. We had to follow the scalar, work in a continuum, that the information we were dealing with had to be 3D rather than 2D, that a higher resolution was better than a lower resolution. From the start, we started with implicit-geek-hacker-nerd-philosophical pretentiousness, where we thought we could actually define everything around us, and it was our pleasure. That our pleasure was modelling. In fact, that moment of failed initial modelling pre-figured all our obsessions about modelling, networking, conceptualizing things. It was our intimate story, but at that moment we somehow found ourselves thinking that it was a pre-setting of our obsessions with models.

They were important in relation to new media production, but it seems to me that the central moment that affected us was the convergence of those things that happened in 2003 and 2004, and this lecture was of the most pivotal lectures we had ever heard and it was by Ricardo Dominguez, one of the affiliates of the Critical Art Ensemble and Electronic Disturbance Theatre. In that Zapatista-like lecture he quoted Baudrillard saying that "transparency is evil", and that the more transparent you are, the eviller and more malicious you are. I think we tried to follow that as one of our imperatives. From that kind of fictitious construction of mythology, as another kind of mythology - a sort of postmodern.

I think that turning point for us was Richard Stallman's experience, and I can tell you, as someone already socialized as a philosopher, that it was a turning point for everyone. The idea of Freedom Architecture he develops in degrees of freedom, creation and access to free content was for us something where we recognized the ideas we had found in theoretical activities, in books

we read or began to publish, the new media. We were focused on that Low-Res, Low-Fi software, or hardware, that all converges to this idea of freedom.

In fact, the idea of freedom as Richard Stallman develops. This is the moment when we as a group realised that there was something related to us, and to no other collective around us in this context. This was an idea that we would articulate philosophically via Negri and Hardt, with the concepts of joint and collaborative production and multitude. This is where we started to subjectivise ourselves as intellectuals, in the true sense of the word, not just as guys and girls from MAMA, who were just sweet and kind, but didn't really know what they were doing, nor were we intellectuals in the true sense of the word, neither were we activists.

In fact, at that moment, with software freedoms we began to articulate ourselves as a group and as something unique in the circumstances.

Now we come to the question of models, the question of NGOs or forms of NGOs - citizens' associations. We had never had a problem with being one, I mean being a citizens' association. We don't even have an aesthetic problem. We don't think that artistic movements or collectives are better, we don't think NGO are the mechanisms and engines of neoliberal capitalism, we don't think any of that. We have never had a problem with that.

Not because we hadn't thought about it, we had, but we had different assumptions. So, it was important to us, we knew why we were an association of citizens and not something else, but, again, we weren't pressurised into legitimacy, there was no need to defend ourselves for being what we were as a form.

This was especially strange to some of our friends, at first. How can you claim to be what you are when you mostly take public money? In fact, we have never, except in maybe two situations where we had some sponsorship, never been given corporate money. We did not receive or asked for it.

All this later multiplied, and these issues became more intense when, at that very moment, at the very beginning, we were the initiation cell that enabled the creation of public funds for this type of cultural production in Croatia. Not only when we were beneficiaries of these funds, but we initiated the creation of these funds. At that point, we were relatively smart, because we realized something like this had to exist.

And that we were in that segment where people didn't know where to pigeonhole us - were we visual arts, or whatever. Were we under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture? Some other ministry like science? That decision, to formalize the ways in which this type of cultural production was at least basically funded, was a very conscious decision that we had to do it, that we could not do without. And that we should not pay heed, I mean, we must do so, but not at the level that it must exist - such was our organizational-financial framework, and that we needed to be clear about that.

One should not expect an organic area or that there was a name that would describe what we are doing in a conservative way. It may be something different, something new. Not ingenious, just different and new. And that we may have had to get used to our own environment for it to exist.

Fighting in a wider context / Right to the city

Tomislav Medak: There were two important formal policies: one was related to free software and digital common goods, which would, in a way, be our way out of the market conditions of new media, during the transition from the 1990s to the 2000s. On the one hand, through the development of free software, promotion of free software, free culture, and then we would end up stating that it hadn't been the most successful strategy for combating the form of private property in the intellectual, but that it was piracy, and that all Marcel and I did was the outcome of that direction of development. And the other direction of development was about bringing together various actors with the aim of changing the context of action. So, we always had our eyes on the context, and that was where Teo's orientation to seeing things from a broader perspective was important.

This was where the reunion of independent culture in 2002, 2003 started, and with then different, other actors Clubtura was born. Then, Operation City emerged from this, as an advocacy at a local level, in Zagreb, that post-industrial spaces, which in that period were an intense space of speculation and accumulation in the mid-2000s, to set aside some of these spaces for public purpose, for youth, culture and other public uses.

This entails a confrontation that has a political character over spatial policies at the city level, against the Mayor, who is still the Mayor, and a more serious consideration of the issue of spatial policies in the whole country, which were differently shaped - dynamics were different. It is different on the coast where tourism dominates the issue of space planning as a resource and future dimension, as opposed to Zagreb, where this is more conditioned by the dynamics of the capital city, the financial centre, and above all the dynamics of the banking capital. Obviously, the Right to the City emerged as a wide mobilization platform not only thanks to us but also thanks to that imaginarium, which was a product of circumstances, and of the idea of seeing things through resources. At some point, it became a mass movement.

Petar Milat: At one point, we began mass-gathering signatures, publicly petitioning against such developments here in the city of Zagreb. At that moment we were still laughing at words *citizen* or *contact with citizens.* Like, now we have to contact the citizens. It's almost like they're aliens. We were not interested in that at all, and all of a sudden, in 2005, 2006, we were collecting signatures in the squares in squares in Zagreb for weeks. We asked people who really had nothing to do with us to sign. That was the moment. I don't think it was a reality check, because we were still snobs, but we had some kind of basic street experience without being punks, which essentially defined us. And then that moment where we suddenly saw that, not only was the cultural scene around us beginning to group together, but suddenly we had a very large number of people grouping around us.

In those moments, the feeling of those first demonstrations gathering thousands continuously without it being a classic political demonstration. At that moment it was something very abstract. In fact, it was abstract to the extent that people were telling us: "Well, why are you doing this?". This was what was called the anti-entrepreneurial climate in Croatian.

You do it because you can afford it because you are in a privileged position, which we were, and we are. But it seemed to us that we were open-minded and that our own obsession with the model of communication in such an initiative as the Right to the City was, actually enabled it not to fall apart after the first couple of demonstrations, the first couple of symbolic actions that were quite visible. And that at that moment we survived the first pressure of politics.

Organisation today

Petar Milat: We had daily meetings, we had long weekly meetings, and that was the pressure that came to us before social networks. It was an immensely intense experience. And today, we come together as a team, maybe twice a year for one day. Of course, there is the pressure of inheritance or of what we have been through, that we would really wish today that all this was gone. None of us want that. And we really don't want to, because we still see that we as a collective are so strong that as much as we do personally different things, from Teodor, who is absolutely the most important person on the whole social scene in Croatia, without any qualifications I think he really is, to Tomislav and Marcel doing incredibly important things in something that would be a new media practice, with the Public Library and with that new kind of new media practice, to what I do, those artistic programmes.

Even though we are physically separated, it is impossible for us to imagine that we are solo. Regardless of the fact that we have become subjective and of course there are frictions, I think some things have changed in the past 20 years, if nothing, we are older, but we still care a lot about it, and I think we are very emotional about it .. as I am now, here I am talking about it and it is emotional for me.

Tomislav Medak: Through the consolidation of other initiatives, consolidation of other agendas, and consolidation of personal interests in dealing with different things, today the organization is much smaller and, above all, focused on its own programmes. Although, the things that existed more organically within the organization itself and were divided into separate initiatives and agendas, still exist as an ecosystem. So the Multimedia Institute has something to do with Operation City, Clubture, Kurziv, which is the publisher of Kulturpunkt, the Association for the Development of Culture with which we have been working closely, and for the last ten years, with Kultur-Traeger, or Booksa.

So somewhere in that ecosystem, that collective form continues to exist, only the morphology and dynamics are shaped differently. All the time, the features of organizing together has been solidarity. Scarcity of resources has always been our primary concern. We had few resources both financial and spatial that we had more than others, and that is why we shared. But money was scarce and in a way the solidarity dimension has defined how that organic framework worked, and how it continues to redistribute the social burdens that people have in this ecosystem action.

They are often huge, given that the resources available for culture, cultural projects, are really small and often depend on the dynamics of project financing that cannot be controlled and so on. But that action against the context somewhere changed the conditions of the exploitation itself, reduced them somewhat .. now how much .. it is related somewhere to the dynamics.

It is not fluid. It's hard to say. Today, we are about ten people, some of whom I have not mentioned, who were among us: Tomislav Domes, Marijana Rimanić, who went away. Lina Gonan, Tihana Pupovac, Ivana Pejić, Ante Jerić was with us but went on to pursue academic career. Many people defined the organization. The organization changes over time ... Igor Marković, I must not forget Igor. Igor was there before us and he will stay after us. Random denominator to net.art.

This defines who we are. It seems to me that there is a complex dynamic of what is outside and what is within the organization. What the organization always gives us is a space of imagination for a new direction of action, and how the things we have created can fit together and be productively complementary. Because the stake is big - a great credit that we have in different directions and forms of action that extends from purely cultural artistic production to political and electoral space. In this continuity or series of interconnected forms of action, it seems to me that the space wherein this is regarded as connection, is the whole. We are not so focused to be able to look at it project-wise as a whole, but yes, that is what is currently the significance of the Multimedia Institute or MAMA for all the rest.