

An interview with Kuda

Trebor Scholz

TS: What is Kuda?

Kuda: New Media Center Kuda is a non-profit organization that brings together artists, theorists, media activists, researchers, professionals and hobbyists of all kinds. Kuda was officially founded in 2000 in Novi Sad (Serbia/Montenegro). In the mid 1990s mainly Zoran Pantelic and the group Apsolutno had the idea to bring together people to shape what is now Kuda.

We focus on research in new cultural relations, contemporary art practice, and social issues. The New Media Center Kuda offers space for cultural dialog and alternative methods of research and education.

TS: How do you compare Kuda in the context of resource scarcity and the current emergence of teach-yourself projects such as Copenhagen Free University?

Kuda: We still don't call ourselves a university but we do aspire to communicate 'universal knowledge.' For students interested in cultural studies, critical media art and theory we offer resources for research. We are expanding our library—we have about two thousand books, magazines and catalogs. Kuda focuses on fields that go beyond traditional academic concerns. We employ the model of the open workshop to increase interactivity, participation and responsiveness. Initiatives like Copenhagen Free University break the walls of traditional educational institutions who are closed in the institutional framework. They go public and talk to 'real people.' At the same time the Copenhagen Free University turns back to a certain intimacy— they emphasize that they operate in private apartments. These activities are based on friendships that is different to 'cold' and often empty educational professionalism. Education that is exclusively based on a two-dimensional master-puppet relationship can become incestuous, and strangely paternalistic in nature.

TS: What are alternative methods of education that you implemented at Kuda and which structure supports this?

Kuda: Kuda consists of three interconnected departments: Kuda.lounge, Kuda.info and Kuda.production. Kuda.lounge is an ongoing program of lectures, presentations and workshops.

Right from the beginning we used surveillance cameras, and simple color video cameras to record all events— lectures, or presentations at Kuda. These materials are in our mediateque where anybody can watch the material or burn their own CD of it. This is how we try to make the best possible use of the available technology. Kuda.info is our physical space that contains our library with close to 2000 titles, the mediateque, and computers for free Internet access. Kuda.production stands for everything that Kuda creates—from the publication of books, to campaigns, exhibitions, conferences, and the production of film documentaries. Our cross-disciplinary approach is still unparalleled in Novi Sad's rather traditional academic landscape. For the most part classical education is informed by a certain standardization of levels of knowledge. This creates a hierarchy of knowledge with its values, which could be turned around or replaced, which is crucial from the point of view of the knowledge economy. We are trying to turn this pyramid upside down by accessing marginalized theories and practices. We introduce them into the structure of the mainstream knowledge basket. Kuda's relax space offers the academic rigor of educational and scientific models without any interest in being accountable for the accumulated knowledge. Serbian mainstream culture and local culture in Novi Sad in particular are not cognizant of the cultural events that took place here in the 1960s and 1970s.

Yugoslavia opened up to the West in the 1960s and we had our very own 1968 with all its cultural and artistic upheaval. In Socialist Yugoslavia of the time conceptual art, visual poetry, Maoism, and leftist 'anarcho-liberalism' flourished. The communist government coined the term 'anarcho-liberalism' at that point. At that time political art bureaucrats and dogmatists wrote official art history of the 20th century, which was very blurry. Kuda's initiatives connect with these historical moments.

In 2004 we published three books. The first one—"Tektonik & Bitomatik" brings together texts and transcripts of some of the Kuda.lounge lectures (English/ Serbian). Secondly, "Divanik" contains interviews with artists and theorists who

are working in critical theory, net and media culture. During the months of April and May 2004 we organized Transeuropean Picnic together with V2-- a three days event with conference, presentations of projects, exhibitions, music events and theater performances. The event was organized around European expansion that took place on May 1st. More than one hundred participants from Georgia and the Netherlands came to Novi Sad to discuss current positions on electronic culture and media in the context of a wider Europe versus the countries that remain outside the EU.

TS: You give your local participants in Novi Sad the chance to work in Linux. How do you motivate young people who may want skills in proprietary software to score a new media job to use Linux and open source software?

Kuda: This is a question points to the larger market economy and goes a bit beyond our activities. Although there are strong initiatives to push non-proprietary software in business, it is still very marginal in that context. The cadre of designers and programmers that relies on proprietary software to find a job, is no different than the Fordist proletarian subject but without proletarian consciousness. We can link the ideas around software to Marx' notions of the necessity for the proletariat to own the tools it uses.

As of now, software and hardware tools are in not in our hands. In this sense the open software and the free software movement are connected to the fight for the ownership of tools in factories. But like a hundred years ago-- this process of transfer of the 'tools to the digital proletariat') is slow and encounters lots of obstacles. In addition, there is a magical problem of standardization in Linux environments especially in the audio/video development area. Today's networks are compatible to the needs of offices et cetera but the development of distributed audio and video still needs much more intellectual and financial investment. Open source and free software need to become more stable and user friendly so that new media practitioners can easier switch.

TS: How do you educate your local communities about file sharing and copyright issues in a society of post-information lock down?

Kuda: We are organizing lectures and workshops, campaigns, and make documentaries ("Catch Us if you Can," 2003). In workshops related to issues of open source and free software we discuss these problems. A few examples of workshops were Derek Holzer on free software audio and video tools, "TamTam CMS" by Aco Erkalovic of "miz Zagreb" and "Slix" by Luka Frelj of the media center Ljudmila. In April 2003 we did a workshop with Critical Art Ensemble. This was at a time when government introduced and implemented a law to protect intellectual property and copyright to rid Serbia of its black market of software, movies and music. In one week an entire pirate industry was destroyed. Before that there were 99 % of all Microsoft Windows software packages in use were pirated. A year this number went down to 72%. Last month we organized a workshop on open source/ free software for journalists. If they will get the message than things will become much easier.

TS: A lot of the activities of Kuda are dispersed internationally, you travel a lot. How does your local community benefit from your international presence? How do you feed back these discourses to the people in Novi Sad?

Kuda: In the beginning there were different views what and how Kuda should work. Is it an exhibition space, production studio or what? We realized that after a decade of isolation there is a strong need for self-education and hence we focused our efforts in this direction. It's important to know that it is extremely difficult for people in Serbia to leave their country. Citizens of Serbia and Montenegro need visas for most European countries. We started to invite people from around the world to come here and then we started to encourage local people to become more active, to create their own networks with our help. Our Kuda.info department is possibly the most important part of our activities for young Novi-Sad based artists. Kuda.info is a database of calls for submissions, proposals, residencies, and awards. We have an open library and mediateque. When we organize larger events like "World-Information.Org" in 2003 or "Transeuropean" Picnic in 2004 we involve young people in the production of the events.

TS: Serbia's new media scene had a lot of visibility with B92, online and broadcasted, around the time of the 79 days of the war in 1999. What are some developments in new media production and theory over the past years in Serbia?

Kuda: Cyberrex center is part of B92 and recently became active again. They organize workshops and presentations. There is also "The School of Missing Studies" which is an example of applied interdisciplinary cross-connections

between architecture, urbanity, culture and new media. In addition, there is a new media department at the Novi Sad Fine Arts Academy. There, Dragan Zivancevic and Vladan Joler are working to revitalize the academy and to produce advanced artwork in their department. Furthermore, there is the VideoMedeja festival which focuses on video and interactive digital art.

The Belgrade Center for Contemporary Art's "VirCo edition" translated some media and theory titles (ie. Lev Manovich, Critical Art Ensemble, and Hakim Bey). There are some groups and individual artists who are working in the field of new media including p.RT, Apsolutno or Ivan Grubanov, and Vladan Joler with whom I worked as part of the Eastwood group.

TS: When we spoke in Tallin you mentioned that most of your funding comes from the state and only a small proportion is contributed by the European Union. How do you find sustainable and locally justifiable funding sources?

Kuda: In 2000, after political shifts Slobodan Milosevic lost the elections. Serbia dwelled for two to three years in a certain kind of constructive optimism-- lots of new state supported initiatives emerged at that time. Now, four years later, there is clearly less energy, and the political specter in Serbia has moved into a more conservative direction. Our current situation is not as good as it was back then. On a local level—the ultra-nationalist candidate of the Serbian Radical Party won elections for mayor and assembly in Novi Sad. Our anti-nationalist activities have obviously no chance of support from this nationalist mayor. Three days after she became mayor we printed 6000 black posters-- just black. All of Novi Sad was in black as a symbolic welcome to the new mayor. Last week our server was shut down: It will be an interesting year.

References:

Kuda.org

http://kuda.org/kuda_info.htm

Copenhagen Free University

<http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk/>

School of Missing Studies

<http://www.schoolofmissingstudies.net/>

Apsolutno

<http://www.apsolutno.org/>

p.RT

http://www.cyberrex.org/p.rt/frames_index.htm

B92

<http://www.freeb92.net/>

Center for Contemporary Art Belgrade

<http://www.dijafragma.com/>

Cyberrex

<http://www.cyberrex.org/>

VideoMedeja Festival

<http://www.videomedeja.org.yu/>

Ljubljana Digital Media Lab

<http://www.ljudmila.org/>

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