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Careful vs Careless: Library Custodians and Artificial Readers

Dušan Barok, Marcell Mars, Tomislav Medak, Nick Thurston

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Large Language Models have, in a sense, created the ultimate “(un)ideal readers” for electronic libraries. By treating e-libraries as vast training datasets, algorithmic scraping has become both the fulfilment and the ruin of a core dream in public library culture: that access to books should be free and unlimited for all. AI systems read everything and nothing, at inhuman scale and speed — extracting patterns and selling what they pretend to know as consequence. What once symbolised a democratic promise now risks feeding extractive logics that empty reading of meaning.

So, why should we care — and if we do, how can we put that care into practice?

The *Careful VS Careless* exhibition centres a new conversation between three custodians of radical public libraries, known as “shadow libraries”: Dušan Barok, founder of Monoskop, and Marcell Mars and Tomislav Medak, co-founders of Memory of the World. Organised around that conversation are a mixture of symbolic and tactical gestures that help people to think and act carefully in relation to the infrastructures of their public knowledge systems.

Organised by Lucie Kolb and Maria Maddalena Lenzi.

1. Careful Repertorium [2025].

PDF Reader of writings on shadow library practice, compiled for Distro, printed as 136pp book, 21 x 29 cm

2. A Public Library Is [2025].

Six overprinted library catalogue cards, 8 x 13 cm each

3. Shadow Libraries [2025].

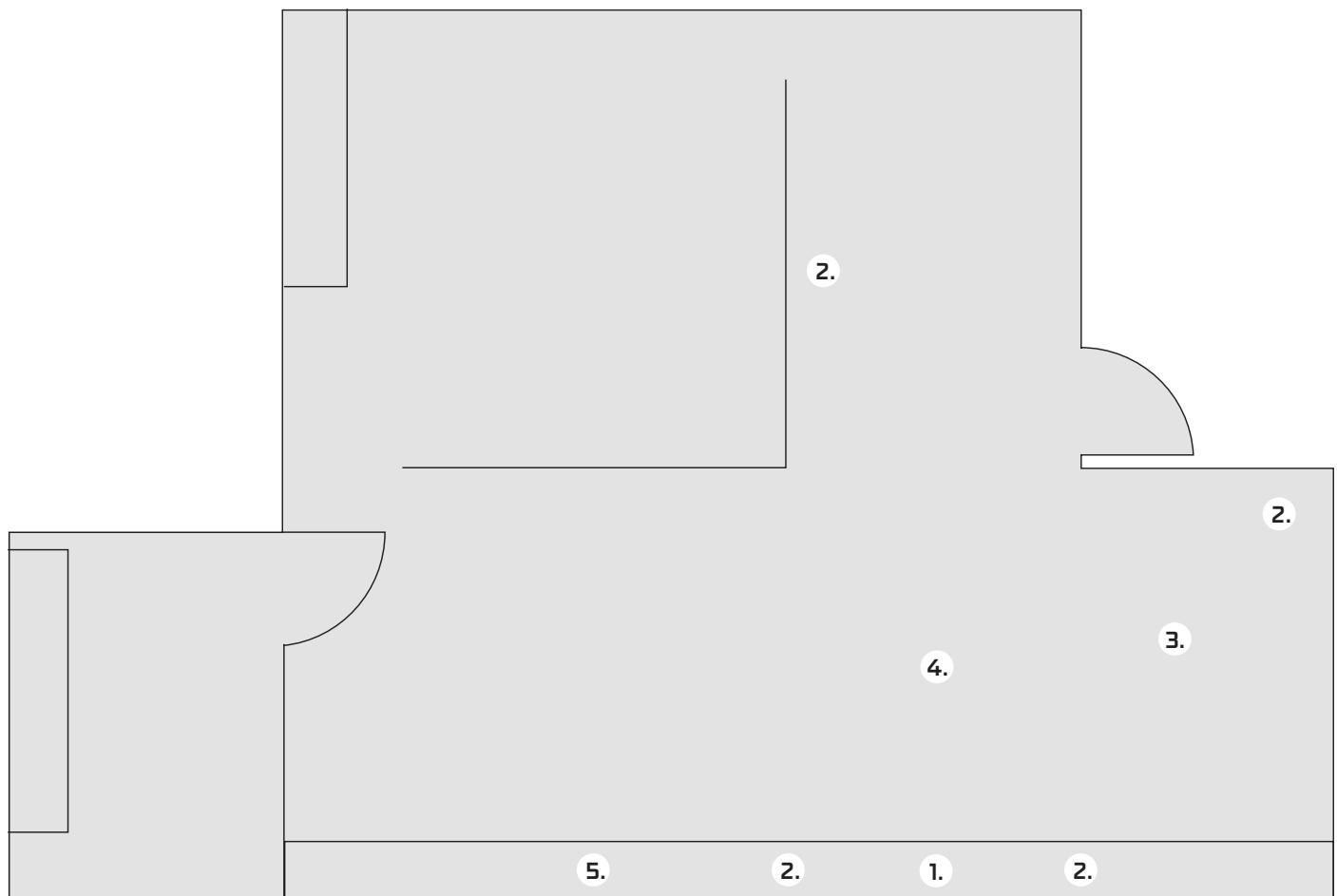
Full colour, one-sided, digital print on 200gsm photo paper, 40 x 570 cm

4. Useful Idiots [2025].

4-channel audio loop, 1hr 10min

5. Angelus Novus [2025].

Found magazine, 20 x 27 cm



In Solidarity and From Curiosity

Nick Thurston

April, 2024

A reflection can be a mirror image, a consequence, or an act of serious consideration.

This reflection is a little of all three.

It's a glimpse back at the circumstances, drives and decisions that brought about two of UbuWeb's (Ubu) kindred projects, Memory of the World (MotW) and Monoskop (Msk), as recounted at ease, in conversation, by the people who built them.

Theoretical, critical and systematic histories of both projects are published elsewhere. Like all reflections, this glimpse is partial and impressionistic. Which is to say, it's limited, it's biased, and it values the subjective reactions and thought-chains of the people involved. In all those senses, it's also a reflection of me.

I spoke with Marcell Mars and Tomislav Medak (MotW) and Dušan Barok (Msk), together, in the sunshine on Cres. I love this kind of oral history, not because it registers any kind of definitive account but because it gets us a little closer to the vernacular processes (words, discussions, actions, values, networks, etc) that shape every compositional gesture.

One thing should become clear in my reflection: I see MotW, Msk, Ubu and their other kin (like Aaaaarg) as compositions, as made cultural expressions, as profoundly social enactments of the speculative imaginary. And the value of the speculative imaginary deserves to be defended in our discussion about the future of digital archives, too, as well as the data, the networks, and political principles they entail.

Here are five historical nuances the vernacular heritage taught me, shuffled into paragraphs so we can see the nuances clearly in the mirror...

MotW and Msk emerged from quite different experiences of the 1990s, each in response to very local cultural conditions – the former in Zagreb, the latter in Bratislava.

Mars: “We were inspired by the Free Software movement in so far as it demonstrated a modality of working together without recourse to private property. Similarly, we took a cue from peer-to-peer sound sharing networks that had emerged with the internet among an underground of experimental musicians. At Mama, in 2001, I started a free Net music label based on workshops where we would share digital sound samples and teach one-another how to make music on a computer. Skill-sharing workshops at Mama were really the hotbed for what became MotW. From very early on at Mama, we would invite computer hackers who were top-notch engineers to work alongside queer and alternative political communities. What they managed to do together, through sharing, was inspiring.”

Medak: “When Marcell and I started working together in the early-2000s, we were driven, in part, by a shared nostalgia for societal property, which had been the dominant form of property relations during our upbringings under Yugoslav socialism. We were looking for ways and for forms to collectivise property again, to avoid the pressured privatisation of property. From the beginning, that was our social mission: to abolish the exclusions created by private property in whatever forms of activity we created, in the hope that our paradigm would trickle down or show-up as a possibility for other people, for other fields of activity.”

Barok: “During my student days in Bratislava, I started co-running a cultural space in the city with a group of about 10 peers. I was studying IT – database programming, that sort of thing – but I was socially and creatively involved in the city’s cultural scenes from the late 1990s. There, Msk emerged as an experiment in using the recent technology of the Wiki, which had made a massive change to the accessibility of online content-sharing because suddenly you didn’t need programming languages to present and properly organise content on webpages. I saw the Wiki as a new technical possibility for a socially-organised form of information sharing. So Msk emerged in this Bratislavan cultural scene. Later I moved to Prague, then Berlin, and eventually to the Netherlands where I started to concentrate more on Msk.

Both MotW and Msk were formed by a subjective mix of solidarity and curiosity.

Barok: “At first, documents or books weren’t central to Msk. I started it in 2004 to map new art and technology scenes in my region, which were unmapped. I wanted to see if this tool could help East-to-East networks develop, and help participants in those networks to map their alliances through the connecting of entries linked by categories that could traverse places and topics. I imagined it as a practical directory of people and scenes in eastern Europe, their interests and initiatives.”

Mars: “I moved to the Netherlands to do a residency at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht. It was a project about ‘ruling class studies’. I was looking at the emergence of start-ups powered by venture capital that seemed to be solving real-life logistical problems in more effective ways than the Free Software movement could generate. The social potential of things like Twitter were politically confusing when they emerged. I’d spent my time around hackers, musicians and the like, figuring ways to support their work. Now I was around people who wanted to read theory but couldn’t access the books. So I started a blogpost called Let’s Share Books, to explain how we could use a cataloguing software called Calibre to share books digitally. What I ‘made’ during the residency was a tool to organise other people’s access to publications – what we would now call a ‘shadow library’ – so I could talk to them about what they were reading, in part so I didn’t have to read it all myself.”

Medak: “Marcell started this work on shadow libraries and invited me to join in. We work together like that, as a sounding board for one another’s interests; and from the start, we both wanted to create interventions and provocations that would resonate in our context, in post-socialist eastern Europe. In 2012, we were invited to curate the biennial HAIP Festival in Ljubljana, and we developed the idea of transforming the festival venue into a public library by installing a server with the entire repository of Library Genesis alongside a book-scanning station, enabling anyone to quickly digitise, save and file-share volumes of books. That was the seed of our later idea about the practice of custodianship, the idea that the custodianship of digital libraries and archives was the reflexively appropriate model of agency and solidarity for the kind of knowledge commons we wanted to help foster. With our fellow shadow librarians, we articulated that idea of custodianship in 2015, when we wrote an open letter in support of LibGen and SciHub, against who legal action legal action was started by the corporate publisher Elsevier. This model of solidarity and agency is what Marcell and Felix Stalder then further developed into letters and a technical support structure for Ubu, dovetailing with Felix’s work on digital solidarities.”

Part by plan and part through play, MotW and Msk both developed networking infrastructures that others could use, adapt and extend.

Mars: “We always wanted to make tools that enable people to do what they want regardless of us. And giving people what they need or want feels great, especially when you can do it by messing with super-cheap, pre-prepared frameworks. I say ‘messing’ because these interventions we make are based on us engaging with a real-world problem through serious play. For example, we’re over-identified with the public library cause, but we like that over-identification and we play with it. Energising all this play, for us, are various kinds of writing – our writing practice has different levels. For me, it always involves writing code. Writing code is a way of bringing what you want to say to people without simply ‘saying it’. Instead, when the computer executes your code, it demonstrates what you want to

say.”

Barok: “I moved to the Netherlands in my early 30s to study networked media at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam. There, people told me Msk was an art project. I thought, ‘okay’. I ran with it and became an artist. As I spent more time in these different cultural scenes, including a wider European art scene, I wanted a way of extending the reach of Msk’s coverage to western Europe as well. To do that, I introduced bibliographies with every entry, so the frame of reference does the expanding without necessarily needing a top-level entry. The same principle applied to extending coverage of North America and the global South regions. At first, storing the book files behind those bibliographic lists was just about gathering material that contextualised the entries. But as Msk rapidly expanded its coverage, its user-base grew, too. It became an extra-institutional space for people to learn about art and technology, so it felt natural to offer a library of resources that people could easily access via entries and the bibliographies.”

Collaboration and comradeship between digital archives has been a fertile and vital support system.

Barok: “Gigapedia was the first big digital library I discovered. As a programmer, I thought it was great. But more importantly, as a Slovakian, it made me realise the politics of access – or rather, the lack of access – to publishing culture experienced by people in my region. When I started to collect book files, as I developed the bibliographies for Msk entries, I knew I was continuing a long tradition in eastern Europe from the 1960s of self-documenting and self-contextualising. I was keeping and sharing my own records. Eventually the library also became a functional apparatus for Msk to self-historicise its growth, a 1:1 record of the references that shape the ideas it channels. Soon after 2012, there was a surge of interest in digital experiments like Msk, and we were brought together especially through the work of Marcell and Tom and the idea of ‘shadow libraries’ as a broader political field of practice. Conferences started to happen and academic interest grew. These shared experiences and extended discussions gave me a context to reflect on the struggles we were in the middle of. Running something like Msk involves a lot of time at the computer. So learning about the ways in which Msk was important to people around the world was a great motivation. I thought it was pretty great that a little website from Bratislava had become a go-to historical record for lots of interesting people and groups.”

Medak: “The politics of memory are key here in a nationalist post-socialist Croatia. The interventions we make together, as a community of people around MotW, and as a broader network of digital libraries, defend a history of diversity and struggle and socialised co-living. We defend those histories against the revisionist purges set in train by neoliberal nationalists, who want to re-narrate our literatures, our records and our shared memory. In that sense, ours is a counter-historical practice. We want to create and support

counter-archives that will let people look more richly at the complicated histories that are traced by our scriptural culture and its discourses. The library at MotW is one important part of this practice, practically and symbolically, because in this scriptural culture books emerged at a moment of technological change in the 15th-century, then they became the very unit or product that ushered in a consolidation of capitalist markets around cultural goods with the invention of copyright. Sharing books reminds everyone that we can socialise cultural goods in ways that are other than private. But alongside the library, we also help groups to make digital collections of their literatures, by teaching them how to create and organise collections of digital facsimiles and to catalogue them effectively.”

MotW and Msk are online projects that open different conversations through offline activity. The online and offline dimensions of the practices are inter-dependent and inter-effective.

Medak: “We have a practice of organizing exhibitions and politicizing shadow librarianship through that format. There’s an exhibition we did in 2015, ‘The Written Off’, which was done as a counter-memorial to mark the anniversary of the end of the civil war in 1995. The war did return Serb-held territories to Croatia, but it also led to the mass exodus of over a hundred thousand people, and the killing of over a thousand Serbs. We explicitly invited people to bring their copies of books that appear on the lists of books purged in early 1990s from Croatian libraries because they were in cyrilic, or by Serbian authors, or about socialism. By scanning these purged books and cataloguing digitised copies on MotW, we made a virtual space to defend access to the memory of the purged and the purging. To bring in the people who have those books, it had to be IRL, a civic public action. Exhibitions have been an important forum for our offline work since then. We did a show called ‘Public Library’ in 2014 with the Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, which really surveyed this network of digital libraries and archives we’re part of. Then in 2019, we did another exhibition called ‘Paper Struggles’ at Raven Row in London, which was intended to show that shadow librarianship pre-dates digital networks – that books have long been exchanged by making paper copies.”

Barok: “These text-heavy educational exhibitions have a longer history in Yugoslavia than in Slovakia. Learning about that history by participating has been great, for me, because my offline activity as Msk is really discourse oriented. Offline events offer a parallel channel for communication, and a way to contextualise the active digital spaces that are online, which are dynamic but also vulnerable. Beyond that communicative function, what’s become more and more exciting for me about exhibitions is that they engage people’s sensory apparatus in a way that facilitates different discourses than the ones we have just through language. We need to engage that affective level, too.”

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