

Phone interview with Darko Fritz

Media artist from Croatia based in Amsterdam about life as an artist and some “Balkan things”

ALAIN KESSI

We find Darko in his studio in Amsterdam, where he picks up the phone immediately.

It’s great that we are able to reach you between two trips.

I’ve come back here to Amsterdam about a week ago, after a long stay in Zagreb. These days there is the World InfoCon conferences, and Zoran from ApsolutNO is here, and Eda from Kuda Center in Novi Sad. They’re at my place for a few days, and we go every day to exhibitions and symposiums and social events.

Can you first describe the space you are in?

I’m at my home in Amsterdam, which I just renovated half a year ago. I tried to make the design as minimal as possible, because I’m overcrowded with things, since my home is also my studio. I’m sitting at a desk which is some four meters long, and which has plenty of technical equipment on it, like a scanner, an old-fashioned phone/telefax, which I’m speaking from. In front of me I have a 17-inch monitor, a keyboard and on the left side I have a laptop, and there is a desktop computer, a big huge laser printer, very old, from ’94 I think, still works great; and there’s another two inkjet printers, and then this Ethernet hub because all devices are connected, and some manuals and some Betacam tapes... this is like what I can see now.

And there are no pictures on the wall, because I have an overload of pictures anyhow in my life, so I decided to display just a bare minimum on my walls. As a color I chose a yellowish color, because my previous walls were white and because I’m a hard-core smoker. I think this nicotine yellow is kind of fitting. It will last a few years longer than the white walls.

When I turn around, I see my only picture on the wall. It is a digital print on canvas, it’s quite big, it’s like 1.70 by 1.20, and it’s...

This is your print?

It’s my print; it’s my own artwork. It’s a digital print on canvas, from the series “Internet porno weekends.” It’s actually a hard-core porn image, very manipulated. Some people have spent hours in this room without realizing what it is. It looks quite abstract.

And that’s about all, except for the small coffee corner there with a low table and a very nice sixties-like very plastic-like fauteuil and sofa. That was a gift from a neighbor of mine. He meant to throw it away when I moved into this apartment, and he asked me, “Hey, Darko, would you like to have this sofa?” And when I saw it, I just like flipped out, it’s the most beautiful sixties, square-shaped sofa, and it’s very... it’s made of plastic, so it’s a little bit torn, after all these years in use. So I made cushions, I put some extra silver on, and added some silver candles on top of it.

So do you feel comfortable, in this space?

Yes, a lot, yeah. It’s great! At the beginning of the year, I put a lot of efforts into it. Because I’m from Zagreb, and I have two notions of home... at least – one in Zagreb and the other in Amsterdam. There are two places where I feel at home. And basically, my life as an artist and whatever... creator, whatever I am, that I’m traveling all the time, as probably you do as well, and that’s... over the past twelve years I’ve spent like let’s say half-half: half in Zagreb and half in Amsterdam. And I’m traveling many-many places... The previous time I was on my half-year shift in Croatia, it turned out that I had traveled to ten countries within those six months. That means crossing the borders twice a month.

What made you choose Amsterdam as the second half of your life?

When I came to Amsterdam I did not plan to stay. I came in 1990, for post-graduate studies at the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam. At the time, this was the only

academy as far as I know, in Europe at least, which had a media art department. This may sound strange nowadays, because just about every art academy has a media art department. But at the time, not so long ago, in 1990, this was not the case. I came here to study, and it was great... At the time, media art meant all disciplines that are not traditional – performances, installations, any use of prints, photo, video, electronic media... anything that lies outside the traditional disciplines of painting, drawing and sculpture.

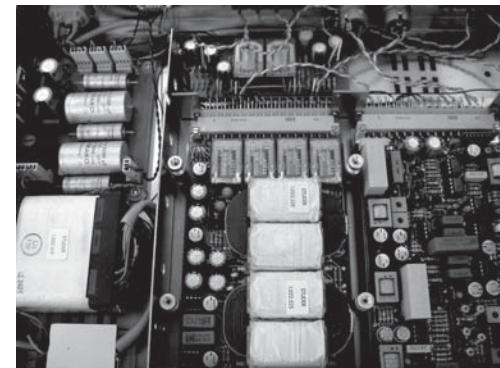
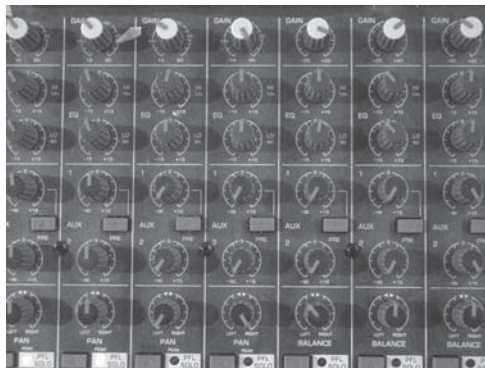
During my first year at the academy, the war broke out in former Yugoslavia. And then, it was... a little strange, you know. I watched television, called friends in Croatia. Then I made a short trip, just to see if everything is ok – and came back to finish my studies. It was such madness in Croatia. The war was still going on in '92. I decided to make two homes: one in Zagreb, and one in Amsterdam. From then on I was kind of semi-legal. I didn't have the right to work legally. Through a private lawyer, I had applied for a status, but the Dutch authorities held back their decision for more than a year. They were supposed to answer within half a year, yes or no. But the Dutch authorities didn't

And I found my way, working and living in two cities. This in itself is out of the ordinary. No country in the world provides a status for people living in two countries. The system likes to control, so you need an address. You can have a second address, but one has to be your main address. I lead a sort of double life. I have double health insurance, I pay double taxes, and so on. If you have your address and your fixed telephone number and income, they can control you easily. If your existence is spread over two countries, this is harder. Authorities on both sides would need to collaborate, and this hardly happens.

What position does work take in your life?

Huge. Too large, I think. I kind of dedicate my life to what I'm doing.

Take the following example: A friend kept inviting me to visit him in Hong Kong. Last February I figured that I had some money and could afford it, so I went. Mostly, when I travel, it's connected to work. And that's great. It's the nicest part of the profession, traveling a lot. You don't make a lot of money, actually hardly any with the kind of art I'm doing. But you meet people



know how to deal with people from Ex-Yugoslavia, because there was still war going on and they hadn't made a clear policy about that. So I was in a kind of gray zone, neither legal nor illegal, but I couldn't apply for a phone, and couldn't find a job. I ended up getting a positive answer, and so I've been legally in Holland since.

you like, travel great places and have a great time, do interesting projects. That's worth much more than some cash, I think. If I had the cash, I would probably invest it to create such a situation in which I can travel, though short of cash.

At the same time, when I travel I'm never a tourist. I don't know what it means to be a tourist. When I get somewhere, it's

into a work environment. This time I decided to go to Hong Kong as a tourist. When I got there, they were selling really good digital cameras at a great price. So far, I had been working with an old Hi-8 camera, which is quite... great, but I now have this new Firewire stuff, and I was tempted to switch to a digital camera, and Hong Kong's the place to buy one. I bought the camera, I said, ok, let's try it out, I made some shots, and then on my way I started meeting all these media artists from Hong Kong. I ended up going to one appointment after the other, to hang out with these people, and gradually I found myself in the same old working situation, talking with these people about work. I felt it could be interesting to document their statements on video, and I ended up recording something like twenty interviews, all taken on the fly, at exhibitions and such. I then called up the guys at "Transfer", a broadcast on Croatian national television. I occasionally work with them, when I come across something interesting, I shoot it on video, they edit it, and it becomes a two, five, ten minute item on their program.

That's on national television, which is great, because it's broadcast nation-wide. Even in Novi Sad, they tell me, they get the signal, and also in Bosnia, in some neighbor countries, this is great, to have access to the mainstream media with such content. I've done stuff on the "Next 5 Minutes" festival, this kind of stuff, media art and political activism. Even during the Tudjman's HDS regime, with its right-wing, old-fashioned centralistic view of the media, and tight control of 95% of the media including of course national television, nobody cared about culture, so that nobody took a closer look at "Transfer". Forty minutes every two weeks, you could place anything you like, hard-core criticism of the system, what have you. This is different from the West. There, you have a clear division between mainstream media and alternative media such as Indymedia. In Croatia, you could reach large audiences with radical stuff on the most controlled medium, national television.

So you didn't manage to become a tourist in Hong Kong...

No... the usual problems. I did this piece. It will be broadcast this summer - a 35-minute documentary about media art in Hong Kong. I really enjoyed meeting all these people, hanging

out with them, having dinners, discussing stuff, having parties, participating in panels there, showing my works on some panel and... no, I didn't succeed... a little bit I've done, like, a guided tour, a day in Macao in China, this kind of stuff. But I like my work too much, to answer your question.

What context would you need in order to realize your dreams? You say that there's too much work in your life. How do things have to change so that you can realize your dreams?

Oh, I don't know... there's always... hmmm dreams, I have... I could be ambitious about dreams, I mean... there are plenty of private dreams, plenty of working, professional dreams. In terms of professional dreams, I'd really like to be able to find better methods to realize my work, whether in Holland or in Croatia. Holland has too much bureaucracy, while in Croatia money is lacking and there is too much chaos. This means that there is no perfect environment in which to realize the projects I'm involved in. I do put a lot of efforts in this work, and it's not easy. And maybe this is my wish, maybe not a dream, to have these better... better circumstances. Although I suppose this applies to everybody. In terms of private dreams, there's plenty of stuff. I'd like to have my place in Zagreb, something I don't have now. I have a random address in Zagreb. And my dream... I don't know what would be my dream... it may be to... I like laziness! We keep talking about work, but I think laziness is the greatest thing you can achieve. I can be lazy. I can switch off, even if sometimes I work very hard. I have this... I'm very proud of myself having this great capacity, of turning, switching off everything and just being lazy for a day, two, a week or so.

Ana Peraica is one of those people you can spend lazy time with. We spent a week this summer in a weekend house just doing nothing. Like nothing nothing. One week... We had the seaside 50 meters from there. We were with another friend of ours, Vladimir Pakotin. He's a great programmer, also on the Syndicate and other mailing lists, and he's a great friend and great artist, and a great VML programmer and, yeah, great guy. It's his weekend house. Vladimir is another one of these great lazy persons. You work when you work, very focused and very concentrated, very hard. And when you don't work, you just

really don't work, without any feeling of guilt, you drink and smoke joints, you just enjoy, talk about something else... and it's great. It's my Balkan genes, working one hundred percent.

In Western society, you're forced to concentrate on your work. You are what your work is. Especially here in Holland. It's that same protestant working ethics which rules over the business flow around the world. I found it fascinating when I heard that protestants find you are closer to paradise the more you work, the more capital you accumulate. To me it was a strange concept, because I had always felt Christianity to be linked to poverty, to heart and mind and a belief system, but not to the material world. On the contrary, the less you have, the closer you are to God.

Does this difference between religious backgrounds, and the work ethics that comes from it, translate into concretely different approaches to work in your context in Croatia and in your context in Amsterdam?

Yeah, it's entirely different. Of course, I'm talking on the level of stereotypes, of generalizations. All over the Balkans I've found the same type of easiness about life. Let's forget about work for now, sit and relax, have a glass of wine and enjoy. We are rich or we are not... it doesn't matter. I've come across this same pattern in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Croatia, which are quite different countries in other respects. It's a Balkan thing, perhaps connected to the South, to Southern countries. The less you work and the more money you have... that's great. You work for results and not for the sake of working. Work sucks. But you do it, because you need the money, or you need to achieve some result. In the North of Europe, on the other hand, you have to constantly work. The result doesn't matter. In Holland, I found that artists will go to their studio every day, at times pretending to do something. There's a huge self-discipline, working habits. When you sit down for a coffee with these people, they're not relaxed. They've booked exactly half an hour for the coffee, and cannot help but speak about work. Then they have to move on, back to work, have a deadline to meet.

Of course, this is all not black and white – people in Croatia like this, people in Holland like that. But there are differences,

and it's great to have these differences, to enjoy the differences and get the best of both worlds. At times I've made use of the chaos in the Balkans to realize projects I could never have done in Holland. When you do a project in Croatia, you won't get a large budget for it. But the lack of regulations can help getting things done without a budget. For one artistic intervention in urban space I got my own tramway in Zagreb, number 17, which was labeled "time=money" as its destination, and was just circling round and round around one and the same square. People would get on, it was a free ride, and after some minutes they would find themselves at the same stop. If you want to realize such a project in Amsterdam, you'll need backing by a solid network of institutions, all very mainstream and powerful, with a lot of money, let's say like the Stedelijk Museum, and after two years of work, lots of paperwork, maybe you'll realize the project with an enormous budget. In Zagreb, it's possible to arrange the same intervention with a total of three appointments, to explain the project to the guys at the Zagreb Electric Tramway Company. They liked the project and said: "Ok, we'll arrange that." I said "Great." So we did it in something like two weeks, with no money at all. It's possible, you know, it's so chaotic, it's not a regulated country, and it's possible to realize such stuff. That's a huge advantage of Balkan countries. There is chaos, just take that as a given. They're chaotic countries. It is great. I like it. Everything has its good and bad sides. In Holland everything is very regulated. On the other hand, there's a great system for subsidies. You can get subsidies for amazing projects. That's great. Nothing like that exists in the Balkans.