

## Section Two

# INTELLIGENT MATTER

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### **“Social-Distancing” as a Chance to Revise the Paradoxes of Humanistic Philosophy: Personality Vs. Identity in Online Artistic Practices of the Pandemic**

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*In the article, the author investigates the correlations between the bounds of individual freedom and external constraints, aiming to view the present pandemic as an opportunity to study the boundaries of freedom. She supports the point of view, which understands the whole period since the end of the Middle Ages till nowadays as a period of constant liberation of human’s creative forces. Nevertheless, she agrees that the philosophy of humanism contains a paradox in itself. The more one affirms oneself, liberating his/her personality – the more he/she loses this inner self. This loss of self results in a feeling of individual isolation and powerlessness when a personality is dissolved in different behavioral patterns adopted from the outside. The author also pays much attention to distinguishing between the notions of personality and identity. She claims that despite the fact that these two concepts are very close to each other and are often used as synonyms, they still are of different nature, and there is a significant difference between them.*

*Based on the understanding of freedom in Immanuel Kant’s philosophy and Erich Fromm’s approach, the author turns to sociological surveys of the artistic sphere in 2020 to show that despite the obvious loss caused by the pandemics, and the fact that art as a professional sphere suffers a deep crisis, the pandemic has unexpectedly become a stimulus for a search of a new combination of*

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*“personality” and “identity.” Several lockdowns in Europe and the US have suddenly become the stimuli for more personal freedom, which is found in art as a way to break the chain of causality.*

*Keywords: freedom, personality, identity, crisis, pandemic, humanism*

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## Introduction

The situation with COVID-19 produced a response in thinking and theorizing, and lots of theorists have immediately linked the present situation (associated with the lockdown and the politics of social distancing) to Michel Foucault’s ideas. They state that “the disciplinary character of some of these measures is fairly clear” (Hannah et al., 2020). It becomes especially relevant in the light of an open discussion between Giorgio Agamben on the one side and Slavoj Žižek, Jean-Luc Nancy, Sergio Benvenuto, and Panagiotis Sotiris on the other. The discussion started in February 2020, when Giorgio Agamben, basing his work partly on Michel Foucault, compared quarantine measures to the military regime (Peters, 2020: 556). In *Il Manifesto*, he wrote that Covid-19 “had enabled the tendency to use a state of exception as a normal paradigm for government” (Agamben, 2020).

Michel Foucault’s central argument was that the modern state has moved from enforcing its citizens physically to enforcing them psychologically, and the mere possibility of being watched is enough to influence the behavior of most people (Foucault, 1999). This type of *disciplinary society*, according to him, has reached its height at the outset of the twentieth century. And what is especially important in the context of our research is that for Michel Foucault, the idea of being observed (through what he calls “the gaze”) has a negative impact because it creates conformity, and people end up being the same. In other words, it eradicates free will and independent thinking leading to our impossibility to behave spontaneously. Inspired by the ideas of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze introduces his concept of *societies of control*, which he claims have substituted *disciplinary societies* by the end of the twentieth century (Deleuze, 1992).

The aforementioned concerns bring us to the main interest of our present research, that is, to the correlation between the boundaries of individual freedom and the external constraints (such as, for example, the ever-increasing control of power institutions). And while the situation with COVID-19 and lockdowns can be successfully studied through the prism of Foucauldian and Deleuzian paradigms of thinking, it however seems to us more productive to view this situation as an opportunity to investigate the boundaries of individual freedom. We assume that several lockdowns could have become the stimuli for a search of a new combination of “*personality*” and “*identity*.”<sup>1</sup>

In relation to the above, the main targets of our present research are the following:

1. To investigate the growing importance of the notion of personality from the Modern Age to the present day and its correlation with the concept of freedom. Within the bounds of this part of the research, to pay special attention to the paradoxical nature of humanistic philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> Here when we mention the term *identity*, we understand it as *sameness* or *equality*. In other words, “a quality of being identical with a certain group; sharing some qualities or ideas” (Fearon, 1999: 4). Further in this article we discuss the difference between the concepts of *personality* and *identity*.

2. To trace the correlation between external constraints and the boundaries of individual freedom by focusing on the influence of the pandemic and self-isolation on artistic practices.

Therefore, we will start with a short overview of the growing importance of the concepts of *personality* and *individuality*<sup>2</sup> in the Modern Age, which has led to anthropocentrism. We will show that the whole period from the end of the Middle Ages to the end of the twentieth century can be considered a period of constant liberation of human potential. At this stage of the research, we will also point to the main paradox within the philosophy of humanism (or, as Nicolas Berdyaev calls it, the dialectic of humanism (Berdyaev, 2017: 135)). Since we believe that due to this dialectic, a “*personality*” (understood here as a true individual self, which is closely associated with the concept of freedom) has gradually been replaced by some sort of a self, adopted from the outside (which we here call “*identity*”), we further devote our attention to discussing the difference between the concepts of *personality* and *identity*. Having made all the preparatory investigations, we will approach the main issue of our present research, which is the relationship of individual freedom with external constraints. After a brief overview of the understanding of the concept of freedom in Immanuel Kant’s philosophy and Fromm’s approach, we will show how the pandemic and lockdowns have suddenly become the stimuli for more personal freedom. The latter is found in art as a way to break the chain of causality.

### **The dialectic of humanism: personality vs. identity**

The issue of individual freedom referred to above relates directly to the concepts of *personality* and *individuality*. According to Erich Fromm, the concepts of “freedom” and “individuality” become especially relevant and important at the start of the Modern Period, when a person, while getting more and more detached from the group, starts understanding themselves as not only a part of that group, but also as an individual (Fromm, 2013: 20). A person is becoming increasingly focused on their own benefit, gradually getting more separated. This is not the least for economic reasons and is also caused by the growth of cities, communication routes, migration, etc.

According to Erich Fromm, “European and American history since the end of the Middle Ages is the history of the full emergence of the individual. It is a process which started in Italy, in the Renaissance, and which only now seems to have come to a climax” (Fromm, 2013: 26). Of course, this does not mean that the concept of personality has never been a subject of close thinking before the Modern Age. The idea that “Man is the Measure of All Things” has been known since Protagoras, but it is the Modern Age that makes an emphasis on personality a mass phenomenon.

In this context, it is also important that Nickolas Berdyaev, in his book *The Meaning of History*, calls all the history since the Modern Age “a Renaissance period of history,” claiming that it is marked with “liberation of human’s creative forces”: “The entire Modern history is a Renaissance period of history. This historical period is marked with the liberation of human’s creative forces”<sup>3</sup> (Berdyaev, 2017: 125).

Hence, the process of individualization, which started at the meeting point of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, entailed an outlook shift, which has led to anthropocentrism in the

<sup>2</sup> In this research we use these two concepts as synonyms.

<sup>3</sup> The original text: “Вся новая история есть ренессансный период истории. Этот исторический период стоит под знаком отпущения на свободу творческих сил человека” (Berdyaev, 2017: 125)

Modern Age. A human is placed at the center of the world, and everything related to human’s personality, and consequently, freedom becomes an object of close attention of philosophers, writers, and artists.

Thus, humanism as a system of human-oriented spiritual values is naturally associated with the ideas of freedom and liberation, which, from our point of view, reach their climax by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when they find a certain limit in the idea of “incredulity towards metanarratives.” After the efforts of the Renaissance aimed at studying the phenomenon of human beings, the age of the Enlightenment concentrated its efforts on liberating human Reason and trying to subjugate all aspects of existence to the latter. The liberation of Reason was then replaced by *sentiment de l’existence*, introduced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Fukuyama, 2019: 57), and liberation of the sensuous nature of a person, which was later taken up by the romantics. Francis Fukuyama states, that according to Charles Taylor, “This is part of the massive subjective turn of modern culture, a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths” (Fukuyama, 2019: 59). However, the liberation of human’s creative forces did not stop at that point, as the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century dictated the need for further liberation of human beings, bringing to the fore attempts to free people from the authorities of morality, God and the Law, and introducing the ideas of moral relativism, the death of God and existentialism philosophy, which followed.

From our point of view, the postmodern idea of “incredulity towards metanarratives” becomes the final link in the chain of liberations of human potential. This chain started in the Modern Age with the turn to anthropocentrism. Postmodern “incredulity towards metanarratives” liberated people from the very need to make a choice and adhere to a certain worldview. Every aspect of human existence – from literature and the arts to the politics of decolonization, multiculturalism, and transculturalism – places emphasis on liberation from the central dominant idea (political, cultural, ideological, etc.).

On the other hand, paradoxically, the desire for liberation always entails a person’s need to associate themselves with a certain group (based on skin color, gender, social status, etc.). By the end of the twentieth century, there especially increases the need to discuss problems of “identity,” “cultural memory,” “collective trauma,” etc. Erich Fromm calls such desire “escape from freedom” and explains it by feeling individual isolation and powerlessness. He claims that “in our effort to escape from aloneness and powerlessness, we are ready to get rid of our individual self either by submission to new forms of authority or by a compulsive conforming to accepted patterns” (Fromm, 2013: 73).

It is interesting that Nickolas Berdyaev in 1916 also talks about the loss of the center and self in the human’s personality, but unlike Erich Fromm, he explains this loss not by a feeling of personal isolation and powerlessness (which, apparently, is more a consequence rather than the real cause), but by the fact that a person is placed to the center of the universe, i.e., becomes the center of the picture of the world: “Humanism <...> repudiated both ascetic discipline and submission to supernatural principles. It dissipated and exhausted human forces, and thus undermined the authority of the human personality which had ceased to discipline itself and had, as a result, lost consciousness of itself”<sup>4</sup> (Berdyaev, 1949: 179-180). Thus paradoxically, the very fact of placing humans to the center of the world and shifting

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<sup>4</sup> The original text: “Весь гуманистический период истории отрицал аскетическую дисциплину и подчинение высшим, сверхчеловеческим началам. Этот период характеризуется растратой человеческих сил. Растрата человеческих сил не может не сопровождаться истощением, которое, в конце концов, должно привести к потере центра в человеческой личности, личности, которая перестала себя дисциплинировать. Такая человеческая личность должна постепенно перестать ощущать свою самость, свою особость” (Berdyaev, 2017: 171-172).

the focus from higher, supernatural forces to human's personality leads to a person's loss of personality and self, and the replacement of this personality with a set of different kinds of "identities." Berdyaev points to this paradox when speaking about the *dialectic of humanism*: "man's self-affirmation leads to his perdition, the free play of human forces unconnected with any higher aim brings about the exhaustion of man's creative power"<sup>5</sup> (Berdyaev, 1949: 142). And further: "when man follows the path of self-affirmation, ceases to respect the higher principle and asserts his self-sufficiency, he exterminates and denies his true self according to the laws of an inexorable inner dialectic"<sup>6</sup> (Berdyaev, 1949: 154-155).

Thus, it turns out that "personality" as a true individual self is becoming increasingly indistinct to finally be lost and replaced by some sort of a self, imposed or adopted from the outside; by "an abstract person," or, better say, "identity" or a set of "identities."

This is, of course, not something new that became obvious in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Back in 1844, Maks Stirner in *The Unique and His Property* spoke about it when apophatically trying to identify his personality (Stirner, 2017). The latter obviously possessed certain moral qualities, had some concerns, and performed specific social functions but could be reduced to neither them. Then one century later, Erich Fromm describes a similar process, pointing to the substitution of individuality by some abstract image of personality imposed (or adopted) from the outside. From his point of view, "the individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns; and he, therefore, becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be" (Fromm, 2013: 99). In this context, Sartre's "man is condemned to be free" does not seem to be always working.

At this point, the question of the correlation of the concepts of "*personality*" and "*identity*" becomes especially urgent. We believe that these are concepts of a completely different nature, although they have often been used as synonyms since recently. As an example of a synonymic usage, we can mention Francis Fukuyama, who practically equates the two of them when he defines *identity* as *authenticity* and *the true inner self*. He writes: "The modern concept of identity places a supreme value on authenticity, on the validation of that inner being that is not being allowed to express itself. It is on the side of the inner and not the outer self" (Fukuyama, 2019: 50). This interchangeability becomes even more obvious when he claims that "in the West, the idea of identity was born, in a sense, during the Protestant Reformation, and it was given its initial expression by the Augustinian friar Martin Luther" as Luther "was one of the first Western thinkers to articulate and valorize the inner self over the external social being" (Fukuyama, 2019: 51). On the other hand, as it was mentioned before, we will argue that the concepts of *personality* and *identity* are of different nature.

The notion of *identity*, which is derived from French *identité*, and means, first of all, "state of being the same; sameness" (Chamber's Etymological Dictionary, 1874: 245), implies alignment primarily with the other or others. *Roget's international thesaurus* also defines the term *identity* as "sameness, similarity or equality" (Roget's international thesaurus, 2010: 1017), which logically presupposes comparison with another person or group. Furthermore, James D. Fearon from Stanford University states that one of the ways we understand identity now is "a social category, defined by membership rules and characteristic attributes or expected behaviors" (Fearon, 1999: 2).

<sup>5</sup> The original text: "самоутверждение человека ведет к самоистреблению человека, раскрытие свободной игры сил человека, не связанного с высшей целью, ведет к иссяканию творческих сил" (Berdyaev, 2017: 135)

<sup>6</sup> The original text: "человек, вступивший на путь исключительного самоутверждения, когда он перестает признавать высшее начало, когда он признает себя самодовлеющим существом, истребляет себя по неизбежной внутренней диалектике, отрицает себя" (Berdyaev, 2017: 147)

Nevertheless, the philosophical interpretations of the concept of *personality* since the Modern Age have always been associated with something inherent to an individual, with some sort of uniqueness. “In the Modern Age, the understanding of the concept of personality developed under the influence of Cartesian dualism, which rejected the essential psychophysical unity of a human being, and personality was identified with consciousness. Being an exception, Francis Bacon viewed personality as the integral nature of a human being, i.e., the unity of soul and body. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz considered conscience to be the essential part in a person <...>, John Locke identified personality with self-consciousness, George Berkeley used the concept of “personality” as a synonym for the spirit”<sup>7</sup> (Ketskalov, 2006: 548).

As we can see, despite the fact that the notions of *identity* and *personality* are very close to each other and are often used as synonyms, there is still a significant difference between them. While the concept of *personality* is associated with something inherent to an individual, with a true inner self, the concept of *identity* implies comparing oneself to the surrounding and means “a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes” (Fearon, 1999: 4).

Consequently, when we look at all these processes together: at the tendency to use a state of exception (if using Giorgio Agamben’s terminology) and the ever-increasing control of power institutions (if following Foucault’s line of thinking), at the personality turning into a set of identities, or individuality being replaced by “an abstract person» (all this in a long chain of successive “liberations” of human creative forces within humanistic tradition), there arises the question: where are the boundaries of personal freedom? Since the Modern Age, people in Western Europe and the United States were gradually receiving more “rights and freedoms,” but personality was gradually dissolving in all sorts of identities.

According to Immanuel Kant, freedom was in a human’s ability to start a new causal chain. In other words, he saw freedom in an individual choice that does not result from the previous sequence of events, in the act of *goodwill*. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he states: “Will is a kind of causality of living beings insofar as they are rational, and freedom would be that property of such causality that it can be efficient independently of alien causes determining it” (Kant, 1998: 52). Similarly, Erich Fromm understood freedom as a cessation of instinct behavior. For him, freedom begins when the way to act is no longer fixed by hereditarily given mechanisms. He writes: “Human existence begins when the lack of fixation of action by instincts exceeds a certain point; when the adaptation to nature loses its coercive character; when the way to act is no longer fixed by hereditarily given mechanisms” (Fromm, 2013: 24).

From our point of view, and judging from our observations, which we will share further on in the article, freedom is closely related to art, and the boundaries of personal freedom are more associated with the true inner self (often lost within humanistic tradition) than with different social functions performed by a certain person, or any kind of external constraints. Terry Smith in 2019 noted that every work of art enables both the artist and the viewer to feel “a certain perception of self in the world” (Smith, 2019: 5). And if we agree that what we

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<sup>7</sup> The original text: “В Новое время понимание личности развивалось под влиянием учения Декарта о двух субстанциях, отвергающего сущностное психофизическое единство человека, личность отождествлялась с сознанием. Исключение составляет Ф. Бекон, рассматривавший личность как цельную природу человека, единство души и тела. Лейбниц считал самым существенным в личности совесть, т.е. рефлексивное внутреннее чувство того, какова ее душа, Локк отождествлял личность с самосознанием, Беркли употреблял понятие “личность” как синоним духа” (Ketskalov, 2006: 548).

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call freedom is a start of a new causal chain, in this case, no external constraints can define the borders of such freedom. It is within the personality where the new chain starts. In this point, our position to a certain extent corresponds to that of Nickolas Berdyaev, who linked creativity to freedom.

On the other hand, external constraints can become stimuli for activating spontaneous artistic activity; an impetus to search for a lost personality. Giorgio Agamben developing the Deleuzian paradigm of understanding art as an act of resistance, viewed an act of creation as a complicated dialectics between a potentiality to do something and a potentiality not to do it. He says: “if creation were only a potentiality for doing something, that passed blindly into the act, then art would be reduced into an execution of an order” (Agamben, 2014), which would be an inadequate conception of art, as of something that must necessarily pass to the act. Paraphrasing Giorgio Agamben, we may say that the dialectics preceding an act of creation corresponds to a break between different chains of causality. This also means it is linked to the manifestation of personal freedom.

### **“Social-distancing” as a chance to revise the paradoxes of humanistic philosophy**

During the present pandemic, we can see how lockdowns and self-isolation are becoming those stimuli for spontaneous activity, which is inseparable from what can be called *freedom*. And here the word “spontaneous” (in Erich Fromm’s understanding) doesn’t mean “driven by a sudden impulse” but rather defines an “action which doesn’t imply being driven by habitual behavior or by other people’s expectation,” in other words, “acting by its own impulse or natural law; produced of itself or without interference” (Chamber’s Etymological Dictionary, 1874: 486). Which is actually a start of a new causal chain. When a person finds him/herself in a new life situation during the pandemic, and the usual patterns of interaction and action do not always work, this becomes the gap that presupposes spontaneous activity.

In order to reduce anxiety and being deprived of the usual patterns of daily almost automatic action, people turn to creativity. It’s important to say that artistic practices of the pandemic appeared to be challenging both for professional artists and for people who are not connected with art in their everyday life.

Sharon Jeannotte, despite the obvious loss caused by the pandemics, reports “the deluge of new cultural content” during lockdowns (Jeannotte, 2021). Despite the fact that due to lockdowns, the art sector in Europe and the United States suffers huge losses (Guibert & Hyde, 2021), and many professional artists lose their jobs and/or are forced to move online, among people whose daily life is not related to art, there is a surge of interest in cultural events and art.

In the summer of 2020, LaPlaca Cohen and Slover Linett have teamed up on a research initiative to better understand the processes happening to the artistic sphere (Wallace, 2020). Commenting on the results of the survey Jen Benoit-Bryan, vice president & co-director of research at Slover Linett Audience Research, has mentioned that “one of the most surprising and meaningful insights from the data has been the high level of arts and digital culture participation among the general public during COVID-19, and crucially, the finding that digital offerings seem to be expanding and diversifying participation” (Wallace, 2020).

In the context of our own research, it is important to point out the words of Diane Jean-Mary, partner and chief strategy officer at LaPlaca Cohen. She admitted that “in a time of such great uncertainty, many are turning to creativity, perhaps as a way to regain a sense of agency, expression, and enjoyment.” She also said, “it was great to see how many people

are leaning into their inner artist and maker: singing, crafting, baking, painting and more” (Wallace, 2020).

That is, we see that during the pandemic, art as a profession suffers a huge loss and is in crisis. On the other hand, art becomes a space for personal freedom. The European Union has launched a social media campaign called #CreativeEuropeAtHome to promote online cultural content. CBC, Canada’s national public broadcaster has, too, published a list of creative challenges to get through COVID-19 (Collins, 2020). Online recourses share lists of virtual choirs strangers can join during the pandemics.

In connection with the above, we want to mention here the project of a student of Conservatory of Music at Brooklyn, who gathered 300 people from 15 countries, ranging from age 9 to people in their 80s, to perform together in an online choir (Snyder, 2020). What interested us most in this project is that the people were not necessarily professional singers. That is the point where art becomes not just a way to avoid depression and cope with anxiety, but also a way to look at oneself from a new angle, that is, to revise a usual set of identities and make a spurt of spontaneous activity, which is actually an act of personal freedom. Since then, lots of similar online projects have been made to unite people across the borders. However, these challenges reveal the same scheme as the previous one. The state of uncertainty is pushing people to revise the established behavioral patterns based on social status, country of residence, income, education, etc.

Overall, in the spring and autumn of 2020, there appeared numerous nonprofit online art spaces, the aim of which is to give artists an opportunity to exhibit their work and exchange ideas.

One of the platforms is called “Art at a time like this.” Their first exhibition, aptly called “How Can You Think of Art at a Time Like This?” united over 150 000 viewers in more than 100 countries. The exhibition presented an artist a day for three months at the outbreak of the COVID crisis. A very similar to this one is a project called “Art in Pandemic!” which is a project where artists share their artistic practice and process in light of COVID-19.

These online activities show how the crisis has unexpectedly provided an opportunity for artists from different parts of the world of different social statuses, beliefs, gender, and political views, to unite across the borders and to explore their own limits of artistic expression. Those who, under different circumstances, would not have looked for ways of sharing their experience online with people from other countries during the lockdown were more likely to join various artistic projects, thus exploring their artistic personality.

Thus the pandemic and lockdowns, despite having immediately been linked to Foucault’s theory of discipline and power, have, on the other hand, become the stimuli for an exploration of one’s individual freedom. From our perspective, it happened because the lockdown tears an established set of routine social interactions, thus creating an opportunity to find a new form of a combination of *personality* and *identity*.

## Conclusions

To summarize, since the whole period from the end of the Middle Ages to the end of the twentieth century can be considered a period of constant liberation of human potential, the notions of personality and individual freedom have played an increasingly important role. On the other hand, the philosophy of humanism contains a paradox in itself (Nickolas Berdyaev calls this *the dialectic of humanism*). The more one affirms oneself, liberating his/her personality (or the inner self) from the pressure of higher forces, morality, authorities, the law – and up to the liberation from metanarratives – the more he/she loses this inner self.

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This loss of *self* results in a feeling of individual isolation and powerlessness, which in its turn brings (according to Erich Fromm's terminology) an attempt of "escape from freedom." A person is ready to get rid of their individual self by compulsive conformity to accepted patterns. In other words, an individual self, or as we call it, a *personality*, is dissolved in different sorts of *identities*, i.e., behavioral patterns adopted from the outside.

Since humanistic philosophy has always been tied to the concept of freedom, this dialectic of humanism, leading to the loss of freedom, brings questions about the boundaries of one's personal freedom. Immanuel Kant understood freedom as the ability to start a new causal chain, and similarly, Erich Fromm saw it as a cessation of instinct behavior. From this point of view, the boundaries of personal freedom have to be more associated with that true inner self, which is often lost within the humanistic tradition.

Numerous surveys held by European and American organizations since spring 2020 show that despite the obvious loss caused by the pandemics, there is a flood of new cultural content during lockdowns. While art as a professional sphere suffers a deep crisis, there is a surge of interest in cultural events, art, and creativity among people whose daily life is not related to art. We may assume that lockdowns and self-isolation are becoming the stimuli for spontaneous activity, which is inseparable from *freedom*. Thus freedom is closely related to art, the idea of which corresponds to Nicolas Berdyaev's tendency to link creativity to freedom.

From this point of view, despite the pessimistic tendency to view the pandemic and lockdowns through the prism of Foucauldian and Deleuzian paradigms of control and disciplinary societies, on the other hand, self-isolation and the politics of social distancing have suddenly become the stimuli for more personal freedom. This personal freedom is found in art as a way to break the chain of causality.

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