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Voices (Towards Other Institutions) #6



Gathering collapse by Varvara Gevorgizova (2020)

Living separately and living together

How do we live together? This question usually refers both to the numerous universal utopias of the “good life” and to the ethics of small communities that create forms of life that are alternative to mass society. But in the era of the pandemic, we have gained experience of “living together” in its naked, direct form: through social media full of fear and aggression, in apartment buildings with thin walls, or in overcrowded hospitals. Life together appeared not as an object of desire, but as a reality that is impossible without the presence of the others.

The quarantine regime has brought to the extreme the main tragic

paradox of the present society - the possibility of “loneliness in the crowd”. The existence of others forced us to abandon our usual way of life, entailed the loss of our jobs and the opportunity to be together with loved ones and friends. Locked in our apartments, however, we were never alone with ourselves - others remained with us as a ghost, a threat and a heavy reminder of our weakness and imperfection. It seems that it was during the pandemic that we were able to fully appreciate Sartre’s famous phrase “hell is the other people” from his play “Behind Closed Doors” (a very apt title to speak about the current state of affairs).

In the form of living together that contemporary market society offers us, each of us individually turns only into an object for projections of other people’s desires and for the game of ruthless circumstances. The alternative to this society should begin with finding oneself, one’s own subjectivity. In other words, in order to find the freedom to choose a truly good life, it is necessary to raise the question: how to live separately? How can one return to a life that is not devoted to the execution of others’ orders and is not enslaved to endless guilt for not meeting the prevailing standards of success and recognition?

Historically, culture has pretended to offer the possibility of such a free and universal development of a personality, where the other turns from an obstacle to your freedom into its necessary condition. Today, the solution to this challenge - the return of the ability to live apart (and thus truly live together with others) - is inconceivable without acquiring public space, both in common political protest (as we see it today in America) and in the framework of cultural institutions.

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