

The Highlights - Interview with Daniel Bozhkov

JENNIFER DUDLEY: For your work you've learned to pilot an aircraft, run a döner kabob stand, greet customers at a Wal-Mart, and bake simit bread, among other things. How does the training you undergo for your work compare to your formal artistic education?

DANIEL BOZHKOVA: I like very much to be an apprentice. This process of learning, which reminds me of the very traditional course of learning I went through as an artist, always expands the possibility of what the work could be. By learning how to make simits, you meet a baker who will tell a story about something you've never heard before. Then you learn what movement of kneading the dough makes simits faster, and what makes simits sell better on the streets. It's that kind of line of participation, but also an inquiry into the real, which is very important for me.

JD: I feel like you use your training in painting equivocally to your training in bread making or flying, in a sense flattening a more traditionally hierarchical approach.



DB: It's more like getting different kinds of activities re-prioritized in a particular way. Painting is in the field of culture, while kabob-making is in the field of daily necessity. I'm interested to not necessarily make all these things equal, but to weave in and out of that

hierarchy, or to create a new one where kabob-making and flying in space are things that can be put next to each other and inform each other.

There's something in traditional art historical practices that has been, at least in the context of a museum, elevated beyond reach. We are almost accustomed or conditioned to experience culture in terms of excess and not in terms of necessity. I want to imagine art forms that are 'daily level' necessary. Almost like some weird kind of emergency.

JD: How does the profession of teaching art, or acting as a studio critic in an academic setting, differ from the kind of professional activity that you undertake as part of your work?

DB: I'm actually much more interested in the similarities. It's difficult for me to distinguish between my in-studio and out-of-studio work, and to distinguish between that and teaching. Ultimately, what's really interesting for me is the work's discursive potential, and sometimes that happens in the most direct way when discussing somebody else's work. In an academic setting, the context for the discursive is provided. It is an opportunity for a conversation about works that I haven't made, but feel equally engaged in. Discursive doesn't mean conversations only, but also meeting people over the terms of their work, collaborating on a research or critical inquiry, doing projects together possibly. There is an endless opportunity for productions of the discursive.

For instance, at Skowhegan, where, as you know, I've been teaching in the fresco studio, we'll meet over learning a very specific technique. Most people who come to learn have never tried fresco before, and it's quite a demanding process. There is a limited little window of what can be done in fresco. The workshop becomes about the experience of these six or seven people, who form a temporary group, and spend together one day of intense learning. In the end, it is not only about fresco. It is also about the specific commonality, which occurs and somehow opens up other commonalities that you might not have paid attention to, or otherwise not been able to discover.



JD: I think of your seasonal role as Skowhegan's fresco master in terms of a liminal being or hybrid. There you are artist and instructor, interloper and community member, facilitator and, to a certain extent, participant. How does this particular circumstance influence the work you've made there, or the work you've made elsewhere?

DB: I think it has influenced a great deal. I'm very interested in this category of the "migrant" that Julia Kristeva talks about: a person who moves from one language to another, from one culture to another, and becomes multilingual and this necessitates translation of the whole individual experience into the second language. One is learning everything anew, and through that process reinventing oneself. Most of the words between two languages can be vaguely of proximity to each other, but ultimately there is a contextual experience that you cannot reach, or translate, unless you know both languages and you've learned them in both cultures. This brings me back to the question of the hybrid. You acquire a kind of hybrid mind, or hybrid relation to maybe everything. Simultaneous roles are the ones in which you experience reality. That whole notion between who is the instructor and who is the learner, who is the author and who is the reader become interchangeable within the activity.



Daniel Bozhkov, *Sigmund Jähn Kabob Stand/Sigmund Jähn Park*, 2008. Life size sculpture of Sigmund Jähn (the first German to fly in space), kabob van, second generation Turkish-German kabob sellers, surveillance camera, TV set, 22 min musical composition in collaboration with the composer Yotam Haber. Photo by Daniel Bozhkov. Images courtesy of the artist.

JD: You just got back from a visit to Portland State University's Social Practice program. Can you elaborate on your work as social intervention?

DB: The program Social Practices that Harrell Fletcher has started recently invited me to give a lecture. It is amazing to me how this program functions so well - in relation to Harrell's own work, as somebody who proposed that program, but also in relation to that city. Portland is, in a weird way, like the city of tomorrow. The traditional centers on the West Coast, like L.A. or San Francisco, are already too expensive and crowded, already determined. Portland seems open.

JD: And how do you relate to the ideologies of relational aesthetics and social practice?

DB: I am curious about the arguments, and I am also wary about the narrowing possibilities

of that terminology. I personally don't consider, let's say, conviviality as the most important outcome of my work, or its goal, or the measure of its success. I'm completely open, if it makes sense for the project, to actually hire somebody to do something. At the same time, participation, collaborative interaction, and particularly the discursive possibility of the work interest me very much.

JD: How do you feel about social practice being placed under the umbrella of academic training?

DB: It's a kind of a paradox. When I saw Harrell's class, which was terrific, I was asking myself how he does it. Those collaborative sets of operants and objectives are usually functional when they work in the periphery, on the sites of the marginal and the private - in subcultures, and very small self-organized communities. What happens when you put them in the center and start taking them apart? Can they lose something of their directness and urgency? I am not saying that useful investigation of the structural commonalities of social practices do not exist. You know, the exhibition at the Guggenheim, *theanyspacewhatever*, is perhaps important as something that points to how the museum is an impossible place to present these practices. The show fails, presents itself as a kind of a paradox, but maybe that's exactly how it succeeds. And, talking about the academic world, especially in the case of Harrell's class, the great thing is that their meetings seem to happen as much on practical as on speculative terms.



Daniel Bozhkov, *Rainmakers Workshop*, 2006-2007. Rain water-collection tower, truck,

garden, garden labels, pond. Photo by Tom Leninger. Image courtesy of the artist.

JD: The 2007 exhibition at the University of North Texas surveyed your work from the past decade. What happens to your work when it's remounted or exhibited in a location completely other than where it had been originally designed to be seen?

DB: I was surprised how they were informing each other, almost like the links that happen within the individual projects start happening between the projects. For instance Darth Vader, who is this masculine villain, started connecting to Hemingway and then Larry King. They become some kind of 'brotherhood of the debased' or something. It was an interesting spillage that happened from piece to piece, maybe because many of the projects are so porous anyway and their boundaries are not very clear. It actually made me realize how I'm not interested in the ending of any of them or where exactly is the boundary, which could also be problematic. Heidegger talks about how specific things only fully manifest themselves at their boundaries, so something not having boundaries is close to something that doesn't quite exist. Maybe that's the kind of immateriality I might be more interested in. There is a different degree of fluidity assumed.

JD: Your work has been described as "sublimely silly," "squirrely," "funny," "absurdly earnest," and "spontaneous." Can you talk a bit about the levity behind the buoyancy?

DB: "Levity behind the buoyancy." This is a congregation of two terms that are oxymoronic next to each other. In some of my work there is that initial, not drive, but outcome that has to do with deflation of power. There are power structures and particular power conglomerates around us. I don't necessarily mean power of the state but, for instance, the power of meaning to crystallize and not allow any other interpretation. It seems to me that I have an impetus to deflate that. Sometimes, in a very profound situation of deep sadness, there's even more room, something really ridiculous seems to be part of it too. This extra space, this possibility for another turn, has something to do with the power of oxymoron.



Daniel Bozhkov, *Eau d'Ernest*, 2005. 1000 bottles of 100ml of eau de toilette trying to capture the smell of Ernest Hemingway, participation in Hemingway Look-A-Like competition in Key West Florida, TV commercial, posters. Photo by Suleyman Cacar. Image courtesy of the artist.

There is an absurd side of the 'necessity for existence.' On one level, everything that exists justifies its own existence - it exists because it does. The fact that it's there proves that it needs to be there. On another level, the whole system of trying to understanding this is completely absurd. In the most serious questions of life and death there is not only dark, but an absurd and ridiculous side as well. And I just can't avoid it. It just comes out. In Bulgaria,

for instance, there's been an early medieval heresy, the Bogomils. They were Christian dualists who were told that the world was created by the God and the Devil at the same time. So there are negative things created by the negative, and positive by the positive. They have this apocryphal saying, "I believe in God, but I don't trust Him." The first part of that sentence is like a credo, the second part completely deflates that. Maybe they're saying, "I don't trust the human mind that speculates about God." On one hand I have moments when I experience the profound level of interconnectedness of everything. On another I don't trust my drive to completely comprehend it, because I appreciate that it's enormous, it's inexhaustible. My attempt to know it is ridiculous because I'm ill-equipped. In some of my works you see me experiencing this limitation.

JD: Unlike other artists who may use humor as an entryway into explorations of more ambiguous space, you see this absurdity or this silliness as being integral to the weightiness?

DB: Oh, absolutely - no, definitely. It's part of the attempts to know, really. The absurd humor is not simply playing the part of the comic relief. I mean, Dostoyevsky is one of the darkest writers I've read, or Kafka, and there is a lot of deeply absurd humor there. You know how sometimes Monty Python reaches this very profound moment of "we don't know what's happening here," it's just so out there, it's painfully silly, and, at the same time, you experience certain exhilaration that cuts through the limits of reason. Or Andy Kaufman with his 'have-beens' talk show, and his "inter-gender wrestling matches." He introduces a freshly minted incoherence into the most banal situations, which we think that we know all too well.