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Interview from the Series "Art in an Emergency."

Iva Sveshtarova

Iva Sveshtarova is a freelance artist, co-founder and co-organiser of the International Contemporary Dance Festival and the Antistatic Performance.

I received the invitation to answer a few questions, which I appreciate. And yes, this is an interview, but without an interlocutor, an interview with myself, a monologue – I promise it will be short. I stare at the monitor. One of the practices that we diligently develop during a quarantine. What I see is my own reflection. Vague, blurred reflection, just as the image of life after the pandemic is blurred – as are the consequences over which we can only speculate at the moment. Hey, you, on the other side of the screen! Hello! Sorry to talk in intimate terms to you. Now you are my imaginary spectator, and somehow I feel close to you. Maybe because we share the same issues, the same fears and even are in the same situation. In isolation. And I will not hide my sincere hope to see you live very soon – in the theatre house, in the gallery, in the museum and just about everywhere Art is created and shared. I am Iva, and this monologue is about the pandemic as contemporary Art.

Panic, insecurity, fear, anger and a bunch of other uninvited emotions have made themselves at home in my/our daily life. How long will they linger? How long will the invisible enemy walk in our footsteps? The STOP button has been pressed, and it seems that we have all become part of a global experiment. As we try to keep up with the new situation, recent daily rituals need to be mastered, e.g. constant disinfection, wearing a mask and handwashing with all kinds of germ-killing liquids. And the intense smell of bleach and alcohol has quickly established itself as the latest "spring fragrance".

The current situation is a challenge for all artists, dance and theatre companies and institutions in the performing arts sector around the world. Contemporary dance, like all other arts, is severely affected and, unfortunately, there will be long-term consequences even after the quarantine is done. Many questions have risen to the service as the art spaces remained empty, and the lights in art houses went out indefinitely. How could we rehearse and how could we perform without compromising our artistic quality, but still keep it safe for our teams and audiences? How will theatres and independent spaces be managed sustainably and safely? Will our work process change and if so, in what directions? Will there be a drastic aesthetic turn due to the creation of more minimalist forms in order to have fewer people crowding during rehearsals? This issue is not particularly relevant for the free dance scene in Bulgaria, which has been operating in small teams for years due to meagre funding. Can performing arts switch over to the digital space? What measures are being taken to restore the artists' work as soon as possible and make theatres reopen? A host of questions out there, so I

will try to share, in a quarantined and somehow pixelated way, a few things that have pestered my mind recently.

As early as the 1960s, American postmodern dance co-opted everyday movements to its practices, which drastically changed the understanding of dance. This approach continues to haunt the work of many contemporary choreographers. What will the new mode of everyday and street life contribute to the Art of dance, to choreography? Only a couple of months ago, there was a movement in public space and the bodies inhabiting it interacted vigorously. However, the quarantine introduced new rules of being present in it. The body still inhabits it, but in humility, in a mode of obedience, coming from the fear of something invisible. The bodies are no longer in the familiar proximity but instead manifest a different configuration. Pedestrian traffic is kept to a minimum, and people give one another a wide berth. If a pedestrian accidentally encroaches the personal space of another at less than a meter, then the trajectory of motion changes abruptly – from a straight line to a semicircle or a hesitant broken line, a zigzag.

What will the choreography of social relationships look like after the quarantine? What kind of meaning will the quarantined public spaces gain when people repopulate them? One thing is certain: distances will shorten again, and the touch will reclaim our relationships as this is the way we are hardwired. Otherwise, we are in for a "return to the crinoline and cigarette holder".

Since the theatres closed, performing arts have migrated to the digital space. Thanks to this quick reaction, millions of people had the opportunity to watch online performances and at least fleetingly forget about the global crisis. All of this is valuable and reveals the solidarity of the artist, but there must be a balance in sharing online artistic content. One cannot expect the quality of perception through the screen to be the same as at a live performance. The power of performing arts is in their happening live, here and now, in the intimate ritual where performer and a spectator spend time together. The audience adapting in a hurry to the home theatre form for me is a worrying trend. And we are aware that once the measures start loosening, the process of luring audiences back to the real scenes will not be easy.

The overwhelming concerns for the vanishing visibility, the broken connection between the artist and the audience and the impossibility to practice one's Art have whipped up an oversaturation of social networks with Art. Some of it was created before the pandemic,

some within the quarantine period, and both met a variety of standards. As a result of all the attempts to create performing arts during the quarantine, a home-spun aesthetic is beginning to take hold, which looks affable for the time being, but turning it into a sustained trend is unsettling. A raft of online projects are in the pipeline and will be out in the coming months, so I hope that this temporary model for creating artistic content will unleash the opportunities for other aesthetics, going beyond today's cottage industry.

One of the words that came along with the quarantine and will stay going forward, with its positive or negative baggage, is SOLIDARITY. What is solidarity in Art? How is solidarity practised? How is it understood by the institutions? The unity around this word and the implications it acquired when so many use it is something interesting to think about. Solidarity should be a constant practice, not a momentary slogan in a time of crisis. An approach that includes support, understanding, dedication, struggle with the difficulties others face instead of only worrying about yours, care for the stranger without expecting a return, i.e. gratuitous care. And this is the point where the word SOLIDARITY cracks because the way it is used goes beyond its genuine meaning. Each artist who has become part of a program related to supporting Art amid the COVID-19 epidemic has specific responsibilities as its recipient. In order to make visible the fact that an institution practices "solidarity", artists are required to advertise the support they have received through media and print materials, press releases and media appearances, logos and hashtags. We have also seen that solidarity is not for everyone. It has become selective and restrictive, not only for the cultural sector but globally. My concern is that the word has lost its meaning and is currently being tossed about as a hollowed-out shell and skilfully instrumentalised by political hypocrisy.

The pandemic also laid bare problems that have long pestered the independent cultural sector in Bulgaria, starting with the lack of legal freelance artist status to meagre funding. The Ministry of Culture has always worked clumsily and neglected the sector, and this transpired during the state of emergency. While most European countries came up with policy proposals, our culture ministry kept to itself. And as is often the case in our country, it was the independent sector that initiated a dialogue and debate with policy-makers. Only after the independent artists lodged an official position containing specific measures to save the sector, the ministry and other institutions put forward actions to support the arts and culture. After a series of discussions between the industry and the culture ministry, some of the proposed long-overdue policies will come into force, unlike what happened in many other countries

where quick responses demonstrated genuine solidarity with artists by putting in place specific measures at very short notice.

Unfortunately, the Bulgarian measures do not cover all those affected by the crisis, which is why it is imperative to continue the dialogue. The proposals made by the sector have to be heeded by policy-makers because they accommodate its specifics. I hope that the situation that has arisen will set the ground for tackling all urgent issues.