

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

Lachezar Boyadzhiev

**Lachezar Boyadzhiev** is a well-known contemporary Bulgarian artist. His artistic practice offers personal interpretations of social processes and the interaction between the private and the public. With a specific interest in urban visuality and today's world straddling utopia and dystopia, Boyadzhiev uses installations, photography, drawing, objects, texts, videos and performance lectures. An incomplete list of his exhibitions would include the individual ones, "Lachezar Boyadzhiev: Repair Works in the World of Images. 1991-2019", MOMus - Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki (2020); "Cosy Dystopias", Sariev Contemporary Gallery, Plovdiv (2018); "Lachezar Boyadzhiev. Sic transit media mundi /The present is too short and quite narrow/", Sofia City Art Gallery, Sofia (retrospective) (2018); and the group ones, in 2019: "The Influencing Machine" at Nicodim Gallery, Bucharest; in 2016-17: "Economise", Ludwig Museum, Budapest and "Symptoms of Society", Guangdong (Guangzhou) and Zhejiang (Zhejiang Sheng) Art Museums, China; in 2016: "Cold Wind from the Balkans", Pera Museum, Istanbul; "Low-Budget Utopias", Modern Gallery, Ljubljana; in 2015 "Grammar of Freedom", Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow; and "Art for Change", Sofia City Art Gallery, Sofia; in 2014: "Disagreement", Banya Starinna Contemporary Art Centre, Plovdiv; in 2013: "Economy and Art", MOCAR, Krakow, Poland; in 2012: "The best of times, the worst of times", 1st Biennale, Kiev and "The eye never sees itself", 2nd Biennale, Yekaterinburg, Russia; and in 2011: "The global modern times", Centre for Art and Media (ZKM), Karlsruhe, Germany. Boyadzhiev is a founding member of the Contemporary Art Institute in Sofia.

Thank you for the opportunity to say some things on five questions posed by Sofia University's Cultural Centre in connection with the pandemic and the situation in culture. I'm afraid I won't be systematic, and I won't be all that logical either, but I will probably be personal in some way.

Let me say first of all that, no, culture has not proven a luxury in these times, when everyone has to save themselves alone or with their families. I, for once, am spending the pandemic in a quarantine situation with my 92-year-old mother like communicating vessels: if she gets sick, so do I – and the other way round. I am trying to keep her safe. On the other hand, people are saying that the socialist past has given us a handful of safeguards. One of them is the tuberculosis vaccine (BCG), with everyone at my risky age being supposed to have been jabbed with it during the late 1950s, '60s, or '70s. I have been infected with tuberculosis three times, this vaccine has not protected me from that disease, but it might as well protect me from this one. The problem is that something stands out as luxury in a situation where we can figure out what is and what isn't luxury. We do not have this option at the moment.

Just as we do not have the opportunity to choose between different types of totalitarian systems, so we do not have the chance to choose between different types of viruses. When the question was asked years ago what would be better – living under communism of the Stalinist type or Hitler's nazism – I thought it was the wrong question to ask. Because the question presumes you have a life to live and choices to make, yet such choices are not taken for granted under this kind of systems. The right question would be which is the more dignified way to die, what kind of victim it is nobler to identify with: the one in a Nazi concentration camp or the one in the Stalinist labour camp. And I have no answer to this. But the important thing for me from a human perspective is to identify with the victim because any presumption that you have a choice in such a situation puts you on the other side.

This is the reason why I am not bothered by the question of whether or not art is a luxury in today's situation. I try to do my work the way I see it, in my home studio (or 'homio', this is my term:), much as I can and without losing connection with the current situation. For example, I mentally roam the cities I lived in and make drawings of some. What you see behind me is a drawing of New York, Manhattan, in particular, a projection I use to make a drawing.

Why do I say Manhattan and why is New York important to me right now? Well, because this is not the first fatal epidemic, the first lethal virus in my life that unleashed incredible fear – for myself, for my loved ones, for every step I take, for physical distance, social distance, etc. What I learned in the early 1980s and especially in the mid-1980s, when I was lucky enough to live in New York, is that the important thing is "distanced physicality" (my term again). How is it possible to maintain physical contact with your loved ones somehow at a distance, being fully aware you are risking both their lives and yours if you are not cautious enough? I'm talking about the 1980s and the AIDS epidemic. Not that I was personally particularly threatened; I just happened to be in New York when word got out about HIV, and it started reaping its first victims. There were different situations then. For instance, in 1986, my ex-wife and I were in New York yet one more time (indeed, we were among the privileged), and during the day I performed various menial jobs earning some money, while in the evening we went to discos and danced it out as if we'd never dance again. Because our artist friends were already dying, and it wasn't just the artists.

The music we danced to was from the 1980s. It is still very popular with discos. One of the well-known tunes at the time was Cindy Lauper's *Money changes everything*. If you remember, Reaganism, Thatcherism, and the ideology of neoliberalism were all born in the 1980s. And indeed, money has changed everything – not for everyone, but the whole world.

What we are reaping right now is exactly what kicked off in the 1980s: money that led to globalisation, expansion, to putting nature at bay, to a much closer connection between unsuspected corners of nature with human beings, and ultimately to a situation where viruses that have so far lived who-knows-where, suddenly crept on to humans. And here we are now talking about coronavirus, Covid-19, etc. And the mantra we repeat is that the virus changes everything; that it should change everything: our attitude towards ourselves, towards others, towards the world, towards some extraterrestrial essences, towards the future. Some other theorists claim that we are currently experiencing the first planetary crisis of the Anthropocene, i.e. things are so global that some global way out must be found.

According to some, this way out is digital. Being unable to communicate physically, we communicate through videos, screenings, Facebook statuses, all kinds of different types of correspondence via Facebook, Instagram, etc. This is an illusion. It is an illusion to assume that the digital can replace the physical, natural, human communication, whether we are talking about art, science, politics, elections, etc. Why? Because today's crisis is the result of pushing nature and its resources into a dead end: the moment these resources are depleted,

there will be no electricity. Unless we find some other way to invent electricity or to digitise our biological cells, teleport and scan them in some way and exist entirely in another dimension, then at some point it will be impossible to produce electricity. And then there will be neither a digital world, nor computers, there will be no projections, nor what you are currently seeing on this screen, and what I am talking to you through.

The illusion of the digital as a substitute for the physical is one we already experienced in the late 1990s. At least as an artist, I experienced it in the late '90s. Then, between 1997 and 1999, I was hanging out with groups that hoped that the digital world, the Internet in its infancy and email discussion groups would be able to overcome power structures in real artistic life. But they failed. At the time when the bombs rained down on Belgrade and, on the other hand, the Serbian army was attacking Kosovo, we in the group called "B2\_Sindikata Iztok" were sitting in front of our computers at home, myself in Sofia, receiving messages from our friends who were sitting either under the bombs or under the bullets.

It turned out digital was useless. It cannot solve the problems of the physical world. This marked the end of the first stage in our belief that the digital would somehow save the world. Although in the story I told you from 20 years ago it was only about the art world.

I believe the current crisis will spell the end of Facebook. And in a sense, I find grounds for this observation in the fact that the so-called demotivators, as Yavor Gardev dubbed them – I call them 'dementors' – those who speculate with defects in the real world to make a living, to learn cultural capital, or symbolic capital on Facebook, in the digital world – will vanish. The moment the boundary between these two worlds begins to be felt in each person's life, through their skin, online hate will no longer be possible. Or it might exist but will make no difference to anybody.

My specific example of this is that even at the beginning of the state of emergency in Bulgaria, i.e. as soon as we started to live amid a quarantine, various colleagues began to unite on Facebook under groups named, "Visual Arts - Emergency", "Virus", etc. and to base their actions not on hatred, not on existing differences of talent, age, gender or cultural beliefs of one or the other, but based on some stuff that breeds unity and solidarity. In the past, we would call that trade union stuff, and now we call them things that concern and affect the lives of everybody from the so-called independent sectors. Everyone who prioritises their work, no matter in what field, over money-making. Although making money is, of course, inevitable mischief.

Colleagues like Vladiya Mikhailova and Victoria Draganova, with the help of many other goodhearted artists, began to self-organise and created a platform to fight for the "natural rights" of those who work in the field of art and culture. "Natural rights" because these people are citizens of this country, even if they do not pay taxes, and even if they work to some extent in the symbolic economy. Anyway, we are part of the national economy, of the exchange of services among people in this country. Part of these services are carpentry, paints, primers, printed products and also art – theatre, music, books, printing, translation – all these technical activities without which no work of art could exist.

So, before we come to the question of whether art is a luxury, in this or any other situation, we must realise that he who wants to do something in art, does it at the cost of his talent, knowledge, skills, education, time, and even the victimisation of family members. All that goes into making an innovative product to share with other people, whether they like it or not. This is as much economic activity as any other in this country.

What else can I say? About fear and courage. Yes, I am terrified. I felt fear in my past life too, but this is what life is about.