

## Interview from the Series "Art in an Emergency."

Elena Aleksieva

**Elena Aleksieva** is the author of 13 books of poetry and prose, e.g. the short stories collections *Reader Group 31*, *Who* and *The Pet Syndicate* and the novels *The Knight*, *the Devil*, *Death*, *The Nobel Laureate*, among others. She has also offered several plays published in 2014 as *Angelic Fire* and in 2015 as *Victims of Love*. Aleksieva has won the Helikon, Askeer and Icarus awards for contemporary Bulgarian drama, as well as the Award of the Society of Independent Theatre Critics in Bulgaria. Her latest novel *Saint Wolf* got the "Novel of the Year 2019" award of the 13 Centuries Bulgaria National Donation Fund, the annual prose award of the *Kultura* portal and the national prose award of the Peroto National Book Centre. A Sofia resident, Aleksieva works as a freelance translator and writer.

If we are to talk about art at this moment and about what happened to art – whether anything happened at all, whether it will happen to it in the future, whether it will continue to be important to us or not – we need to start from a little further afield, because at the end of the day the pandemic and the state of emergency, although seemingly unusual events in our lives, are not that surprising. That's why I'll start talking about the time before this surprise came upon us and the question of whether art had become a luxury.

I think art has long been a luxury and this amounts to its entirely natural state. There is nothing so tragic or scary about this fact. It is a luxury perhaps more for the people who consume it. And of course, it is by no means a luxury for those who create it. I have long been unwilling to recognise a fact, which, however, has been sticking further out. It does not need so much explanation either. This fact is related to reading. There has always been a loud cry about people not reading and why reading is no longer important to them. Has the internet screwed up reading or have we dumbed down – what's going on here? Over the years I have increasingly found, with a great deal of bewilderment, that, paradoxically, many people never read and have no need to read works of fiction, philosophy, the humanities, but are no less smart and decent people for that. I also know more than a couple of people who have intensively read their way to becoming very well-read in the areas I mentioned – and who are no smarter for that.

So for me, the paradox is this: there are an awful lot of silly people who are closely involved not only with the consumption, but also with the creation of art, which could be "art" in this case, and this art doesn't do a whole lot of good for them. On the other hand, some people are profoundly alien to art, but this has not made them less worthy or worse. So the pandemic and the closures around it, which, although large-scale, seem somewhat academic to me in some of their manifestations, actually showed us something we should have already noticed. And I think we have noticed it, and we've known it for a long time: yes, art is a luxury, and there's nothing wrong with that. Sitting down and whining about it would mean accepting a significant degree of levelling people off, which is something I think that we have long since given up or should have given up.

I guess this is the right place to point out that I see art as a luxury in the same sense as I see, for example, morality as a luxury. That is, its absence does not mean immorality, but something far more terrible, i.e. the absence of the notion itself. Just like its excessive but

misunderstood presence easily degenerates into bigotry. I don't mention morality just randomly: for me, making art is a moral act. That is something I can't necessarily say either about its consumption or about its ultimate effects, which for most people are short-lived and purely aesthetic. So it is normal for me that art isn't equally interesting to everyone, and even if to some extent it isn't so easily accessible to everyone. I am even opposed to this over-accessibility of literature, the performing arts and art in general, which we saw during the pandemic with its online events. Everything went online with the idea that as many people as possible have free and easy access in the hope that somehow they will feel the need to virtually attend such events and these events will do something for them.

I think this is way over the top. Art should not be inaccessible, but it should not be fully accessible either, because everything easy and cheap loses its value for us. It sounds coarse, but art has to cost us some money to keep its meaning. I don't know how many lives were saved by all these online events, which instantly, as a life-saving operation, exploded on the web. I'm not even convinced that a tremendous number of people have taken advantage of them. I guess this smooth accessibility feeds into the illusion that art is so necessary to each one of us.

No, it isn't, and I take this as perfectly normal, just like the fact that we don't have the same needs. My insatiable appetite for reading and writing and my belief that this is the most important thing for me is no one else's problem. The fact few other people share it does not make me feel better or worse. It is my thing entirely, and I have accepted it with all its benefits and downsides. This is what I am, and I don't expect the rest of the world to be like me. All this has been indeed greatly amplified by this giant magnifying glass, or rather a microscope, which the so-called social isolation has flung upon us.

However, I'm not sure whether the situation has managed to play the most, in my opinion, important role it could play – to make us look at ourselves for a little. I would've said "to take a hard look into ourselves" if it didn't sound too ambitious. In the absence of more exciting stuff to do, in the lack of sufficient communication, let's peep into ourselves for just a little. Unfortunately, I do not see even this happening. What I saw instead was loads of people who have become so jittery from their cherished indulgence, well-being and leisure achieved hitherto in their lives as to be tipped into a state going beyond panic now, some terrible hysteria and anger at the slightest inconvenience.

This has generally made humanity – assuming that we are some representative sample of it here – even more repulsive as far as I am concerned. My point of view is, indeed, biased, because I am not particularly social, I am profoundly asocial and introverted; so for me, such isolation was welcome. I can't say that I had to rescue myself through art or in any other way this time because I've been involved in a self-salvaging operation throughout my life. I saved myself by searching, thinking, reading, and – to some degree – by writing.

I have two personal discoveries of mine, one being a fiction writer and the other one an author in applied psychology and memoirs. I came across the latter earlier into the pandemic, and this has an explanation of its own. Dr Edith Eger is a fascinating woman, a clinical psychologist who worked for the US Army for many years; she is now 93 and continues to practice. She invented her method of treating people, which involves, instead of disconnecting them from their traumatic past, helping them to accept it and live with it. This woman miraculously survived Auschwitz – if there was any other way to outlive that experience. Edith Eger tested on herself everything she managed to invent. The way she defines herself is as the female voice of Victor Frankl. Her book is called *The Choice*, and in it, Eger talks about herself, her method, and her ideas. I think this is a book that as many people as possible are well-advised to read during the current crisis. I even started translating it; I don't know when I will be able to complete this self-commissioned task, but I hope it will happen someday.

My other discovery was Clarice Lispector, an amazing twentieth-century Brazilian writer. I will say nothing more about her than that she is one of the phenomenal voices of the entire twentieth century. Very little is known about her in our country yet, and I hope this will change soon. So this is what salvations are about: everyone is looking out for them on their own. Everyone has different needs, and people rescue themselves from their fears and impossible desires in different ways. I don't know how much art can help the masses.

I rather tend to think it can't. Will anything change from now on? Are we going to write about this pandemic or otherwise? Will there be films about it? Will there be theatre performances to be staged? There will be, most likely. But does this need to happen now? I, for one, think otherwise. This is something that still needs to be made sense of; it needs to be put into context as we are still muddling through it. I'd rather stay out of this. This is a legitimate pattern of life and history. Similar things have happened to humanity and will happen in the future as well.

What is more important is what they change and whether they change anything at all in our attitude towards ourselves and the world in which we live. So far, I am pessimistic about this. At first, I didn't think that so soon after the social isolation, we would fall back into our well-trodden ways. This is, of course, the casual human pattern of behaviour – but it is not the best we can aspire for. But I'm still hopeful that the exciting and valuable twists and turns are still ahead of us because we were so much stuck in our ways, so terribly lost, so overindulgent. And if this is the way to break out of this plight, I believe it is most welcome.

From now on, it is up to us what we will do with the knowledge that we get out of this. I am afraid that, as have many other vital pieces of wisdom, this one will come to no good at all. But if anyone can use it and turn it into some value, this is what art is about – in that exclusive sense of the notion, in which at least I see it and tried to put across to you.