

Phone interview with Houben Tcherkelov and Georgi Tushev

Artists from the Bulgarian radical arts scene based in New York about their desire to “live in a real world”

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After quite some time of ringing on the other side, Houben picks up the phone. Tushev joins us for a bit despite being down with the flu.

Can you describe the space you are in?

HT: Right now I'm here in a huge loft, it's like 7000 sqft, which is pretty much like 300 m² or something like that. It's a former factory, a meal factory, I don't know. It's our life and work space. We're a couple of guys.

Together with Georgi Tushev?

Yes, he's over there. Do you want to hear from him?

Yes, sure.

GT: Hi!

How do you feel in New York?

At the moment I'm ill. This place is huge, but it's cold!

Are you happy in New York?

Oh, yes, definitely... it's interesting, that's the right definition for it. I don't know if I'm happy or not.

Why are you there? What made you choose to go to New York?

It's a long, long... list of reasons to be here. First... ok the galleries are here. The center of the art world, if we can talk about a center... the most interesting stuff happens here. And I'm interested in New York and New Jersey hardcore, the bands, so I'm quite often at some dance and concerts.

Which bands?

... I have a girlfriend here. Couple of reasons. It's enough, right? My friends are here also, my best friends.

In Bulgaria, you were a superstar. Why did you choose to leave and go to New York?

Really? Is it possible to be a superstar in Bulgaria?

HT: In Sofia, everything is fake, so I was kind of a fake superstar. Everything is fake, nothing is real over there. So... we decided just to move, to leave this... Bulgaria. I don't really feel myself like a Bulgarian artist. I mean, I'm Bulgarian, but I don't think it's something very important, to be Bulgarian, or Eastern European, stuff like that. I don't like the Bulgarian art, or stuff like that. This conceptual or... I don't know. It's so stupid; it's ridiculous, really. So, right now I'm pretty much happy to be here... I feel great.

Do you have a possibility in the United States to be the advertising faces of Lucky Strike?

Oh, no, no, no. No, no. Nothing, no. Simply I work doing interior design, stuff like that, just like pay job, but... no, to work for Lucky Strike... first of all, it's pretty much illegal to advertise cigarettes, tobacco, tobacco products here.

Yes, the times are achanging...

It's very, very cruel... it's... actually, I quit smoking, like, five months ago.

Congratulations!

Yes, it's not... it's not healthy.

To what extent do you feel “radical”, in the States? I mean, you certainly were in Sofia.

Oh, radical. I don't know. It's pretty tough to be radical because everything is so radical here. I mean, the most radical part coming from the government, from... you know, the military guys. So the artists here is like, not that radical... it can't be. You know, it's very tough competition. But you got artists like Eminem, you know,

Flare, stuff like that... for visual artists it's not that... you know, it's not that possible.

You are being missed on the Bulgarian scene! You left a hole there when you left.

Look, I don't know. There is a lot of good artists over there, and a lot of good persons, too. I don't think that there's going to be a huge problem, no, not at all. I mean, I spent – and George also – like ten years to doing art and stuff like that and finally... so what? We're supposed to move, I mean, it's nothing... nothing really could be possible happen over there. So, I'm pessimist about that.

What are your dreams in life, and in what context you think you can realize them?

Hmm, I'd like to earn money doing art, and to live like a normal person. If it's possible at all, I don't know. But... to live in a normal country. I mean, I don't want to be afraid because of my life or life-style, stuff like that. I don't... simply I'd like to live normal, to travel a lot and... you know... to have fun.

What is for you the American dream?

Wow... to be successful, to... I mean, to be able to sell artwork for a price over 20000 US dollars. That's the American dream. That's very commercial, but...you know... here it's almost impossible to think about... I mean, if I don't think about money and success, I rather stay in Bulgaria to live like, happy life, if it's possible.

Can you tell us something about your context in New York? Like who do you work with, whom do you see every day? What is your context in New York?

Actually I work pretty much by myself. I'm working here in my studio. I don't see a lot of people, but... you know, during the night, usually we spend a lot of time in East Village and West Village drinking and we... Actually I got a lot of friends from... I was in one so-called AM program, "Artists in the marketplace" it's called here in a number of museums so I got a lot of friends there and... so we see each other and drinking and talking about... the art, how difficult it is, you know, the regular stuff, but... you

know, sometimes less alcoholic, much more... you know, bad conversations.

You probably still follow what is going on in Sofia, you have certainly heard of the new project by Ventsislav Zankov, "White straight male"...

Yeah, I heard about that.

How would you comment on this project, looking at it from your new context?

First of all this project is typical for Bulgaria, not for Western world. It's related with Bulgarian complex of inc... impossible to be understand like... on a regular basis, like we... spread Bulgarians, a lot of Bulgarians are out of that: "Look, I'm very conservative, and straight, and stuff like that, and nobody understands me." – which is so stupid, or ridiculous, I don't know. But this context is typical Bulgarian. I'm... I'm against that. I don't know if you understand, but... As far as I know, this project is for people who are proud to be... to live in isolation... Am I right? I'm not proud of that. I'm living in a real world. So I do some kind of effort every day to stay in the Western world, and to be accepted as a normal person without my complexes.

How do you feel you manage with this?

Difficult, difficult. It's very difficult, but you should supposed to put some effort on that, you know. It's worth it. Because it's not a matter of one month or one year, it's... let's say, maybe after five years or ten years I could say that I'm accepted from the other, from the regular, you know, Americans, like American also.

Can you describe some concrete problems that you are fighting with?

First of all, you know, the language... it's not that difficult, but every, actually every Bulgarian gives this kind of strange... pronunciation, you know, it's the accent. Which is ok, but it's not that... you know, it's... it's better not to have an accent.

So people react strangely when they notice your accent, for instance?

Yes, because they... it's a very few Bulgarians over there, and they... it's very hard to locate where you come from, actually. Bulgaria is a small country, very small population, and here there is no... there is not any kind of Bulgarian artist... probably Christo... Christo is Bulgarian, but he's like Americans for... you know, twenty years, or thirty years. But since that... there is not much Bulgarian stuff, over there, so I suppose to prove that this country is part of Europe, first of all that... then that you are normal, you know, everything... so... I don't know, it's not much stuff.

How do you imagine your future, how do you wish it to become?

Hmm... I don't know. So, marry for a rich woman, you know, just... I don't know, to earn money, to live and to, to work, and that's... that's it! So, like, to spend my life in a desert island... you know... No! I would like to stay here in New York for as much as I can, and... yeah, to work.