On what it means to identify as an artist

Artist and musician Lizzi Bougatsos discusses the pleasures of collaboration, what it means to identify as an artist, and why it's good to always have multiple creative outlets.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2564 words.

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In addition to your work in Gang Gang Dance, you're a visual artist, a writer, and a frequent collaborator with different artists and musicians. Have you always been someone who needs to be working on a lot of different things at the same time?

Yes. I am that person who has the art books on one the side of the bed and Hot 97 playing over on the other side, you know? I've always been that person. I need a little bit of everything, all the time. I have always been chastised for being that person. I've always been told to focus, in a very military-like way, on one thing. But if I don't have my hands in all these different pots and pans, then I just can't function. I know that sounds really crazy, but that's just how it is. I can't really do it any other way.

As a band, Gang Gang Dance resembles an ongoing art project. It seems built into the DNA of the group that there's this eagerness to mutate, change, improvise, and try new things. Given the nature of your music, has the actual working process within the band changed radically over time?

We like to experiment, but the recurring work patterns we have tend to drive me insane, actually. We had a long hiatus after our last record; during that time I really got to focus on myself and go off to do art residencies and apply for grants and make solo music and reach out to anybody I wanted to collaborate with. With Gang Gang I always have to check in with five other people in everything that I do, because the creative forces are so vibrant. Everyone has their own thing going on in that band. It's wild. It was amazing that I got to go off and do my own stuff, and now, when I'm devoting five hours to practice, I try to make sure that every hour before that is me time. I really have to push it. With so much happening with the band now, it means every hour is so precious. It's been feeling really good, but it's a balance—you sacrifice one thing to do the other thing, you go where the energy is.

Gang Gang has been an ongoing project for almost 15 years. With so many creative people in the group, does it ever feel like everyone is struggling to get their own point across and be heard? Does that sort of thing become less stressful when you've been doing it for so long?

I wish it was less stressful, but when it's my passion project and something is *not* working for some reason, it hurts my heart. But I think that's how it should feel. Otherwise, what are you doing? You have to know when to push and when not to. We're setting up some shows right now and there are certain people who I want to play with us, but it might not happen. It just kills me that I can't have it happen, because I feel so strongly about it. But sometimes you just have to drop it. You have to learn when to just say, "Okay, I'm going to put down this fight. I'm just going to let it go."

It must be freeing to have your own art practice that is unconnected to the band. When you have a variety of concepts you want to explore creatively, it's nice that that don't all have to go through the prism of this one specific outlet.

It is beautiful, but it's lonely. I think that's why I never became a painter, because it's so lonely. At the end of the day, I also just realized that I'm really a people person. In my mind, I've been waiting to paint my whole life. I don't know how long I can be on a stage. I was sort of saving this time later in my life to paint, but I never took a painting class, which is something that I always meant to do. I've only had an actual studio once in my life, which was such a pleasure. I can't wait to do it again. I can't wait to get a studio. I figure I can transition into a more solitary kind of art making when the time is right, when I'm at the right place in my life.

So it's the loneliness factor that has kept you from it so far?

A little bit, yeah. Also, I think it's just more fun to work with other people. Now that I'm getting older I am realizing that I really want the alone time—like, now I *really* want that. I need the space to write. I need a room to be alone. I didn't need that as much when I was younger.

I was talking to someone recently, a visual artist, who said, "I always felt kind of embarrassed when people asked me what I did. I would never say I was an artist, because it felt weirdly embarrassing to say out loud. I was always afraid they would roll their eyes at me." How do you feel about that? Do you self-identify as an artist?

I do now, but I didn't always. Now I'm finally owning being an artist, owning what that actually means. I know I'm a true artist, and I know that that's where I lay my head at night.I always identified with being a worker, because I feel like my struggle has always been about working at my craft. Also, my father is a cobbler, and my mother pushed me to study all the time. I still feel like I'm just constantly studying, and I love that. I prefer to consider myself as a worker, because I just feel like it's more humble.

What does it mean to be an artist now? I mean, anyone who makes anything is an artist. Everyone is an artist. It takes so much for somebody to really make a mark though. In many ways, it just feels so nihilistic and narcissistic and selfish, considering the state of things. And maybe to really be a successful artist you need to be selfish… but I never really was a selfish person. I'm the most generous person in the world. I never really had anything, and I'd give everything away. I feel like my life is like the poor people's campaign, and everybody knows it. I'm just always broke. But I know that it's going to be okay tomorrow, you know what I mean? I've just always been *that* person.

People that romanticize what it means to be a struggling artist in NYC are almost always people who have never actually done it.

It's a funny thing. I've almost always been in bands with people who never had a day job. They never took a day job. Our guitarist was a bartender for a long time, but most of my male friends who are visual artists have not had a day job, while I always had one. I'm working at a gallery now and this is like my office. The woman that runs the gallery said to me, "You know, you don't work for me. You lend me your time." I like that. That's kind of how I've always worked. I would get resentful towards my bandmates about it in the past. But I think that real success is when your work actually becomes a pleasure, and vice versa. Right now my work is a pleasure.

When you're juggling a bunch of projects, plus trying to piece together enough money to live, how do you keep from burning out or just having a breakdown? How do you reset your dials when everything starts to feel overwhelming?

I have some rituals that I do. Sometimes it's research. I'll investigate what herbs I can plant for the bees outside of my window, or I'll go take a bath. Maybe I'll go to Enchantments and look at astrology for a second. I'll have a little mystical time-out.

I make a point to go and see the things that give me pleasure whenever I'm not working. I'll go see a film or go look at a painting that I happen to love. Weirdly, the thing that really helps me is just stuff like doing laundry. I love doing my own laundry.

Being part of a creative community in NYC can also kind of warp your brain. There's always someone who's more successful than you. There's always someone less successful than you. Still, it can be a weird thing to be friends with people who are experiencing out-of-this-world success while, at the same time, you're debating whether or not to splurge on a $10 bottle of wine…

I know exactly what you mean. I have been so incredibly lucky in most ways. Also, I have friends who are very successful who have been so generous to me. It's almost overwhelming at times. I have been that person who only has $10 and is wondering, "Am I going to buy the bottle of wine, or am I going to go buy a slice of pizza? Can I make this $10 stretch for three days?" I'd always end up buying the wine. Anything I could do to relax felt worth it. I think that's why I love wine so much. Also, when I was really down, like in my poorest of days, even if I was *really* down and out, if I still had perfume on, I would feel rich. Do you know what I mean? I would feel luxurious, like I had money. Perfume was always my go-to to make me feel better.

How important is the idea of community, or rather, how important is it to be a part of an artistic community?

Oh god, it's my backbone. It's everything. There is no substitute for it. To be surrounded by amazing people, to be supported by them when you need it, and to be able to support them when *they* need it, is everything. It's really inspiring. I often feel like I'm standing in the middle of this stream of genius.

Like, that's really what it is. Sometimes I think about the people who I've met and the people that are my friends and I just can't believe it. If you put in enough years, and you follow what your friends are doing, you become a part of this community of people, and eventually even a place like NYC becomes like a cushion for you. It takes care of you. Sometimes when you look at your friends and you can see the magnitude of what they have all collectively done… sometimes I have to check my pulse to see if I'm still breathing.

For young artists who are just trying to make work and get someone to pay attention to them, what advice do you have?

I'm a believer in street cred, earning your way, and staying humble. I've had a lot of young girls work for me as assistants. I refuse to call them interns. I call them my helpers. If they're a musician I'll say, "Okay, if you're going to lend me your time, what can I do for you? What could we exchange? Let's barter, you know?" My advice for young artists is to be open to doing anything. You have to be humble and you also have to do things you don't want to do sometimes. It's not always gonna be glamorous or fun, but that's how you form who you are. If something ultimately just doesn't work for you, then get out of it and do the next thing.

That's good advice. I feel like people get trapped in these prisons of their own making, which only really exist in their mind.

It becomes toxic to hear people complain about things that they could actually change if they wanted to. People become addicted to their complaints. I've known so many artists, people who I've worked with, that become addicted to their own misery and equally addicted to complaining about it. It's like, "Okay, how many times can I tell you that you need to stop what you're doing and take a chance? Take a risk." Risk-takers are the only people that I truly admire.

That makes sense, given the kind of work you've done over the years. Even with Gang Gang Dance, everything feels like a risk—like it could go in any direction at any given moment. Live shows often felt like an exchange, or some communal thing that depended equally on the audience. It feels free.

Yes. It feels free. Lately I've been saying, "Let's make New York free again." I think it's freeing up, you know? Like with all the galleries moving back into the East Village. It just feels alive again.

Also, I wanted to say just one more thing about the word "struggle." I know we were talking about struggling as an artist, just trying to get by, but I don't feel like I should really even be allowed to use that word, because other people have truly struggled so much more than I ever have. You just need to keep that in perspective. I was in a bookstore recently and the guy who runs the store gave me this book on capitalism and feminism. I opened the book, and there are all these images of slavery, an image of a black woman being branded. I got so mad—I'm getting angry just talking about it now—thinking about how slavery existed. Suddenly your place in the world, in history, just becomes very real. These are things that still exist. If you are in a position to make art, to wonder about whether or not you can call yourself an artist, then you're already operating from such a fortunate place. It's good to remember that.

Lizzi Bougatsos recommends:

Playing Diamanda Galas records at home alone while cleaning the house. It takes me back to a "NY State of Mind" I've been missing—super Jazzy, but punky Linda Sharrock at the same time.

The Ted Talks article that lists plants that clean the air. Listen to the podcast and go buy the plants.

Listen to Elysia Crampton's song "Children of Hell," produced by Chino Amobi. This song illustrates the dumpster fire times we are living in to a T.

Using a few drops of eucalyptus or lemon oil in the shower for a cheap, invigorating steam.

Duppy Gun's "Miro Tape," is a great mix of beats. It reminds me of Why Timbaland liked Black Dice's beats back in the day. Bring back the mixtape! Oh wait, it's already back. Ha

I Love MC Bin Laden

Bossa Club in Washington D.C. This bar/venue is my dream club. It feels like Zebulon. The best bands play there from all over the world, it makes me want to live in D.C.

**Sakura* by Susumu Yokota. This album is getting me through some things, it especially makes the everyday one's own personal movie.

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