

INTERVIEW for the article: "What is the position of the (independent) artist in our country in the times of the current pandemics?"

The following set of questions is intended for artists and cultural workers. They have been sent to you in an attempt to gather the information for an article article that I'm writing.

I am striving to provide a realistic representation of the creative/art scene during the Covid-19 pandemic and your answers are of great importance to the article. I would not like to take a lot of your time, but I would appreciate your insights. I might decide to quote some of the answers in the article, therefore please fill-in your contact details. You can answer in English or in Macedonian. If you need translation of the questions in Macedonian, please contact me.

If you feel that some of the questions are not applicable to you, or you don't have an opinion on the issue, please leave the box empty. Finally, If you have any comments or disagreements, or would like to talk more about the issue I am exploring, please write to brankoprlja@gmail.com. If it's easier for you to just talk about the issues, we can arrange a video-chat.

Thank you in advance,
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1. What is your opinion on ONLINE ART EVENTS? Do you think they give an opportunity to the artists and art audience or it diminishes their experience?

I think it was remarkable that in a very short period of time, all of us, collectively, understood that we have to revert to this form of production, sharing and communication. Online Art Events existed before the pandemic, however they were not as prominent. All of a sudden, we had to understand how to do them professionally and how to rely on them for visibility, but also for accountability too - it still needed to be done in such a way to honor the concept and meaning of the content presented. I would say that the online-based production and distribution helped democratized art to some extent and that it add value to the work that artists do and the way audiences received it.

2. Do you think that the HUMANISTIC aspect of ART is important in these strange times?

Yes, absolutely, and I do not think that presenting art online takes any of it away, quite the contrary, it adds value. Let's not forget that those are extraordinary times so to me any effort to bring art closer to audiences stuck in isolation is meaningful and human act.

3. Do you think that CULTURAL POLICY MAKERS in our country have done enough concerning the cultural workers in the wake and the development of the pandemics?

No, I do not think they did. On one hand, they recognized the artists and cultural workers that are already in the system and quickly (in the first package of measures granted 2 month worth of support in the amount of 14,500 Macedonian Denars or roughly 250 Euro. However, in regard to a "Decree with legal Power for financial support of artists and cultural workers during a state of emergency" not all the recommendations were taken into consideration of the coordinative body of cultural workers and Government representatives, so this legal decree did not fulfill its own objective as it made it nearly impossible for anyone to apply (due to restrictive measures and responsibilities on part of the applicants for help). I have to give them a passing grade as they showed accountability and also as they were the only Government in the region of ex-Yugoslavia to go as far as to make such help for the independent culture scene possible.

4. In your opinion, are ARTS AND CULTURE VALUED in our society and if not, what could be done?

No, they are not. But we also have to make a distinction between the value or the funding care for the state-supported institutions on one hand and the independent sector or the non-institutional art and culture scene on the other. As we are now in the pre-election period, we can see that culture is nowhere in the programs of either of the political parties fighting for power, nor it is on the agenda. The problem is that they do not see it as economically, politically, nor socially relevant collective body that has any real power or standing in society.

5. Is the INDEPENDENT CULTURAL SCENE active in the current time of the crisis? If possible, give examples of current interesting initiatives?

The INDEPENDENT CULTURAL SCENE is quite active in the current time of crises, but I am not sure that it is visible or tangible enough. I am currently President of JADRO - Association of the Independent Cultural Scene and I can say that our association has initiated and participated in a number of processes as well as advised on specific measures that can help the small and economically fragile scene. One of the key things we produced was the Survey "The effect of COVID-19 on the life and work of artists and cultural workers" conducted by JADRO on the emergency situation regarding the effect of the pandemic on the life and work of artists and cultural workers from the independent cultural scene in the Republic of North Macedonia. The Analysis of the same, were prepared both in English and Macedonian and distributed the Ministry of Culture, Office of the EU in Skopje, and also all the Government bodies as well as all the municipalities in the country that have Cultural sector. We also adjusted our programs for 2020 to create a Fund for Solidarity and help our members as needed, especially with our current active project of opening the second hybrid institution based on the principle of civil-public partnership Socio Cultural Space Podium-Jadro in the city of Kavadarci (the first institution is in Skopje and its called Socio Cultural Space Centar-Jadro). We are also active in the region via Kooperativa - the Regional Cultural Network.

6. What role, if any, have the MUSEUMS had in the times of the crisis? Are you aware of any online exhibitions, discussions etc?

Macedonian museums have been quite inactive, with one bright example being the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje who at least tried to animate the audience via social media with highlighting their international collection.

7. Are any artists, cultural workers or any other entities representing or advocating for extended SUPPORT from the government during Covid-19 crisis?

Yes, there are individuals in the independent art and culture sector, the non-institutional sector that are advocating.

8. Can this situation teach us anything about the ROLE OF ART in society?

The role of art has always been to initiate a dialogue and to instigate change, to question the established norms and roles and to envision a more critical field for reflection. I think during this time we have moved closer to the notion of the social and educational or emancipatory role of art. We have seen that we need it and that it should have a place in our lives even if the government deems it not mandatory nor necessary in times of economic stagnation. We have to continue to create, develop, share new ideas and protect the democratic space for free expression.

9. The members of the Croatian platform "Za KRUH" made an appeal (<https://zakruh.wordpress.com/appeal/>) to their Ministry of Culture. Among (many) other things they ask for "universal basic income". Do you think Macedonian artists should propose similar appeals?

Yes, there are discussion on this topic, however, it takes a political will to push this issue further, we are still very far from a real discussion and plan.

10. Do you think that artists and cultural workers should exercise their SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY during the current pandemic?

Absolutely.

If you desire to add anything, please comment here:

Thanks for your interest and writing on this subject.

