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**DANIEL
BOZHKO**

Daniel Bozhkov studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Sofia, Bulgaria, where he was trained in the traditional painting techniques of fresco, egg tempera and oil painting. He has worked on numerous murals and frescoes in Bulgaria and abroad.

CYRUS W. SMITH OF ART TALK AM IN CONVERSATION WITH

DANIEL BOZHKOV

JANUARY 12, 2009

Daniel Bozhkov studied at the Academy of Fine arts in Sophia, Bulgaria, where he was trained in the traditional painting techniques of fresco, egg tempera and oil painting. He then moved to the United States to pursue a graduate degree at Hunter College in New York City. Bozhkov's describes his interdisciplinary, interactive and multifaceted projects as "positive subversions," often addressing cultural issues with a bit of absurdity and play. He teaches at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Columbia University, Yale University and Rhode Island School of Design and was the recipient of the 2007 Chuck Close Rome Prize of the American Academy in Rome.



CYRUS SMITH I thought I'd introduce you with your own project about introductions, a project you did with a Wal-Mart called "Training In Assertive Hospitality." Can you describe how you got involved with a Wal-Mart? Why you might have been working there?

DANIEL BOZHKOV

I was in Germany when I heard this program talking about a new Wal-Mart opening in Germany, back in 1999. And in the program, the speaker was talking about the greeter as having this very special function. I was struck by how interesting it might be, to be paid to greet people, and what would that feel like. I was attracted to the discomfort of that position. So the project started from there. I went to the nearest Wal-Mart, where I was at the time, where I was teaching at Skowhegan, in central Maine, and I ended up working over three summers as a people greeter in that Wal-Mart.

CS And so this is as an art project. A lot of people get a job at Wal-Mart for a summer



as a greeter, but you actually transformed it into a pretty elaborate project, right?

DB Yes. Well, working as a greeter was also a way of getting in. Wal-Mart is this quite tight system. There are things that are not allowed, and don't belong there; it's actually very worked-out, and regimented. Part of the project was finding what can you do that doesn't belong there, and what would that do? So with the help of the other greeters, I actually painted a fresco at the layaway department there. That was how the project started.

CS So you took on the role as a worker to kind of get your foot in the door and start figuring out your own place in the Wal-Mart industry?

DB Right. And also that moment of: How do you belong to a place, or your job in particular? It's so absurd, and in a way discomfoting from the beginning because people know that when you say "Good morning, welcome to Wal-Mart," you're actually paid to do that. So do you actu-

ally greet? Slowly you become part of the group too, so you become Daniel the People-Greeter.

CS One reason I wanted to use this project to introduce your work, is because you're using this traditional form in the fresco, actually painting a fresco inside of the Wal-Mart. You have a very particular and traditional set of training in art, but then you're doing something really different with it.

DB Well, the traditional training for me is not only a beginning point, but something to almost get rid of, in a way. I studied in a very rigorous, almost renaissance studio. The whole thing was really oriented around not only old painting methods, but also ways of thinking about images and visuality. After I graduated I didn't know what to do with it. But now, through projects like *Training in Assertive Hospitality*, that kind of training becomes a way of bringing something in that doesn't quite belong in the world of the mechanically reproduced. When something like that enters the world of mechanical reproduc-

possibility for de-alienating product, in a way. It reverses something there; it creates this pocket of deficiency in a system that functions all too well.

CS I was also hoping to ask you about this specifically because I know you're an educator as well. You've moved on to conceptual concerns, if that's a way to put it, but are still using this classic training. I've been thinking also about the value of classic training in art. How much, or how little you stick to that in your own practice as an educator?

DB The thing is, the second part of my education I went to Hunter in New York, and that is as conceptual of a school as you can get. I studied very closely with Robert Morris, so that whole lineage of minimalism is the other side of my makeup as an artist. And on top of that, there is the discursive side of what education can actually provide. Part of it originates or happens in some kind of an academic environment, but that's almost an excuse for conversation, or a particu-

lar kind of exchange. So I'm interested in that concentration, that a school provides, for instance.

CS So the process, whatever it is you're learning, is a jumping off point for the conversation... Is that what you're saying? And that maybe the conversation is what you're becoming more interested in?

DB Yes, and not only conversation, per se, but more like this discursive exchange that happens when several people work together on the same project. That is the reason some of these old practices are good that way, because they engage. It's a modernist kind of fiction, the lonely genius in their studio. It's actually very far from these traditional practices. You need at least five people to prepare the materials, because even if you know how to do it, if you prepare it yourself, there's no time left to paint. The territory is discursive, but it's not only the conversation only.

CS An amount of interdependence.

DB Yes, very important.

(break for music)

CS So you wanted to say a thing or two about the piece we just listened to?

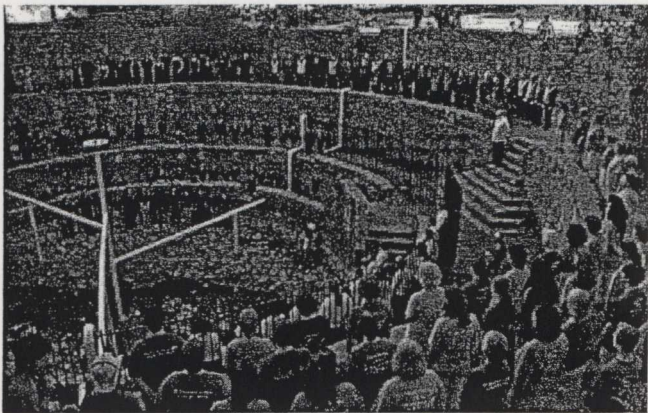
DB Yes. We were listening to the clarinetist Ivo Popazov, who played with Winston Marcellas in the early 90's, and he's really amazing. This piece is actually not jazz, it's a traditional folk music. A kind of gypsy funeral/wedding music. I'm very interested in this kind of music. I worked a couple of times with composers to extend it and try to understand what is happening there. It changes rhythm several times throughout the piece. And the rhythm itself is not a traditional three-quarters or halves; it's actually 15/17ths, or something along those lines. But it also changes throughout the piece, so for me there is something very interesting in that genre, that one piece contains several moves within itself.

CS And something related roughly to your upbringing in Bulgaria?

DB It's unique for that kind of music, but there's something about that way of making decisions. Let's say you make a decision. That decision provides a particular kind of structure of choices. Then half-way through, you actually make a next decision, which is within that structure, but actually shifts to another one, another rhythm. That ability to evade capture, it's a very interesting side of this music.

CS Which I think would make sense when thinking about how you produce projects. You're moving and shifting around, discovering as you go. And you move to a place, right? And then kind of work out the project from your experience in that place.

DB Yes. It's important for the whole thing not to end, because when something starts wrapping around itself, or around its own logic, something ends about it. I'm much more interested in the possibility for something to continue; not necessarily to keep reproducing itself, but more to know that there is not the end to it.



CS To have a life, maybe?

DB Right. That open-ended lack of closure, almost lack of answer at the end.

CS We were starting to talk about interdependence with your work. One example of that was brought to us by Regine Basha, a curator you worked with at Arthouse in Austin, Texas, which also has to do with music. I was hoping you could describe the many layers of that project.

DB Very briefly, the whole project is called *The Rainmaker's Workshop* and it happened in two different cities, Austin and Denton, near Dallas. There were two different major sites of it. One was a congregation of twelve choirs that gathered in one place, singing but also mostly listening. So, one choir at a time sings while the others listen. That part of the project was called *Cantata for Twelve Choirs and Several*

IMAGES // Top: Daniel Bozhkov, *Cantata for Twelve Choirs and Several Salamanders*. 2006. Bottom: Daniel Bozhkov, *Rainmaker's Workshop*. 2006–2007

Salamanders. And then the other site, in Denton, actually has a rainwater collection tank, and a garden that is being sustained by it. But the garden itself is made by a truck with an elevated bed that came and delivered a lot of soil, stayed, and then the garden grew up with the soil still in the truck. In other words, the project has several locations but also it's almost like a conduit in a way because there were maybe 80 people involved in it and another 250 choir members.

CS One question I wanted to ask in relation to that. With an institution and a curator, kind of helping organize with you... what do you look for in a curator? As somebody who's working in the way that you work, coordinating multiple choirs, creating a garden, negotiating different sites. What helps you be able to do that?

DB Well, the question of a curator is interesting because it's very important who that person is, in terms of openness and understanding of how the work goes, and how much from the beginning it doesn't

actually know where it's going. It almost finds itself. And not only finds itself, but at some point even kind of eats itself up as well. Because some strands of it you have to give up on, or get rid of as well. So that project Regine Basha and I did together. Half of it was going and exploring these different strands of it, actually going and meeting people and seeing how much they could be a part. This amazing process, that almost didn't end up with any kind of conviviality, but more like some kind of weird archeology of the social realm.

CS I've heard you describe this method as relating to the parable of a rainmaker, which is where the name of this project comes from.

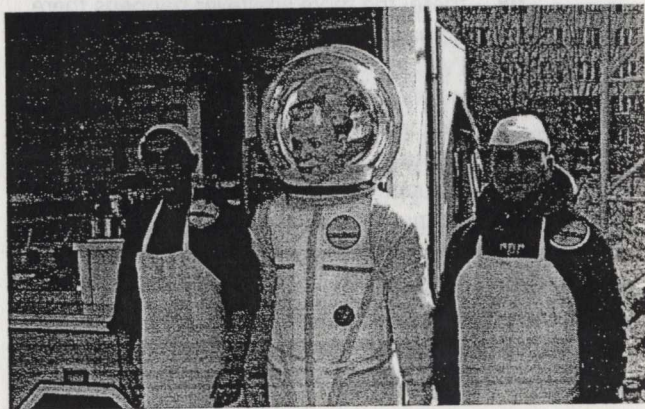
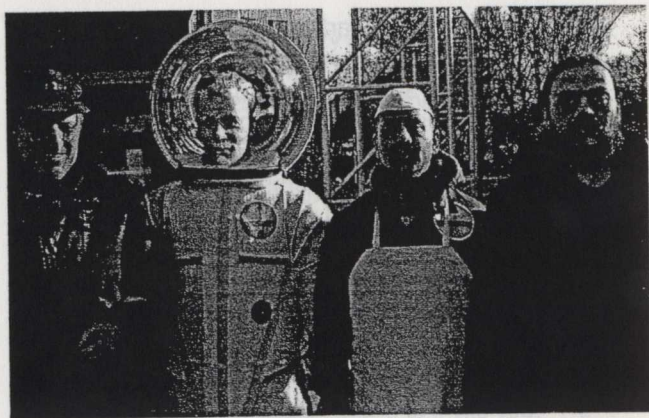
DB Yes, it's an old parable of this village, which was really in trouble for months because there was a big drought. And by the way, this project was done in Texas, which has a very strange climate, where you have two months of the year when it rains cats and dogs, and you have ten months

that are mostly drought. So anyway, the villagers were suffering from this prolonged drought and the village medicine man couldn't himself help, so they had to invite the rainmaker, who comes and deals with the problem. So the rainmaker came and stayed for a few days, and just closed himself into a house at the end of the village. By the end of the third or fourth day, the rain started. So the villagers went to him, very excited, and said, "You have to tell us how to do that, because next time we can't afford to invite you." He said, "The question was not what I did, but what I didn't do. When I came in, I realized the village had de-aligned itself with everything around. So the only option I had was to align myself as much as possible with all the surroundings there, and by the time I succeeded on the fourth day it started raining." So there's that assumption that everything is incredibly connected, and sometimes your personal decisions of a very small scale will affect something on a larger scale, and for me, particularly, how that has to do with the idea of not doing. That kind of non-doer as

an active participant, somebody who is not necessarily an observer, who is actually very active, but he's a part of producing things. He or she is more like a non-doer.

CS And you as an artist making those choices, when and where to act and how to situate yourself. That is something I see in your work, how you're situating yourself culturally, or how you are in relation to these different cultures. How these different cultures are colliding.

DB Right, and sometimes the less you do there, the more whatever happens there actually works. Again, most of the things I've been doing in the last few years are in different locations and have a lot to do with traveling and arriving from somewhere else. I feel myself as kind of an intruder-visitor, who doesn't necessarily do much. But because I happen to be there, suddenly all the things that always had been happening there suddenly are aligned in a different way. Not necessarily more clear, but you can see them in a different way. For instance, like *Training*

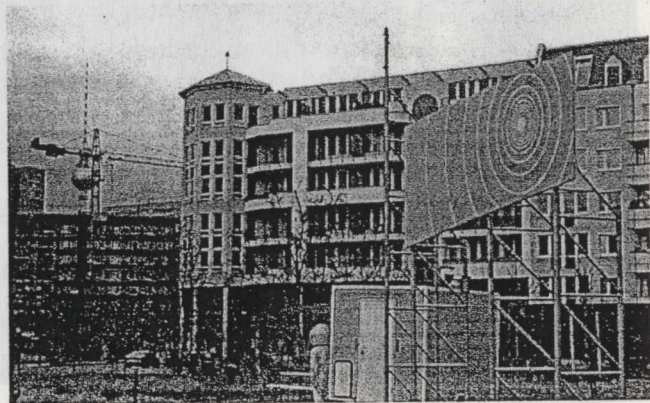
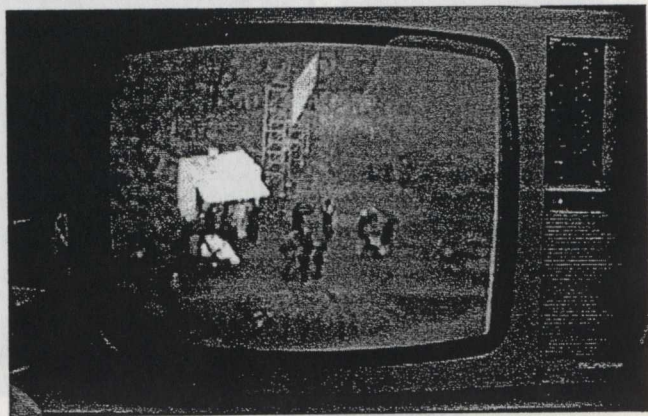


in *Assertive Hospitality*, at some point Wal-Mart had to call me after four years of the piece being there, and actually had to get rid of it. Wal-Mart globally was changing its colors from blue and gray to beige and tan. So, you put something there that doesn't belong, and there is this, almost, accelerated archeology. And suddenly the system couldn't handle it, threw it out as a foreign body.

CS So we're talking about examples where you're living in a place and developing a project. But this might be a good time to bring up the tours that you give, where you're choosing not to get to know a place. Giving a tour of a town from what you collect right when you get to town basically.

DB Yes, the piece is called *Fastest Guided Tours of Unfamiliar Places*. I've done

IMAGES /// Daniel Bozhkov, *Sigmund Jähn Kabob Stand/Sigmund Jähn Park*. (A 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 minute musical composition in collaboration with the composer Yotam Haber.) 2008.



them in several places around the world. Towns I've never been before, and that I don't know much about. The first one was in Vilnius, Lithuania. I had no clue other than some cliché of what Lithuania might be like. I usually arrive the same day, read through some guidebooks for half an hour or something, and I lead a tour through some of the main places that you're kind of, not to miss. We usually advertise it through tourist agencies in advance, that a tour like that will happen. So you find the people who want to take that fast guided tour of a place, which is this peculiar group of people. The whole piece becomes a tour of the people who take the tour. This small group, that for half an hour comes together and has to run through particular kinds of information.

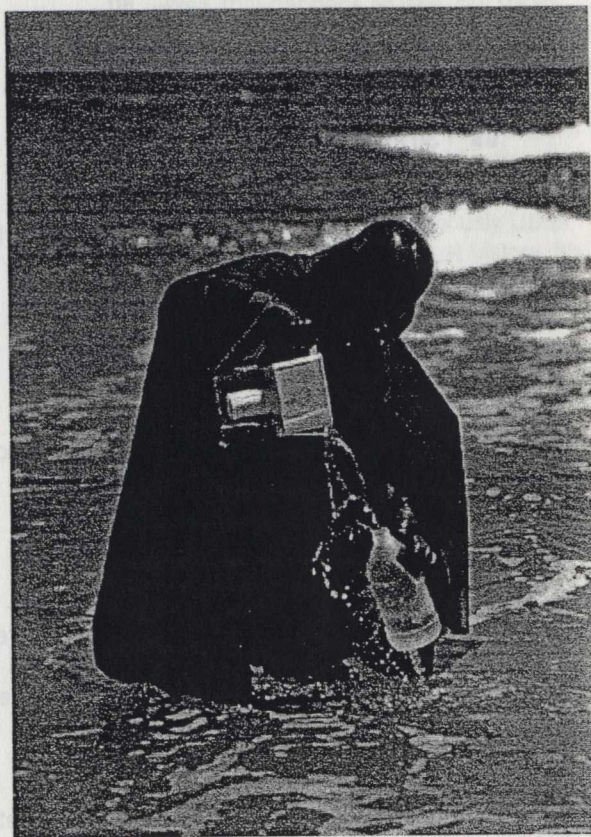
CS Some examples? I'm guessing it's fairly strange, like the blind leading the blind right?

DB Well, that happens as well, but for instance in Lithuania I didn't know that Vilnius had its own holocaust night, comparable to anything that happened in Germany. In one night ten thousand people were killed, taken in trucks. And that's almost not to be seen in the town of Vilnius. There are very few plaques. Obviously Lithuanians are not proud of that history. It's not easy to find out about it. So anyway, when I was doing the tour and we were going from this church to that museum, running and slowly jogging through the city with a flag and a few people behind, and it turned out that two of the people who were taking the tour were this mother and daughter, and the mother's uncle was actually somebody who was a survivor of that. He left before that happened, but the whole family was killed. So five minutes down the line this lady asked me, like, "how long have you been doing this?" And I said, "I just came this morning." So from that kind of absurd encounter like that, suddenly by the end of the tour we all cried; it was a very profound experience of a very personal, moving story of a family

being depleted like that. These traveling platforms of possibilities that might happen like that.

CS So another project that I want to get to, that I think is related, as far as situating yourself, was a recent project in Berlin, that had something to do with a food cart, right?

DB Right. A project called *Sigmund Jahn Kebab Stand*, *Sigmund Jahn Park*, and it happened in Berlin. It's actually in the so-called "death-zone" between the two parts of the wall. They couldn't agree who owned what, so since 1990 the whole place was left to deteriorate. And in this case, many things have started growing, and it's kind of wild but it's in the middle of the city. But the project I did was basically a food cart with a life-sized sculpture of the first German cosmonaut, Sigmund Jahn, because last year was the thirty year anniversary of the first German in space, which was part of this kind of Soviet intercosmos international program that included all the soviet satellites. So at that



time, in 1978, having the country divided, this was the first major event where somebody was celebrated as German, not East German or West German. So Sigmund Jahn is this anticipation for the unification of Germany in a way, but in a very odd way because, again, it was less for West Germany than for East Germany. He was a propaganda figure.

CS Speaking of odd, I guess I was just wanting to get you talking, at some point, on the notion of absurdity. The fact that you're pairing up a German cosmonaut with a kebab stand, which doesn't exactly fit. Maybe you could talk about why those things are connected and what that says about the project.

DB For me it's actually just at the brink of being a connection, when two things are so far apart. When it's difficult to find a connection between them, then the connection is the most productive, I think. I have another

IMAGE // / Daniel Bozhkov, *Darth Vader trying to clean the Black Sea water through a Britta filter.* 2000.

piece that is *Darth Vader trying to clean the Black Sea water through a Britta filter.*

- CS** Yes, where you scoop up the black sea water with a Britta filter.
- DB** Yes, and pour it into another bottle, and pour the bottle back into the sea. So there is this loop. That's another one of those kind of stretched out fields that are just about to break, in a way. Suddenly something is being highlighted there that otherwise you wouldn't know was there.
- CS** And these loose ends.
- DB** Right.

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WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS
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This interview took place January 12th, 2009, live on KPSU, in conjunction with the PSU MFA Monday Night Lecture Series.

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