

Creatives-Sofia



Creatives-Sofia is an online community created to bring together artistic minds from Bulgaria and all over the world (600 members). This is the largest international creative collective in Sofia that involves artists, writers, musicians, poets, photographers, and creative enthusiasts. Its founder is the Irish writer Ruby Moore.

She is also a co-founder of Artist Tree Sofia – the co-shared art studio for the community of Creatives-Sofia. It is formed to give a space for the community to meet, connect, collaborate and create. More about Ruby and the international community of creatives follow below in the interview with her.

Identity

How did you move to Sofia?

In 2013 I left my home country, the United Kingdom, and I went to Istanbul to teach English. Unfortunately, my experience there was not very positive and after 5 months I decided to take a short break - a weekend in Sofia. I didn't know anybody, and I just stayed in a hostel. It was New Year I could find everyone celebrating and chatting with each other. I had so much fun! I just loved it! When it was time to go back, I realized that I didn't want to leave Sofia and started thinking – maybe I can live here. Two weeks later I did it. I got in touch with a real estate person and the InterNations – a huge expat community who helped me to find 2 part-time jobs almost immediately.

What is the story of Creatives-Sofia?

I started the *Creatives-Sofia* group on Facebook in November 2015. In the beginning, it was focused only on literature and writing. A few months later, in 2016, I thought that there is so much more going on in the city, I like other art forms, too, and I decided to open it up for all of them.

What was your initial goal to start it?

I just wanted to meet like-minded people with the same interests as mine. But then it showed me that it is a very good way to integrate with people and meet Bulgarian artists. Also, it was great for those Bulgarian artists to meet other international artists. It became that, instead of, being only me who wants to meet more people with the same interests.

The whole point of the group is to gather people who are involved or interested in art – whatever they are artists or appreciators. All artists need people to appreciate them. Writers want to be read, painters want to be seen etc. And the appreciators are looking for new, exciting and unique things. It is a part of the process.

Also, many people consider themselves as appreciators who do art just for fun. However, they feel intimidated to show to others what they do because they think they are not good enough. There is no imagine like that here. Everyone is an artist, especially, if he or she feels happy and full of inspiration when doing it.

Take me, for example. I am a writer but I have never considered myself a painter before. I became one because the group gave me wings to do it. Those things grow within people. During an exhibition I organized last year there was this girl who shared her work saying that she has never painted before but she was inspired by the group. And she was incredible!

What is the dynamic of the group and how does it evolve?

I try to keep the dynamic of the group more active by sharing more of my art work. I've noticed that when I share people respond and start sharing, too. Then a friend of mine told me he is impressed by the very good artists we have in the group and gave me the idea for an exhibition. It was July and it was just brilliant! The opening had such a good vibe. Everyone loved it!

How many artists did you exhibit?

There were around 15 artists from 10-12 different countries. The exhibition ran for 2 weeks and during this time we had many events and workshops. We had paintings on the wall, book readings, arts and craft fair, musicians playing, and a closing party with live music. It was more like a small festival!

Structure

Was there someone to help you with the exhibition and how did you find a budget for it?

I got help in terms of people supporting me with some logistics. However, it was mostly me managing things because as a first exhibition I needed to keep the control myself. About the budget... I didn't have any. But the only thing I had to pay was the rent of the venue which I got cheaper because it was not busy during the summer.

How did it happen that you opened the co-shared artistic studio The Artists Tree Sofia?

It was after the exhibition when I just had a thought that it will be great if all these people had space where they can work together. I was introduced to Tom and Sarah during the exhibition, and later to Mia through them. After talking to me Mia has mentioned to them that she loves my idea and she wants to do it! We were like: "Yeah, let's do it!"

I also shared the idea on the group because I wanted to find people who would like to share a co-working space with us. It was an invitation to meet and open up discussions about what are people's needs, desires, dreams, etc. That was in November 2016 and just a few people came. That was not the problem. The bigger thing that got us stuck was that those people were just interested in using the space, and not necessarily interested in being responsible for it. There is a big difference.

However, by the end of January, I decided to try again. We were hoping to have more people involved to help with the rent, the maintenance, etc. However, we decided that if we want people to believe in it, they need to see it first.

How is it organized at the moment?

We are three of us the moment – Tom, Sarah and me. Tom is like the manager of the space, and Mia is in London. The three of us pay the rent.

At the opening of the space, we set a donation box. We told people it is a suggested help for this shared place, and till now, it works fine. Some months when we have collected more money, we give more for the rent, and vice versa. It kind of works this way.

Unfortunately, we are not making enough to save money for future development. We do not have a kitchen, the only shared facility is the toilet, water and electricity. Most of the things that we used to decorate the space are from my apartment, others we found on the street and the rest were donated by a member of our group. People helped us in various ways to find a coach, for example, and to arrange things on site. We also did an open call for pictures for the walls. We did want it to be just me and Sarah exhibited here, we wanted other artists to contribute, too.

Experience

Tell me about the writers' meetings that you used to organize?

There were two types of events. One was more like a social meet-up where writers just meet other writers. The second was the themed events which are more focused on discussing a particular topic – poetry, copywriting, blogging, etc. They were also discussions, so we did not need someone to facilitate. We used to do these events once a week which felt quite often, and I think I got a bit burned out. We also did working days for co-writing. All of them were communicated via events on Facebook and shared on the group. People who liked it were coming along, usually, we would have between 5 and 10 people, and we used to go to a cafe or a bar.

What are you working on at the moment?

We want to do a storytelling festival. It will also be multidisciplinary – poetry, theatre, street photography, animation, and many others. We also want to focus it on the bilingual side of telling stories and organized it in different venues around Sofia.

When we speak about storytelling my favourite event is the storytelling painting party. It invites writers to come with a short story which they have to read and then artists draw a sketch of the reading. We have stories in Bulgarian and English. It is really interesting. What happens sometimes is that while someone is reading another author gets inspired and starts writing a new story. It is like a story that inspires a story, and then this story inspires another story, and so on.

All of those stories inspire paintings and these paintings inspire new stories. It is incredible the amount of creativity we can share. Another thing is to see how many visual representations we can have of one single story. You never have the same picture. You might have similar elements but you have completely different styles and final images.

We also do None Mic Open Mic nights because we don't need a microphone to sing and have fun. I also have ideas that involve theatre, life drawing, and a film club - we did it once and it was really fun.

Another format you developed is the Fashion Stop. Can you tell me more about it?

The Fashion Stop is created to inspire people to stop buying throw-away fashion. We create an event where people are invited to come and bring 5 good quality fashion items from their wardrobes. They could be bags, clothes, scarves, jewelry, etc. They bring at least 5 pieces and they can swap and go home with 5 new pieces. I've done it a few times before in the UK and it was very successful. We also provide wine and have music.

Communications

Did you have media coming to the exhibition?

I had an interview on the Bulgarian National Radio for its arts program. It happened because I was in touch with the Irish Embassy and I shared the event with them. They also came along as special guests at the opening, and they passed it on to their media contacts. From my side, I also got in touch with other bloggers and wrote an invitation for the community on the group – Foreigners in Sofia & Friends.

Do you share other events' information with the media?

We share the different events organized by our members and encourage people to go together for support. It is not publicizing it but we share all the details and enthusiasm on the group. We are also planning to use our physical space for more exhibitions.

Now, I am also in contact with a bar which is located behind the Sofia University. It mostly invites artists. One of my friends plays music there from time to time and I would like to take other artists from the group and create something with them there. Our idea is to sell them and fundraise for other ideas at our venue.

Collaborations

How would you like to collaborate with other organizations?

On the one hand, we would like to do things with different literature and language organizations. On the other, Sarah is working on a children's' program for a summer school that wants to come here and teach kids different art forms during the day. Our musicians are also a part of the Art Musician Foundation and we are collaborating with them.

Working with travel bloggers is something that was on our mind, too. We also want to do parties and many other social events that will let people see the space and to know that it is available for them. I am looking forward to the organization of the storytelling festival. We will need many different collaborations to make it inspiring, fun, and knowledgeable.

I am sure we can do a lot more in terms of collaborations, using other channels, membership engagement. And it will be beneficial because we are not aware of another space like that at the moment in Sofia. This city really needs it.