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and Michael Fesca

With contributions by
Anna Bromley, Michael Fesca,
Diana McCarty, Catherine
Nichols, and Hedwig Fijen.
Voicings of Kaltrina Krasniqi,
Genc Salihu, Toton Pllana,
Alisa Maliqi, Shkëlzen Maliqi,
Sihana Klisurica of Foundation 17,
Kafu, Arba Hatashi & Kinema Jusuf
Gërvalla, Vullnet Krasniqi,
Miljana Dunđerin, Dardan
Zhegrova, and Qerkica Rexhepi.

Anna: Am I a *radio artist*?
I always wonder about this term.
I do take radio practices – in
plural – as a point of departure.

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SCRIPTINGS

Anna Bromley I Speak Radio

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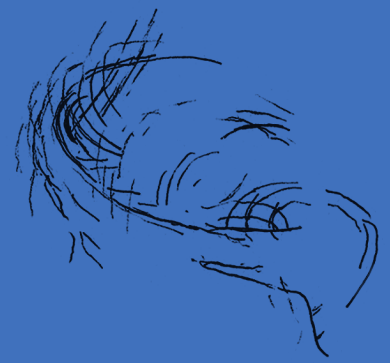
POLITICAL SCENARIOS

Anna Bromley

# I Speak Radio



Archive Books

SCRIPTINGS

Anna Bromley

# I Speak Radio

Edited by Achim Lengerer and Michael Fesca

Published by
**SCRIPTINGS**
and
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# Index

# A Voice Exists in Voicing

*Radiophonic Walks and Conversations*

Anna Bromley
With drawn annotations by Michael Fesca
Afterword by Hedwig Fijen

The following texts are modified transcripts of *A Voice Exists in Voicing*, a ten-part radio piece commissioned by the Manifesta 14 Prishtina (July–October 2022) at the invitation of Catherine Nichols for the artistic program "it matters what worlds world worlds: how to tell stories otherwise."

All conversations took place in English except for the last one with Qerkica Rexhepi, which was simultaneously translated by Donjetë Murati. For this printed version, the sound recording with Qerkica Rexhepi was translated by Plator Gashi.

In the prelude, almost all characters, including authors and researchers, are introduced by their first names. In the conversations, the full names of all persons recorded in the radiophonic walks and conversations are used at the point where their audio recordings are featured, unless they requested otherwise. The spelling of names throughout appears in the original language.


Radiophonic walk in Prishtina with Agnes Nokshiqi
during pre-project research, July 29, 2022.

## Radio Jingle

*Sound of footsteps bounding down a few steps, opens into birds singing, footsteps continue on level ground.*

Anna Bromley: A voice exists in voicing.

Qerkica Rexhepi: I was cold, I didn't know where to go.

Vullnet Krasniqi: I ended up in my apartment.

Alisa Maliqi: I was very, um, strong.

Dardan Zhegrova: To kind of romanticize.

Sihana Klisurica: Uh, the oppression and, um…

*Ambient, blended sonic textures slowing down.*

Kaltrina Krasniqi: We're going in circles now. Careful!

Arba Hatashi: So I have to warn you.

Kafu: I'm kind of mad a little bit.

*Water splashing in fountain. Distant dog barking. Then dog barking close by in a high pitch, stretches into an ascending glissando.*



# 1

## Prelude

[Bouncing from the eighties to right now and back again.]

*Voices buzzing, relaxed laughing.*
*Lucid feminine voice chanting ahaaaaa.*
*Tone transitioning into a stammering, breathed chant.*
*Anna speaks in a narrator's voice.*

Anna Bromley: Shake the syntax! A tale of borrowed voices.

In the eighties and early nineties, questions about the philosophical subject were debated in East Berlin's French Cultural Center. Some considered it dead, others worried that it was becoming increasingly lost in postmodernism. Others pressed further for a feminine subject, while a number of then unknown feminist philosophers argued that it had been sexualized from the start. Some hoped that it would constantly recreate itself through performative parodies and gender masquerading, while others declared it an identity crisis, fearing a complete loss of meaning.

In the mid-eighties, a teenager in Fushë-Kosova embraced her femininity. The adolescent who would later be known as Qerkica was supposed to be raised to be a boy. If she continued behaving as a girl,

said her family members, she wouldn't fit in with them. So she put on her red jacket and went to the capital. There, people who loved differently than the dominant majority met at Mustafa's house. At night they listened to the cross-gender eighteenth-century Bejtexhinj poems.

*A warm and sophisticated synth sound.*
*Baroque pattern, plucked on an acoustic guitar.*
*Fading into aerial sound.*

And they danced.

On New Year's Eve, I let myself be carried away by a flow of bodies, music, and euphoria – toward the Berlin Wall and into 1990. From my side of the city, the Wall stretched behind the Brandenburg Gate. Its balustrade offered more space than I had guessed. It was so broad that at least four people could stand side by side. Beneath our feet, people avidly hammered bits and pieces out of the cement to sell to the crowds of visitors flocking to the Wall. The fog and burned-up New Year's Eve rockets thick in my voice.

*Modified original audio of a 1989 party on the Berlin Wall.*
*A second-long sequence looping, like a vinyl record stuck in one groove.*
*Clarinet intro of "Bei Mir Bistu Shein" flashing.*
*The modulated guitar pattern still in the background at a slower tempo.*



*Following, the clarinet line decelerates.*

Among winter jackets and champagne bottles, I wait for the year 1990 to begin. From a licorice-colored clarinet emerge the warm tones of "Bei Mir Bistu Shein." The higher-pitched syncopations find their way through the crowd as the rhythm gains momentum.

I wonder if the East has already become part of the past, what the tongues of the West taste like, and how communication will work; tongues from the West seem to deliver sentences in a tone that is unfamiliar to me. I learn not to use the provocative jokes and grammatical abbreviations of my Berlin dialect. In West Germany these are considered rude, dumb, ill-mannered.

But somehow my memory of 1990 seems to have been kind of erased. When I think back, the first thing that comes to mind is an oblivious two-month-long party lasting from late autumn to New Year's Eve 1989. It was not until much later that I would learn of the woes of an Afro-German poet in what I called West Berlin. In '89, May writes "... a reunited germany / [...] / it celebrates in its intimate circle / it celebrates in white / but it's the blues in black-and-white / it's the blues ..."[1]

*Fireworks.*
*A jubilant crowd fades into drenching rain.*
*Somber, throbbing synthesizer.*

Thinking about it now, it dawns on me that Minh-ha, composer and filmmaker, published her first book in the year 1989, and like May's work, it was to become quite famous. In it Minh-ha reflects on the voice training she received in preparation for a film voice-over job. It was only much later, while creating the voice-over for her own film projects, that she comprehended the alienating effect of her newly learned way of speaking. It's like impersonalizing a stolen or borrowed voice, she says. But a stolen or borrowed voice cannot speak of the transgression in which her own vocal expression has been shaped.

From her book, I learn that "... the *minor*-ity's voice is always personal; that of the *major*-ity, always impersonal."[2] Whenever I think of Minh-ha, I somehow hear her voice from her 1982 debut film – "I do not intend to speak about. Just speak nearby."[3]

*Trinh T. Minh-ha's voice in the original audio from* Reassemblage.
*Sea water splashes against a rowboat.*
*Gunshots and screams.*
*Calling for Hoxha!*
*A bullet casing is hitting the ground.*
*The sound disintegrates into fragments of digitized noise.*

Intending to speak nearby. Prishtina, 1981. In the park outside the university, the smell of coal stoves still burns the nose, but the sun is already



somewhat warming. Students protest the lack of supplies. In other parts of the city, blue-collar workers and day laborers join in. Even the farmers participate in the protests. Tens of thousands go on strike, thousands get imprisoned. The government declares military rule. Ibrahim was looking into whether he could translate the writings of his gay mentor into Albanian.

Almost exactly a year ago, that mentor – a cultural and literature theorist – lost his life in a traffic accident in Paris, where Ibrahim studied. Roland's death had upset him. But so does the sudden outbreak of violence in the city. Is he still to translate the texts? Or how to make his research a part of a nonviolent resistance?

In the archives, he comes across a few seventeenth-century writings holding important clues to the legacy of writing in the Gegë (Gheg) variety of Albanian spoken in Kosovo.

*Lucid feminine voice chanting ahaaaaa, like in the beginning.*
*Walkie talkie signals.*
*The sound of a distant crowd.*
*Agitated murmurs of voices fading into the sound of an office of today.*

Forty years later, not far from the university building where Ibrahim was contemplating these historical findings, I run into one of Prishtina's filmmakers. The heat of the Kosovar summer is

creeping in through the windows as Kaltrina tells me about her troubled relationship with Gegë. With her is Genc, a singer-songwriter.

Kaltrina wears a remarkable coat – which I believe I recognize from one of Genc's television appearances. Listening to the two of them, I can tell how in tune they are. They've been a couple for many years. Genc is equally at home on stages in both Kosovo and Albania. He chuckles. These days, it is trendy to speak in Gegë – no matter if one is in Tirana or in Prishtina.

*Reverberant sound from inside a room.*
*An interlude with Genc's and Kaltrina's voices.*

Genc Salihu: This has a lot to do with the exotic quality that has been attached to it. And that came from Gegë making a big comeback in post-communism as a beautiful, poetic Albanian variety that had been almost banned. It was disqualified from official use in Albania, and, consequently, in the whole of the Albanian-speaking world. In its comeback, it had that exotic effect both in Albania and Kosovo. For decades there had been no access to the old Gegë literature, which constitutes the main body of Albanian literature. It had, of course, continued to be spoken without interruption and was even used in illegal literature in Albania – "drawer poems," as some used to call them.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: In the seventies, eighties, and nineties, we were forbidden to publicly explore any



kind of cultural references to Albania. For half of my life, I couldn't speak or write my own dialect Gegë. Until I was eighteen, I used to think in Serbian. This was due to the very limited use of Albanian in mediums that interested me – as well as the lack of quality translations into my mother tongue. Later I wrote in Standard Albanian, a variety which is not my domestic dialect. After that I wrote and thought in English.

When the alternative theater and film scene started to develop in Kosovo in the early '60s – what happened was that until 1965 the Albanians from Kosovo wrote in Gegë. But after the Albanian Orthography Congress in 1972, they – primarily artists – radically changed course and wrote exclusively in Toskë (Tosk), using language as a tool for shaping (an Albanian) national identity within Yugoslavia.[4]

Genc Salihu: Tosk, the dialect spoken by high-ranking communist party officials of Albania, was decreed the official Standard Albanian. But Toskë is only spoken in the south of Albania, some parts of Macedonia, and in Greece.

Gegë as such was abolished in Stalinist Albania, after having been the main officially written variant since at least 1916. In order to identify more strongly with "Albanianhood," the Kosovar Albanians agreed on the new unfair standard – the new lingua franca that had substantial similarities to Toskë – since Serbia, from within the Yugoslav federation, was determined to establish a clear ethnic differentiation between Albanians from two sides of the border, which is, of course, absurd.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: But this new standard was basically Enver-Hoxha-speak. And many years later, even our alternative scene inherited this, as detached as we were from any nationalist idea. I remember the rap music of the nineties. It was done in Standard Albanian – clearly stating, "You can't tell us we're not them." But after the war, we said, "Okay, f*ck this! We need to write in our own local variety. Otherwise, we cannot write true poetry, we cannot write true film." Now we're in another tricky position. We suffer when writing in Standard Albanian and we suffer when writing in Gegë.

Genc Salihu: In 2009 we would hold weekly translating sessions in Dit' e Nat', our café. We were trying to translate bits of literature from English into this Gegë thing, which we had to standardize for ourselves. Although we were natives, none of us were really versed in this beautiful old variety. The year after, I started writing and singing in Gegë. This also meant defying my first album, which was a celebration of the Toskë-based Standard Albanian.[5] I had changed my mind about the whole thing and was now keen to show it.

For me, as a singer, Gegë became fundamental. Not only because it has a wider variety of phonemes. While in Gegë you have a short, or oral [a], plus also a nasal [ã],[6] there is a lack of nasal vowels in Toskë. But it was also essential because through this I was reaching for my own language, for the first time, in my singing and writing. And I didn't care whether people considered this a dialect!

There were others (singer-songwriters) as well, like Dritëro Nikqi and Shpat Deda. Shpat must have started



a year earlier. I think I must have shoved him a little bit in that direction, since I produced his first album. Dritëro possibly did it even earlier, maybe around 2006. I am not sure how consciously he approached the language issue. I think with him it came more as a consequence of his quest for a more direct and honest artistic approach, while I was maybe more preoccupied politically when I did it.

Back in those days, we considered ourselves Gegë language activists and started using it in Prishtina for the first time ever in the Albanian public sphere since 1973. We all felt a little heroic. Plus, we were punk!

*Two double bass notes repeat and form a brisk rhythm. It slows down, sliding into a constant reverb.*

Beograd, 1982. Accompanied by his friends, a university graduate celebrates the publication of his first book. It has been sixteen years of work. Sixteen years of visiting Orthodox monasteries to study medieval icons. Shkëlzen likes his life in Beograd, and, although he has just finished writing a book in Serbian, he's increasingly attacked for being a stranger.

He doesn't believe that those extremists would ever gain power, but nevertheless begins to feel unsafe and returns to Prishtina. It is outside the Grand Hotel that friends introduce him to Alisa. Or perhaps we should assume that the outspoken Alisa introduces herself to him. The two become a vital duo in the city's art scene.

Forty years later in the Drenica Valley. I find a copy of Shkëlzen's book in Vullnet's shelf. The culture journalist translates: *Art in the Resistance*.[7] I page through it. In the photos taken in the nineties, I recognize the hopeful curatorial duo: short-haired Alisa and long-haired Shkëlzen.

*Original audio of the feminist procession to the Drenica Valley from Prishtina in 1998.*[8]
*Protesters are chanting "Drenica."*
*The archival recording gradually decelerates and builds up into one long "aaaaa."*

Mitrovica, 1989. By the time the fresh grass began to grow, Bajram's grandmother had passed away. After the funeral, the young boy, who was to become known as Kafu, sits next to his mother. They can hardly wait for the bus to leave, heading home. But the streets are filled with crowds of thousands. Between the gunfire, the mother rushes to the market. She gets some onions and cuts one in half. Inhale this so that the tear gas won't burn! People bring milk to rinse their eyes with it.

As summer begins, everybody is talking of one thing. A speech that was given in Gazimestan. The following summer, a year later, the radio and television station in Prishtina is taken over by armed state forces. Soon after, Kosovo's only Albanian-language newspaper is forced to stop publication.



*Archival audio recorded during the shutdown of the Radio Television of Prishtina.*
*Brisk trumpet fanfare playing.*
*Everything now melting to one continuous, crisp, high note.*

For Alisa, the time between 1991 and 2000 just flies by. She keeps her hair short.

Alisa says she needs to look in Shkëlzen's books to find the years matching up to her memories.

*Sound of a café, today.*
*Plucked guitar music dribbling along.*
*Alisa's voice in an original audio.*

Alisa Maliqi: During the war we were refugees. I still wonder where I got the strength to leave and become a refugee. We didn't know if we would ever come back. I was so sad when I saw the people in the Foreign Embassy. My god, they are all leaving! Who will be left in Prishtina from the people that I know?

The war ended within a short time. We did return to Prishtina. But the trauma of this situation hit us later. Much later.

*Plucked acoustic guitar over ethereal synthesizer tunes.*
*The light music transitions into a high-pitched drone.*
*It decelerates, its pitch lowers.*
*Artifacts of static sound.*
*Anna's studio-recorded voice.*

I can't help thinking that all my memories of the year 1990 have been wiped from my mind. All I can see is myself again and again on the Berlin Wall balustrade behind the Brandenburg Gate, awaiting that year. Crossing the bridge over the river in Mitrovica, I wonder if it too would become that kind of symbol – that of a frozen state of relations that history would defrost one day. I pass the bridge watchers, who are there to prevent passers-by from becoming victims of separatist violence on their way between the southern and northern part. I imagine the bridge being full of tourists.

*Sounds of an office.*
*Kaltrina's voice in an original audio.*

Kaltrina Krasniqi: We've only been talking about those huge narratives – the nation, the country. We need to scale down to the personal, to see all the people that have not been interested in those large debates around nations. Serbian, Albanian – what the f*ck! That meant nothing if you were gay.

*High-pitched synth organ tone.*
*Fading into arabesque vocals, gliding upward from tone to tone.*
*Fading into an aerial oscillation.*

On the internet, I watch José Pérez Ocaña perform in Berlin. It is the winter of '79. The camera captures a vantage point for tourists on



the western side of the Wall, with the snow-covered Brandenburg Gate behind it. From this platform, visitors from West Berlin tried to get a glimpse of East Berlin, of my childhood self, so to speak. Instead of looking elsewhere, Ocaña plays to the camera. Wearing an evening gown, he pulls up his flower-embroidered scarf and sings. His voice vibrates as it glides from one note to the next.

*Ocaña's singing voice from '79 fades into the honking and shouting at the Brandenburg Gate in an '89 recording.*
*A bouncy double bass melody joining in.*
*Sax from "Bei Mir Bistu Shein" playing an upward loop.*

I daydream of belly-dance sessions organized by lesbian activists at their private apartments. Oh, they know how to relax and do politics at the same time! Excuse me, darling, but are you a feminist too?

A drag queen who has named herself after a particular time of year lip-syncs to a pop song. She lifts her arms and flexes her lips to the playback. The flowy fabric of her outfit shimmers in the light.

*Chanting: "Bei Mir Bistu Shein."*
*Synthesized whirring.*

Her performance adds a new and surprising meaning to Minh-ha's notion of the borrowed or stolen voice. For only a few will hear the offstage voice

of the drag queen. Indeed, the queen is rather modest, somewhat shy. She does not speak much. And she has no desire for long conversations, preferring to borrow voices from pop songs.

*All sounds cease.*

Speaking of Minh-ha. In the eighties, she boards a ferry boat in Sénégal. The boat is named after a dockworker who, forty years earlier, organized market vendors (mostly women) seeking to resist the imperial impositions of colonial rule and taxation. After closing their market stalls, they dance in secret. The evening grows long and sweaty. In their own words, speech rhythms, and grammars, they activate their voices – borrowed or not. Shake your syntaxes, darlings!

*Footsteps bounding down a few steps, opens into birds singing.*
*Outro jingle.*



## Endnotes

1 May Ayim, "blues in black and white," in *Blues in Black and White: A Collection of Essays, Poetry, and Conversations*, trans. Anne V. Adams (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2003), 4–5.

2 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 28.

3 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen* (1982). Excerpt at min. 1:33.

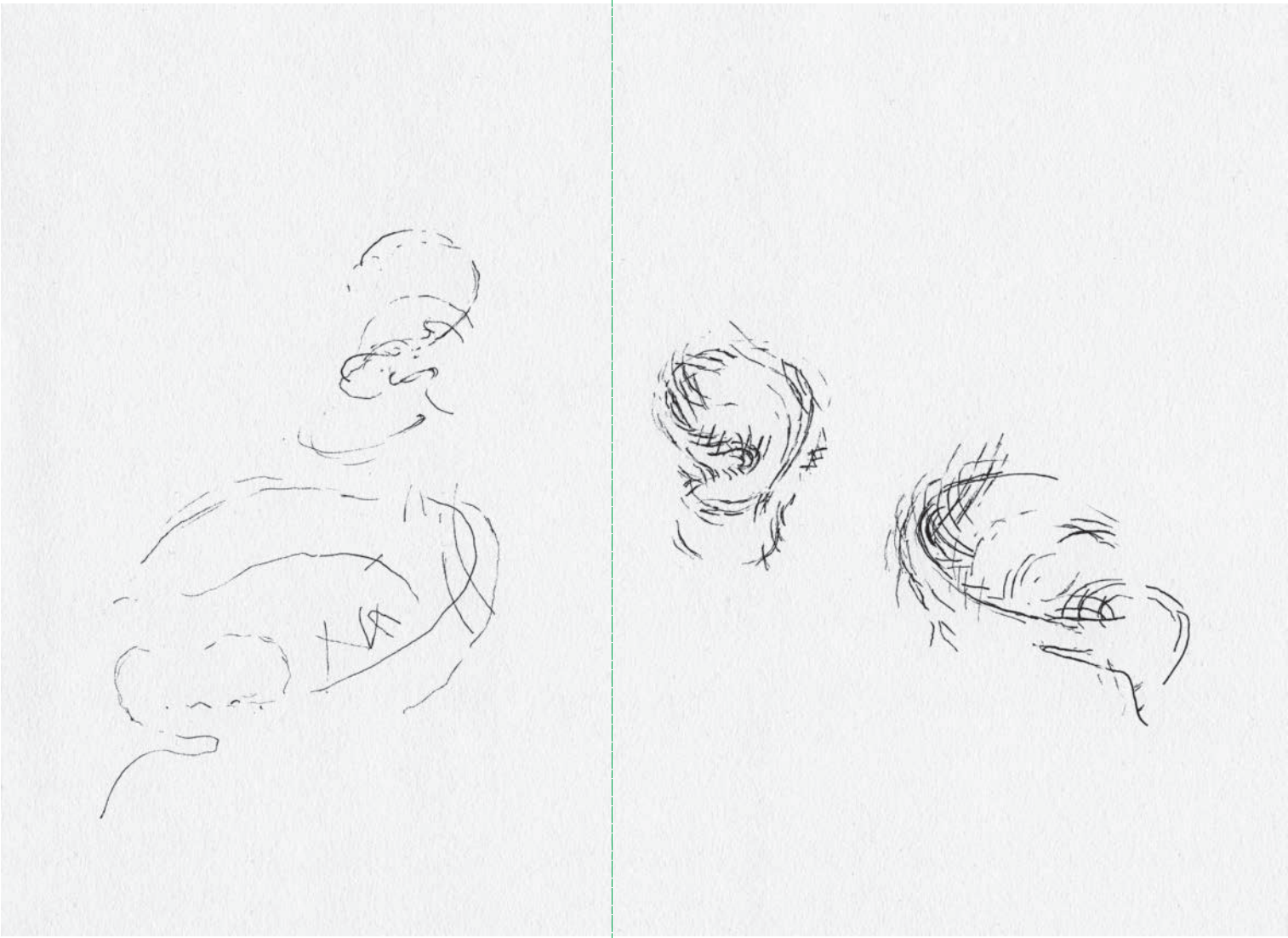
4 A translator's note from Plator Gashi: There are two major dialect groups of the Albanian language: Gegë, spoken north of the Shkumbin River, and Toskë, spoken south of it. The first official attempt at standardization took place in 1916, when a committee held in Shkodër (northern Albania) decided that the southern Gegë subdialect of Elbasan would serve as the foundation for the new standard variety. The choice was influenced by its status as a transitional dialect with substantial similarities to Toskë. This was in effect from 1920 until the liberation of Albania in 1945. Subsequently, it was abruptly replaced with Toskë by the communist dictatorship led by Enver Hoxha, whose functionaries mostly originated from the southern part of the country. In 1968, across the border in Yugoslav Kosovo, a burgeoning standardization effort based on the Gegë dialect was halted after the local Albanian intelligentsia, for the sake of unity, unanimously agreed to participate in the standardization process in communist Albania. This process eventually led to the establishment of the 1972 Toskë-based Standard Albanian, which is still in use today.

5 Cute Babulja (Genc Salihu & Enes Bajramliqi), *Cute Babulja* (Prishtina: Ginger Music, 2004).

6 This is sometimes referred to as [ð̃] or [ð̃] in phonetic texts.

7 Shkëlzen Maliqi, *Arti në rezistencë. Shkrimet e fundshekullit 20* (Prishtina: Botimet Koliqi, 2022). Essays on art in Kosovo during the Serbian repression.

8 The street protest "Bread for Drenica" was organized by the Women's Network in Kosovo on March 16, 1998.



# 2

[Walking from the Prishtina City Park to Kino Rinia via Rekord Bakery and Teatri Dodona.]

*Jingle.*
*Chirping of birds.*
*Two runners passing by, talking and panting.*

Anna Bromley: How Kaltrina Krasniqi almost gets lost in the streets she wasn't allowed to walk in as a child.

*Runners' footsteps and breathing drifting out of the scene.*
*Gentle morning birdsong.*

Early in the morning the City Park is still cool. Kaltrina and I take an espresso amongst some elderly women and start walking. She had told me about how her uncle took her to watch the most daring plays in an independent theater – part of the nonviolent resistance in Kosovo during repression. I'm curious and we stroll in the direction of this building.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: I'm a filmmaker. That's what I've been doing since I was seventeen or eighteen. It started as a small experiment immediately after the war. Before that, I went to high school. Then my secondary school education got completely interrupted by the war. After

we returned, I finished gymnasium and asked my mom if it was ok if I took a gap year because I thought I wanted to study film but wanted time to think about it. She agreed. I also think she felt sorry for me because there was all that war and my childhood deserved a break. A year later I applied to film school and I got in.

In that gap year I met Siobhán Cleary, a documentary film maker from Ireland.[1] She taught me and my friends the basics of shooting, editing, and storytelling. Since she was politically engaged, she also helped us to understand where we were politically in that moment. We were just kids and needed an angle to understand and also heal from that. Being second-generation Irish, brought up in London, she was completely aware of where we were coming from and also what would happen to us in the future.

In that year, a lot of my friends and I joined together, almost like a small collective. We produced an essay film and called it *Sudden Air*.

*A toddler's voice is calling.*
*Footsteps transition from the gravel trail to a street.*
*A car engine rattling nearby, its tires squealing a bit.*

It was a great opportunity for all who were brought up here in Prishtina to document the city the way we found it after the war. All the venues that we used to frequent as kids and as teenagers were not there anymore. Most of the center was bombed.

*A rooster crowing in the distance.*



Anna Bromley: You grew up in a closed environment where you couldn't play in the streets with others.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: I was born in '81. I was about eight when what we knew as our country, which was Yugoslavia, completely disintegrated in '89.

*Rooster crowing once again, this time a little closer.*
*A few conversing voices fill in the background.*
*Every now and then the rooster crows.*
*Children's voices and footsteps coming and going.*

Kosovo's autonomy was revoked in '89. The 1974 Yugoslav constitution had granted us conditions like a province with major autonomy (not a constituent republic, but with a guaranteed seat at the federal level), which meant that in public life we spoke the Albanian language. But then schools, education, media – everything was shut down and Kosovo became a very violent and brutally police-controlled environment.

My sister and I were kids, our parents were divorced. We lived with our mom. During the nineties, my mom never felt comfortable for us to be out in the streets. It wasn't safe. So she had to come up with ideas to make time at home interesting. Just before Christmas in '91, our mom came home with a huge box. My sister and I were curious, knowing that this wasn't the year to expect fancy presents. Everybody around us was getting extremely poor. But she said, "I got you a VHS player!"

We didn't believe her. She said it again, put the box

down, we opened it and it was a VHS player. “Now you can watch movies!” We were really ecstatic. Back then, thirty seconds from our home, there used to be a video rental called 007.

*A silent car driving by.*
*After that, a noisier diesel model.*
*And then more and more vehicles.*
*No more cars after that.*
*Shopkeepers calling.*
*Car doors slamming.*
*A large group of kids rushing by.*

Until then we hadn’t watched much TV because the Channels One and Two were from the Radio-Television of Serbia and loaded with extremely racist content, especially against Albanians, and war propaganda regarding the wars in Bosnia and Croatia. Our parents were not comfortable with us watching that. But then, all of a sudden, they started this Treći kanal, the third channel, which focused strictly on arts and culture. It had a well-selected film program of about a hundred movies – the best cinema created in the twentieth century.

*Someone communicating by hollering to someone else across the street.*
*A car door is soundly slammed shut.*
*Car pulling out and driving away.*
*Another car parked, leaving the engine running.*



So we got to watch Bergman, Lynch, Pasolini, Fellini, Coppola, everything. That’s where I got my film education!

I don’t know this neighborhood!

Anna Bromley: I was told that there used to be a river here.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: It was called Prishtevka. It was covered over before I was born, probably during the sixties, when the city was not capable of managing water resources and its inhabitants became concerned with the water quality. They complained and asked the city council to cover it in order to protect public health. Within five or six years, they gradually covered the entire river. When I see pictures of the river, this looks like a different place. Instead of this street, there was a river and small wooden bridges that people would cross to see neighbors or go to town.

*A rattling truck is pulling up very close by.*

In that moment in time I think it was pretty impossible to come up with a smarter solution – because Kosovo was so underdeveloped. It was the only province that was not supported by Yugoslavia; infrastructure projects were just not a priority.

Actually, the main priority of that period was convincing Albanians to move to Turkey. According to an agreement between Yugoslavia and Turkey, people that considered themselves more Turkish than Yugoslav

could move to Turkey. From the end of the fifties through the sixties, people that felt they had more cultural ties with Turkey would sell their properties and move. Often enough for economic reasons, but also because they felt politically pressured by the newly created government after World War II.

Today when I go to Turkey – which is often, because it's one of the four countries that Kosovars can travel to without a visa – I often end up in areas of Istanbul where they ask, "Are you an *Arnaut*?" Which is an old name for Albanian.[2] There are several areas in Turkey where people that moved during that period would be relocated by the government.

At the same time, this used to be a Roma neighborhood. And Roma neighborhoods, because they were underprivileged, used to be ghetto neighborhoods. I don't know this neighborhood well because it never felt safe to come here.

*Truck driving by quite close.*
*A little child is saying something.*
*An adult's voice answering.*

But that might just be a story that was told when I was a kid. During my childhood in nineties Kosovo, it was just not safe to go everywhere.

After the war in '99, the Roma deserted the city because they were considered war collaborators by the majority of the population. There is a famous story that Prishtina people tell. During the bombardments, the park where we started walking became an illegal



market for all kinds of home appliances that had been stolen from people who deserted the city. A lot of Roma were part of that market but we, as a majority group, never revisited that story. To begin with, we never talk about the life of Roma people here. People who live in extreme poverty! These stories need to be revisited in order to create a greater understanding – the word "collaborator" doesn't justify everything.

*Another truck driving by.*
*The sound of voices and dishes from a sidewalk café.*
*Laughter, like someone had made a joke.*

Only a few Roma families remained in that street, maybe only one. Very close to the Hivzi Sylejmani Library, there is also a huge Roma neighborhood. There were famous musicians that were part of the Radio Television of Prishtina orchestra. The street where the Hivzi Syleijmani Library is located was a famous eighteenth-century merchant street. It was the street where everybody mixed, forming a Roma-Jewish-Albanian-Turkish neighborhood. Some of the remaining but deserted pre-World War II houses are known to be Jewish houses. Just as the Roma did in '99, the Jews had deserted the city after World War II. The ones that stayed decided to identify themselves as Serbs.[3]

*Steps on cobblestones.*
*A buzz saw can be heard from a little further away.*
*The sound of a waterway somewhere nearby.*

I haven't been here for long. I think I once shot a scene here but it's changed since then.

Anna Bromley: There is water!

Kaltrina Krasniqi: I can hear it.

*From a gully comes the sound of a small river.*
*For a second, sounds of the underground stream take center stage.*

I actually think I shot the scene here. My short film from 2012 was the only war film I've ever made. I didn't feel comfortable making another one without ever processing what went on here during the war. At the time, it was difficult to find areas untouched by the aggressive reconstruction.

*Rumbling motorcycle leaning around the corner, moving away.*

The location scout brought me to this neighborhood – there were at least two small streets that were completely as they had been before the war. And this small street was one of them. Now the house and the facade are new. That's why it took me a while to understand if it was the same street. But besides that, I don't have memories of this part of the city. I always lived in the center.

*Footsteps on the pavement.*
*Once again, the underground river sound.*



I like the view of the park from here. This area continues to be very poor. Since it's so central, in ten years it will probably be sold to construction companies for new apartment buildings. It's really crazy to see it in this state. What's nice is that it still has the old *kalldrëm*, the cobblestones. It's interrupted here, and I wonder why. Various local governments made some stupid decisions, especially when it came to cobblestones – it was a priority for them to get rid of these after World War II.

*Vehicle driving by.*

The local government worked very hard to divorce Yugoslavia's life from the Ottoman Empire. Cobblestones are considered part of the architecture and heritage from that period, which is true. But what's wrong with them? They're beautiful.

Actually, here is one of the oldest bakeries, if it still exists. It's called Furra Rekordi. They still have the chimney. Our parents loved to come to this bakery. Especially during the fast. Although they were atheists, they used the opportunity during Ramadan to come to the bakery and get that … see!

Anna Bromley: It smells so good!

Kaltrina Krasniqi: The circular round bread is best during the fast. I'm embarrassed to say that I don't know what it's called in English. People would come and get this bread because they would be baking so much during the day that the quality was amazing.

*Energetic steps on the cobblestone.*

Even if you were an atheist and not part of the rituals, you would come and wait in line at this bakery to get *somun* – an aromatic, puffy flatbread baked in a wood-fired oven.

*Sound of flowing water mixes with traffic sounds.*

The river is under here, too. It comes from up there. The cobblestone is still here but is interrupted again over there somewhere. And I think that the main bridge was here. But it's not there anymore.

Now we're approaching Dodona – a theater that was established at the end of the eighties for children and youth.

*Car doors closing.*
*Cars starting up on the hill.*

After Kosovo was stripped of its autonomy by the Serbian regime, all public institutions including theaters and concert halls were placed under Serbian control. This was the only theater that was allowed to be used semi-legally. In the nineties, Prishtina's cultural life migrated to the city's periphery and Dodona was one of these venues. People from the Academy of Arts, all of the directors and actors, would come and organize activities and theater productions.

I think we missed the street. It's over there!

On Sundays they had puppet shows for kids. And as



kids, we would come to see them. The schools wanted to avoid creating a lot of traffic of kids and parents – they didn't want them to be police targets. So it would just happen from time to time.

*Arabesque pop song from a car radio.*

Then something really interesting happened in my personal life. Around '95, when I was fourteen, my uncle, who was the head of the French department at the University of Prishtina, was invited by the acting department as a diction lecturer. I went with him regularly to watch some of the most controversial theater pieces – some of his students were taking part, so he'd listen to them speaking on stage.[4] That's how I watched probably everything that was produced during that period. I remember *Waiting for Godot* most clearly. I had read it that year and was amazed to actually get an opportunity to see it in a theater. Luan Jaha and Shkumbin Istrefi, who performed it when they were very young, are still two of the best actors working now.

I had the opportunity to work with them on films. Whenever I see them, I say, "Well, even if it's only once, you'll have to bring it back on stage for me." When they talk about that period, about acting in *Waiting for Godot* in the nineties, they say that, although they learned a lot from working together, it was a very depressing experience. That to go back to it would be like reactivating trauma.

*Motor purring as it passes.*
*A motorcycle howls as it climbs the hill.*

Anna Bromley: It seems Dodona is still active.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Yes, but the status of Dodona has always been precarious. It was initiated as a city theater dedicated to children and youth. After the war, as far as the legal infrastructure is concerned, they couldn't invest further or claim the institution as part of the municipality. As a result, Dodona couldn't employ its own company of actors and was financially dependent on ticket sales. Their children's program was always popular, so financially they could maintain some of the aspects of the theater.

*A small truck rattles by, its old engine groaning.*

But in order to pursue more serious productions they would need support not only from the local, but also from the central, level. In the last government, I think, they were quite intensively working to try and find a sustainable solution.

*Kaltrina's and Anna's steps on the pavement.*
*The traffic becomes heavier.*
*A horn honking.*
*Clinking cups and people chatting in sidewalk cafés.*
*Somebody exclaims something.*



Anna Bromley: Compared to people at the margin, I'd see academics as a rather privileged group. But when I hear about Kosovo during the nineties, it seems to me that they suffered a great deal from the repression.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: That's true. As kids we were told on an everyday basis that we needed to be careful – at school and at home. We had to make sure that we were not provoking anybody in any possible way. This wasn't easy at all – and you actually risked sending your parents to prison.

Anna Bromley: How?

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Let me give an example, a small episode. But let's go this way! I think we're going in circles now.

*A lot of passing vehicles, the noise of a multi-lane traffic artery.*
*A car rushes past very close to us.*
*Startled footsteps.*

Careful! I'm just so used to this kind of traffic and keep forgetting that you're not.

*Kaltrina's and Anna's laughter fade into the noise of rush-hour traffic.*

When we were about ten, my sister and I were at my aunt's apartment. Our two male cousins were playing

in front of the apartment building. That was what we usually did when we were kids – we would play in our own neighborhood. For some reason, one of them got into a fight with a Serb kid.

*The rhythmic sound of a diesel truck stopping to unload.*
*The sound of Kaltrina's and Anna's footsteps on a smaller side street.*
*Store owners talking across the sidewalk.*
*Doors opening and closing nearby.*
*Pedestrians rushing into small shops.*

Over a ball or something stupid. And then I remember that all the adults in our house were really scared. They were afraid that the Serb neighbor would call the police, and that if he did somebody would end up going to the police station. If you ended up in a police station, you would definitely be beaten up, and you wouldn't know when you would get out.

It was the first time as a kid that I had seen grown-ups helpless. Any sense of security and safety was lost from that moment on.

Luckily the neighbor came and just threatened everybody but didn't call the police. The neighbor was well aware of what would have happened. Nonetheless, he really made sure to threaten every grown-up in the household, saying that if this happens again he would call the police and, "You know what will happen."

This was the intensity and the dynamic within the regime. So we would be really careful not to get in those kinds of situations. It was safe if you spoke Serbian well;



you wouldn't get into strange situations and could pass as Serbian when needed. It was difficult to watch grown-ups do that. On one hand, they had to live as second-class-citizens and, on the other hand, they wouldn't want you to inherit that attitude in life. It was difficult to not feel this way when you saw your parents dehumanized on a daily basis. They had to renegotiate their everyday life every second that they were out on the street.

Anna Bromley: Kosovo's school system was taken apart by the regime – that also contributed to a kids' need for special care. Hasn't this led to breaks in women's careers?

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Everybody's career was disrupted in the nineties, apart from people that were directly involved in the educational or health systems. Those made sure to create a parallel system that would be in service of Albanians. People with other professions – no matter what gender – were excluded from public life.

*A car motor starting up, stands idling for some time.*
*A few vans whiz by.*
*Kaltrina talking vigorously despite the traffic noise.*
*Anna and Kaltrina are passing more and more vehicles sputtering as they start up.*

Our aunt was a lawyer and our mom a linguist. But then the situation changed for our mom. She divorced and had to support my sister and me. So she continued to work as a translator.[5] At some point in the nineties, my

aunt, because of her legal expertise on state institutions …

It's busy today, man! Uh!

*A truck passing by very close.*
*A multi-lane roadway then flows steadily and swiftly, but also quite loud.*

Maybe this way!

She was a legal expert on international matters, specialized in representing the interests of workers that have been employed by companies abroad. In Kosovo, there was this particular migration history in the sixties. Yugoslavia had established a workers' exchange with Germany and Switzerland. A lot of people would go there to build cities and infrastructure. My aunt would make sure that those international workers received pensions after retiring.[6]

*Laughs halfheartedly.*

But what the Germans and the Swiss were not anticipating was that people and their families would want to continue living there. They were like …

*Shifting her voice to a higher pitch.*

"We invited you to work, so why do you want to stay?"

*Lowering her voice back to mid-range.*



Should we cross here?

*Humming engines.*
*A car turns, tires squeaking.*

Of course, to prevent them from staying was against human rights and also illegal. So every Yugoslav state created a department that would deal with the rights of these workers. My aunt would represent them as a lawyer. But then in the nineties she was out of work. A lot of people that she helped during the eighties had other family members who then came to her because they knew that she knew the system and asked her to represent them. And she represented their interests. She helped them to get the pension they deserved.

But that was pure luck, because a lot of people of our mom's and aunt's generation were in their late thirties and forties then and out of jobs. Once the war was over, this ten-year gap was not helpful in terms of getting back into the workforce. I mean, the nineties was a very dynamic decade to be so isolated. And then instead of them going back to work, it was their kids joining the workforce and supporting the families. This contributed to an unhealthy relationship between generations. A lot of kids feel like they were never real kids. And a lot of parents feel like they were never real parents.

Anna Bromley: In Germany there is a growing debate about the unrecognized situation of migrant workers and the discrimination they encountered.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: It is painful to look at it from our perspective. Because of our specific political and historical circumstances, the Albanian community is now looking back at four major migration waves – in the twentieth century alone.

*On a quieter street.*
*Birdsong mingles with the sound of cars braking as they pull in.*

For some reason our migration focused on Europe, and not so much on the Americas. I think this had to do with this agreement between Yugoslavia, Germany, and Switzerland, because the people who migrated could have a legal status if they wanted a job. But then they had nothing else. There was no structure to integrate these people. From the moment they entered the country until the moment they left, they often felt completely foreign. They must have felt that they were there for a particular purpose and that they were not welcome. As a result, they lived in these countries for decades with the dream of returning home – and home being Kosovo. But when you live in another country for four or five decades, then when you come back home, the home is not the home you knew. And where you live is not home either. Your home is in between.

*Traffic picking up again.*

These in-betweeners had kids. And those kids were not allowed to feel at home in Germany. They were to



participate in this grand dream of their parents about their return to Kosovo. But when they returned to Kosovo, their kids didn't feel that they were Kosovans either. Of course it was much more natural to try to find and figure out ways of living wherever they were born. Now the third and the fourth diasporic generation has gradually started to detach from its Kosovo roots; they're trying to find and create their own identity and recognize their divergent identity-formation in those countries. We're finally seeing good films from these guys and are reading some interesting books, which I find impressive. I can't wait to watch more – those kids are the most honest mirror to us here and to themselves there.

*Bus turns noisily.*
*Then a few rattling engines.*

I think it remains important for them to understand that in-between status, since it was a continuation of feeling foreign. That's not a pleasant feeling, especially in Europe. Europe has never been nice to foreigners.

Anna Bromley: Are we approaching Kino Rinia?

*Very busy and noisy street.*

Kaltrina Krasniqi: The word *rinia* means youth. It's one of Kosovo's oldest cinemas and it used to be the most popular cinema in the late seventies and eighties. All the famous blockbusters used to be shown here.

Cinemas were important social gathering places. People went weekly and saw it as an opportunity to meet friends – just like in other parts of this planet. But in the nineties, the entire management of cinemas changed. And the cinema program …

*Laughing.*

… was filled with pornographic movies. All kinds of them – in the city center! So, we would go out with our mom and she would constantly say: "Oh, don't look!" Because of all the huge pornographic posters all over the city. That has created a distance between the people and cinema.

I started going to the cinema at an early age. That was in Kino Armata, which was the central cinema. Its morning program was dedicated to kids. I watched all the famous Russian and American cartoons there. We would go with the school too.

The last time I was in Kino Rinia was in '97, I think. After many years of pornographic programming they brought in a blockbuster, *Independence Day* or something like that. It was not the kind of movie that I liked, but I just missed going to the cinema so I went and saw it. My mother was horrified that I had entered a building that was not managed by Albanians. I didn't think they paid any attention to me. First of all, I was a girl and secondly, I was able to speak Serbian.

*A public announcement in a high-pitched voice coming from further away.*



Last week I read the news that finally the municipality has solved the legal issues with this building. Now it belongs to the municipality. It's the first time that the municipality claims a public space in the center of the city. There was a dispute between the municipality and massive corporations and other stakeholders claiming ownership over the building. Now I'm really eager to see how the municipality is going to use this opportunity. It could serve as an example for other venues that have been occupied by businesses and have legal issues with them.

*A short, gentle honk.*

Over there is a cinema for over 300 people. On the second floor, there is a small cinema for about a 100 or 150 people. But there's also an outdoor cinema, over there. In this part of the world, outdoor cinemas were extremely popular. This is where the screen used to be!

Anna Bromley: I wish this would be reactivated!

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Me too. It's an unusual place to have a cinema. I truly hope they'll do a good job with this. It's a very important step and it was a crucial fight.

*Chatting people.*
*A slamming car door and then a car driving off beside Kaltrina and Anna.*
*Its engine purrs evenly, like a sewing machine.*

Being in a federation such as Yugoslavia created a lot of ownership issues as far as public property is concerned. Sometimes the legal battles are not only local legal battles, but they are also battles on a state level. Often neighboring countries try to claim certain properties as their own because these were part of Yugoslav business organizations. So try to understand how to solve property issue after a country ceases to exist! When you're a citizen of a country that has ceased to exist, you gain a lot of knowledge of this kind. I don't know whether this will ever be necessary again in the future. I hope not.

*Deep, reverberant drone.*
*Footsteps bounding down a few steps, opens into birds singing.*
*Outro jingle.*



## Endnotes

1 Siobhán Cleary's documentaries, such as *The Truth Lies in Rostock* (Channel 4, 1993), on a fascist attack on a refugee reception center and the homes of Vietnamese workers, and *If We Can Dance* (Guava Productions, 2013), on a Kosovar feminist initiative organizing a peace concert in their refugee camp, were produced with the substantial involvement and from the perspective of victims of racist hate crimes, dispossession, and forced migration. Cleary is an independent filmmaker, director, and writer for Rebel Sister Films.

2 Translator's note from Plator Gashi: *Arnaut* is the common exonym used to refer to Albanians during the Ottoman Empire (in Turkish), which was then borrowed to other Balkan languages. It is not, however, equivalent to Albanian – it is used only in historical contexts that specifically have to do with the Ottoman Empire. It might be received as derogatory today if used without context. The modern Turkish word for Albanian (e.g. an Albanian person) is *Arnavut*, which derives from this.

3 The Kosovar Albanians, who, before World War II were being threatened with displacement by the Serbian-dominated government of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, were in part supporters of the Italian and later German National Socialist occupiers. It was from here that the Waffen SS had recruited its 21st Mountain Division Skanderbeg, which terrorized Jews as well as Kosovar Serbs.

4 Kaltrina's uncle Halit Halimi (born in 1942) earned his PhD in linguistics at the Sorbonne. Upon returning to Kosovo at the beginning of the seventies, he became the head of the french Department at the University of Prishtina. His area

of research was social linguistics, contrastive linguistics, and theory of translation. He passed away in 2019 in Prishtina.

5 Kaltrina's mother, Vera Avdyli, was born in Peja in 1953. She studied Albanian language and literature at the University of Prishtina. Throughout her life she worked as a Serbian-Albanian translator and legal interpreter for various governmental bodies until her retirement in 2018. Currently, she lives in Prishtina.

6 Kaltrina's aunt, Hida Halimi, was born in Peja in 1948. After studying law at the University of Prishtina, she worked in the legal office of the Entity for Social Security, a governmental institution, protecting the rights of Kosovo's seasonal workers in Western Europe. She was fired from her job in 1990, the year Milosevic's regime revoked Kosovo's autonomy. She used the next decade to go back to her primary passion, writing, becoming the first woman to have published a novel in Kosovo; a fact that made her very sad. She died in 2012 in Prishtina.

# 3

[An afternoon café at a recording studio in Prishtina's Velania neighborhood.]

*Jingle.*
*A soccer ball bounces back from a wall and is kicked back toward it.*
*It stutters as it jumps back and forth.*
*Off in the distance, a faint, long, high horn.*

A kid: Whoa!

Anna Bromley: What Toton Pllana would like to do with Kino Rinia.

*The thud of the ball being kicked repeatedly against the wall.*
*It rebounds.*
*The child hollers for something.*

In a text message, Toton apologizes for the lack of air conditioning in his studio.

*Nearby buzz saw.*
*It howls as two logs are pushed in.*

I indicate that I'm okay with this and look for the location, using the Google Maps pin he had sent. There was a photo in the message. An aerial view of a blue and white sun shade. And a baobab

tree with café tables in its shade.

*Convivial voices of a garden café beside the sidewalk.*
*People talking and laughing.*

It's in the neighborhood that Kaltrina fears will soon be gentrified and expensive. So far it doesn't look like it is.

*A voice calling from further away.*

Toton Pllana: Hello, Anna!

*Now indoors.*
*In a reverberant room.*

I just appear out of nowhere.

*Sparkling laughter.*
*Key jangling.*
*Then inside a soundproofed recording studio.*

I'm a 45-year-old guy that has been in and out of the scene – from nineties heavy metal to following bands and helping bands generally. In the postwar nineties, I became a techno DJ. Now, when DJs my age are becoming softer, I'm going harder. I'm an optimist. When the pessimist says that it's f*cked up, the optimist says, "It can be f*cked up even more."

*Laughs.*



That's me. Overly optimistic like my dad used to be. I grew up around musicians. I call myself the musicians' best friend. That's what a DJ is.

I'm overly political in many ways. I could say that I'm a political activist but a Facebook political activist. From the comfort of my home, I'm an internet warrior.

*Laughs.*

It's weird talking about myself.

Anna Bromley: You moved to London shortly before the war, is that right?

Toton Pllana: '89 was the first time I went there. There was basically no hope, no future here. My parents didn't want me to grow up in a place like this.

I was lucky to have a sister living in London and I could go through her. And then another sister went and lived there. And another one moved to New York. All my siblings and I moved to other countries. I started my first half year of secondary school here in Prishtina and then carried on with secondary school in London until earning my General Certificate of Secondary Education. Then in '94 my father died and I came back to Prishtina to take care of our mom. In '97 I went back to London for a sound-engineering course. The war broke out and I volunteered to join the KLA to fight.[1] I was turned away the moment they saw me – they said that I wasn't cut out for war and that I should stay in London. My mom was in New York and Istanbul

during the war. When it ended in '99, she came back to Prishtina. I came back too and we met up here.

I've been here ever since, except for 2012 when I went to London to do my master's degree in audio production at the University of Westminster. After that I set up my own studio here. I do recording, mastering, mixing, and also work on my own things.

Anna Bromley: You were part of Urban FM.

Toton Pllana: Urban FM was set up right after the war. I was one of the people who set it up. For a time, Urban FM was based in this room and produced their programming here. In '99 this was our small production studio. We had this show for about two hours a week. We would prerecord it on CD or minidiscs. In the early 2000s, we could use the Radio Prishtina building to broadcast our shows from the studios there – from the building which is still home to Radio Prishtina.[2] We had a daily two-hour slot using their studios and an FM frequency. But we were independent from the politics of that time, and also from Radio Prishtina.

Back then I also worked for a station called Blue Sky Radio. Blue Sky would pay and Urban FM not. It felt like a good marriage between the two stations: Get paid at one place and work someplace else. I moved in and out of Urban FM. Left it many times, came back many times if they needed me. I would train new journalists in sound editing and technology, or I'd come in to produce jingles or just contribute ideas. I was like a friend of Urban FM.



Anna Bromley: I was told that it was an important hangout for the music scene and music lovers.

Toton Pllana: We would play anything from ambient to death metal. We introduced a lot of music. And a lot of people would come in and bring us their music collections. We would do DJ sets on the radio. Later we brought international DJs in to do a set and a party.

Urban FM did establish a standard, fostered a scene, and was a starting point for everybody. That's what people needed after the war! There are bands in Prishtina that formed thanks to listening to music being played on Urban FM. We wanted something new – although we grew up in Yugoslavia, which had a great music scene. It was, as we call it, communism with advertisements. A communist country that produced Coca-Cola!

*Chuckling with laughter.*

Not far from here you could go a few times a year to see bands, from Nick Cave to Iron Maiden. But during the ten years of institutional halt throughout the repression, we didn't have access to radio – both in the sense that I didn't have friends running shows, and that we couldn't speak our own language on the radio.[3]

Anna Bromley: I was told that the festivals here were legendary. I've heard of the Boom festival.

Toton Pllana: I remember Boom. I was a kid. I don't know which edition of Boom I remember. It might be

the last one – ’86 or ’87? My sisters and cousins were all into music. They were friends with DJs and would take me along.

Then Milošević and his nazis came and outlawed everything for ten years. We couldn’t really do much. I was living in London and was sending music to my friends. After I came back here, my sister would send music from London and I would record it all on tape for friends, to keep the spirit alive. There was an underground scene – in the sense that there was a crew of people listening to music, getting together to have heavy metal or punk parties. And there were some bands here and there. And then, all of the sudden, there was a boom of bands with no instruments! We couldn’t buy guitars, amps, or drums, so we had to make them ourselves. A friend of mine, Ilir Hoxha, an electronics engineer, would build amps, pedals, and instruments. He built his own drum kit.

Kosovo in the nineties was a perfect punk scenario. You had some one million of us that completely opposed the state in just about everything. So, here you have the perfect punk album of all times, lasting for ten years. That’s longer than the Sex Pistols!

*Chuckles.*

When I talk to my stepdaughter and her friends, who were born in the late nineties, they cannot imagine our reality here in the nineties. Actually, she conducted an interview with me, talking about my childhood in the eighties. Me with my BMX bike! The BMX gang of



our neighborhood was called The Ghostbusters. We had one of these 8-bit players that played the *Ghostbusters* music.

*Sings the tune.*
*Di di dit. Dit dun!*
*Di di dit dun dun!*
*Giggles.*

We thought we had the world in our hands! My daughter and her friends see us as a whole generation that lived in a cave. We did not! But imagine if none of that had happened. If Milošević had just decided to stick with working in a bank or if Vuk Drašković decided to never write that book – then we wouldn’t be having this conversation from this perspective right now. I would probably be in Berlin, interviewing you!

It’s not like we’re not normal people now, but losing ten years of your life is hard. Losing ten years – from everybody’s life and from the institutional life as a whole – is hard! When I talk to my stepdaughter and kids her age, around twenty, I’ll say, “You wouldn’t have to deal with this bullshit today if that hadn’t happened in the nineties.”

Take my dad, for example. He was a dean at the university.[4] He was removed from his job by force – an academic researcher that had to resort to giving secret talks – probably in the bathrooms. Isn’t that the lowest of the low? A humanist, interested in culture – you just don’t do that to people! Everyone was treated like that.

Anna Bromley: Would you say that Urban FM brought festival culture back to Kosovo?

Toton Pllana: We reintroduced festival culture. I performed at Freedom Festival One and Two, and helped organize the second one.[5] In the first edition, we had GusGus as headliners. In Freedom Fest Two, we had Red & Mef of Wu-Tang Clan. Maybe I'm mixing it up, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that Dua Lipa mentions these festivals when asked about her decision to go on stage. She said these were the first concerts she went to. And Dua Lipa is the pop queen of the world right now! That's exactly my point, how important festivals are for culture!

I loved Freedom Fest because it really didn't do what was trendy. We did invite commercial artists – but also artists no one had ever heard of before. A festival should provide culture and not what's popular. If I were to organize a festival, probably seventy percent would be music that I don't personally like, but that I consider good to get out to people.

Anna Bromley: Where do people go to see live acts in Prishtina today?

Toton Pllana: I don't go out much, but there's a small venue where bands practice – which is also a record label. Frankly, I don't think there's any good venue to go to listen to music. Prishtina has great bands but no venues. Prishtina has great DJs but no clubs. It has brilliant contemporary artists, but has no contemporary



art museums. It's an oxymoron.

But there's an old cinema building that hasn't been used for years, Kino Rinia. Apparently the municipality took it over. I'm going to help push towards building a concert venue there. I think it's important. I don't want to sound like an elitist, but I just cannot go to little bars to listen to bands.

*Reverberant ambient sound.*
*Footsteps bounding down a few steps, opens into birds singing.*
*Outro jingle.*

## Endnotes

1 The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), a militia, emerged in the late 1980s and was disbanded in September 1999. In Albanian, it is referred to as UÇK (Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës).

2 Designed by Oton Gaspari in 1966, Radio Prishtina is a Brutalist building standing tall in the city center. Its broadcast studios are still functional.

3 In 1990 the police took over Prishtina's radio and television station, Albanian journalists were expelled, and the expulsion of all government employees, health care, media, education, and other cultural, economic, and political institutions followed.

4 Until 1992, Toton's father, Shefqet Pllana, was the dean of the Faculty of Philology at the University of Prishtina. As a professor, he was engaged intensively in collecting and studying Albanian folklore from Kosovo.

5 Freedom Festival One and Two took place in 2009 and 2010, on the anniversary of the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution 1244, when the arrival of KFOR troops in 1999 terminated Serbian rule in Kosovo.

# 4

[Late breakfast at Tiffany Prizren to sundowner at Prishtina's Foundation Shtatëmbëdhjetë.]

*Footsteps hurrying up a street.*

Anna Bromley: How Shkëlzen Maliqi filed a complaint in the newspaper and Alisa thought "Who is this guy?" How their 1997 exhibition "Përtej" came to be and was remade by Foundation 17 (Shtatëmbëdhjetë).

A pedestrian: Do you need help?

Anna Bromley: Yes, where is the Tiffany?

Pedestrian: Just follow this road! Do you see the object with large windows? Pass it and turn left.

*Pedestrian's footsteps rushing away.*

Anna Bromley: When I stood in front of the Dodona Theater with Kaltrina, it struck me that Alisa Maliqi's gallery had the very same name: Dodona Gallery. I need to know more. I get a ride to the southern Kosovo town of Prizren to have breakfast with her and her partner, Shkëlzen.

At the Tiffany, of course, where else?

*A Reggaeton piece – at first distant, then closer.*

*Mellow vocals with reverb and auto-tune, stretching vowels.*

Anna Bromley: Good morning! Sorry, I'm a bit late.

Alisa Maliqi: No, don't worry!

*Humming of voices.*
*Smooth entertainment music.*
*Dishes clatter.*

Shkëlzen Maliqi: The restaurant we're sitting in was once the local library of Prizren. At the age of thirteen or fourteen, I came here and took out a book by Aristotle on the constitution of Athens. I didn't understand a thing but tried, at least, to read a book in Serbian.

Later I decided to study philosophy. I was close to the circle of artists in Beograd. My preferences for studying were art, literature, or philosophy. I chose philosophy because it covered my wider and more universal interests.

*Chuckles quietly to himself.*

During my studies, I worked as a conservator of medieval frescoes in Serbian monasteries. One of my aunts had a house just about fifty meters away from Bogorodica Ljeviška (Our Lady of Ljeviš), a fourteenth-century Byzantine church in Prizren. I was impressed by this as a child. Almost every summer I went to the medieval Orthodox Deçan Monastery. A relative of my mother lived there. And Deçan is so beautiful!



*Plucked, gentle, solo guitar music.*

I wanted to write my diploma thesis about something that I felt connected with as a child. Back then there were no studies available on the Byzantine period. I approached my philosophy professor and told him that I was going to write a study about Byzantine aesthetics, about what Byzantine really means for the philosophy of art, and for artistic ideas. My colleagues replied that this was not a proper subject. They said that the medieval period was anti-philosophical and that there was only theology, which doesn't allow for philosophy. I insisted on my interest in the proto-philosophy connected to antique aesthetics. And that we have Byzantine sources that should be studied.

In the library of the Serbian Orthodox Church, I found the *Patologicheskaya Gretsiya*, a book with the original texts of Greek Christian thinkers that were translated into Russian, before the revolution. I knew Russian. So, I spent six months going to this library, reading the early writings of the Eastern Church. I decided to translate some into Serbian. The final version was like a book!

They only published half of it – many years later in Albanian. I published another part in Serbian, a study on iconoclasm. In the Byzantine period, for about a 150 years, icons were forbidden and destroyed – an iconoclasm which they didn't believe even existed. This was similar to Islam's iconoclastic approach.

After the book was published in Beograd in 1980, I wanted to continue with Byzantine studies. But I could already sense the Yugoslavian Kosovo crisis coming.

I noticed a growing fascism in Beograd. I felt discriminated against as an Albanian, although I was fully integrated in Beograd. In '82 I decided to return to Prishtina. After I came back, I wrote a text against this Serbian propaganda. It made me somehow famous in Kosovo. The Serbian government was really afraid. Suddenly, Kosovo's art scene, which they presumed as being "underdeveloped," scared them. Maybe they feared that the control was less effective than in Beograd or in Zagreb.

Alisa Maliqi: I had never heard about this Shkëlzen, who had published an article in Beograd's news magazine *Nin*. It was a response to a nationalistic article that a member of the Serbian Academy had written. Back then, anybody in Kosovo who responded to Serbian authorities was really brave.

Since my father was a journalist, we used to read all the newspapers from Beograd. We were like: "Who is this guy?" Nobody knew who Shkëlzen Maliqi was. He was never seen in Prishtina. By coincidence, I met him that year. My generation was truly liberal at that time, but he was like somebody from Mars.

*Laughs cheerfully.*

Anna Bromley: I was told he didn't speak much.

Alisa Maliqi: I thought he was shy, since he didn't speak much. But he would tease me. Tease me in ways that made me think that something was going to happen between us.



*Laughs boisterously.*

Shkëlzen Maliqi: I was active in the political scene during the eighties and the beginnings of the nineties. Creating parties. For three or four years I joined the coordinating body of the Albanian Party in Kosovo and in Yugoslavia.[1] I was the founder and, between '91 and '93, the first president of the Social Democratic Party of Kosovo.

I wrote all the documents – but to run a party was something different. In our meetings I found myself unable to speak like a populist and at times was totally blocked. I also had conflicts with Party members because of my writing for newspapers and speaking at conferences. I thought to myself, "Okay Xen, you may be a good thinker and writer, but you're not made for this."[2] Active politics really disappointed me. So I started to mingle with artists and began to work for the Soros Foundation.

*The instrumental music now trickles forth with added instruments.*
*Every now and then a clash of cymbals.*

Anna Bromley: A young culture journalist told me that there isn't much of a tradition of art writing in Kosovo.

Shkëlzen Maliqi: My tasks included editing the journals. I didn't find writers who were able to produce good articles about literature, theater, or art, so I started

writing art and literature reviews myself. In '97 I stepped back from politics and focused on articles in art and cultural critique.

*Shift to more upbeat, bouncy music.*
*Latino beats.*
*Fuzzy singing.*
*Steel drums kick in.*
*Other conversations around us.*

The Soros Foundation had four offices in nineties Yugoslavia: in Beograd, Novi Sad, Prishtina, and Montenegro. In one of our meetings, we prepared the program for the following year. I made a proposal: Since it was difficult to send our artists abroad, why can't we organize an exhibition of Kosovar artists in the Vojvodina or in Montenegro? I never mentioned Beograd.

It was put into the program for '97. In January '97, they called me from Beograd. They asked, "Xen, where is your exhibition?" I answered that I would try to find a curator. They said that I should be that person. I was almost fifty and then gave curating a try.

That same January, Alisa opened the Dodona Gallery and was organizing her first exhibition. The exhibition in Beograd was scheduled for June. In February, Alisa and I went there to see the space. My friend Borka Pavićević was the artistic director of the still somewhat new Center for Cultural Decontamination.[3] We agreed to do it there. After that I talked to a number of artists. Some had doubts about whether



or not to participate. We chose Sokol Beqiri, Mehmet Behluli, Maksut Vezgishi, and the composer Ilir Bajri. They told me that they were really okay with showing in Beograd, since it had an art public that understood what we were working on and could give feedback.

Alisa was the executive producer of the exhibition.

*The music shifts into a smooth, vocal-driven track.*
*It sounds similar to the one that was playing at the beginning of the conversation.*

Alisa Maliqi: I am a very structured person. All the infrastructure, including the art transports, were organized through my gallery. The budget was going through our account and we were very transparent in terms of how the funding from the Soros Foundation was spent.

Anna Bromley: Your gallery was so important for the Kosovar contemporary art scene.

Alisa Maliqi: I ran the gallery as a part of the larger system of parallel institutions – a form of civil resistance to organize our culture under oppression. Before that, I designed costumes and the scenography for Teatri Dodona. I also designed the posters. I kept looking for a space that allowed us to organize exhibitions and other cultural events. I found this empty corner store close to the theater, which became home to the gallery.[4]

The art scene at the time was dominated by a bunch of older painter-professors, but what I wanted in my gallery was a younger generation of daring artists. There

was an experimental scene in Prishtina, very into installations. Dodona Gallery was created as a space for these young artists. I wanted them to keep up their hope during the repression.

There was a rule that students at the art academy were prohibited from participating in public exhibitions. Only after you graduated were you allowed to show your work in public. I decided to break this rule. Counting on my diplomatic skills, I talked to the older professors and organized two annual exhibitions of students' works. I titled them "Perspektiva," which means perspective. The older professors never came to see these exhibitions.

*Reggae rhythm.*
*A brass group grooving quietly.*
*Soft vocals join in.*

Shkëlzen Maliqi: Because the Soros Foundation supported it, Alisa could run the gallery on a professional level.

Alisa Maliqi: The Dukagjini Publishing House sponsored the theater's posters and other publications.

Shkëlzen Maliqi: And they also sponsored the exhibition catalogues of the gallery.

Alisa Maliqi: We really wanted the artists to have these opportunities. To have their work in a catalogue.



*A higher pitch.*
*Sighing vocals.*
*Minor cadences flooding from a tenor sax.*

Shkëlzen Maliqi: And also for the writers who contributed the introductory essays. Some of the works that we showed in Beograd were first presented at Galeria Dodona or the Hani i 2 Robertëve.[5] One of the artists, Mehmet Behluli, had a solo show in both spaces. Almost all of the pieces on view were also shown in Beograd. Maksut Vezgishi had his first exhibition in a café in Prizren in '93. These spaces formed a parallel art infrastructure in the nineties – some people thought that no one would write reviews of these exhibitions. So, I wrote about them in the "Përtej" catalogue. I wrote about these artists who were simply defying the division between legitimate and illegitimate exhibition spaces.

*A snare drum providing an off-beat.*
*A solo piano trickling along.*
*Shkëlzen's voice becoming faint and strained.*
*He clears his throat a few times.*

One of our intentions – Alisa's, the artists', and mine – was to show the fascist regime in Beograd that Kosovo had creative capacity. It was not that we were underdeveloped, as their propaganda suggested. We were simply unfree.

But the exhibition also included a joke.

*The solo guitar again.*
*Slow melody.*
*Plucked tones.*
*Shkëlzen laughs.*

Sokol Beqiri's objects were made of barrels with cones on top – so they looked like ethno-bombs. Later, people were saying that Sokol installed bombs in Beograd way before NATO!

*High-pitched, reverberant, drawn-out static tone.*
*Ultra-low-pitched voice emitting a sonorous aaaaaaaa.*
*Then there is the sound of a busy highway, which transforms into an ambient murmur.*

I take the midday bus back to Prishtina and go to the old city where Foundation 17 and its gallery space is located.

*The low, resonant drone of a modified stringed device introduces a new sonic environment.*
*An echoey interior.*

Sihana Klisurica: *Shtatëmbëdhjetë*.[6]

*Sihana laughing contentedly.*
*Then laughter from a few mouths.*
*Sihana Klisurica, Nita Zeqiri, Ajete Kërqeli, Liri Hashani forming a choir.*

All together: A collective defeat!



*Boisterous laughter.*
*Then an engine rattling softly, coming from the street outside.*

Sihana Klisurica: We opened the Galeria 17 last year. This is our third exhibition, each one following a certain theme. Through this current theme, "Archiving Transition," we look back into past moments in the development of art and culture. Moments that have not been documented or not talked about enough – or that in the background of the political situation in our past have been left undiscussed or politicized.

*A noisy automobile speeding by outside.*
*Engulfing Sihana's voice for a moment.*

For our first "Archiving Transition" chapter, we restaged an exhibition called "Përtej," which means beyond. It was initiated by Shëlzen Maliqi and supported by Alisa Maliqi who, at the time, was running the Galeria Dodona in Prishtina. "Përtej" took place in Beograd's Center for Cultural Decontamination, which was and still is a strong voice against oppression and human right violations. It was heavily attacked for bringing in artworks from Kosovo.

The composer Ilir Bajri says that the artists and exhibition team came to Beograd to talk "people to people" about what was happening and what was about to happen in Kosovo. They foresaw that something bad was coming. Some people in Kosovo called them traitors for exhibiting in Beograd, while a few

others saw this as a heroic act. In Beograd, the exhibition was mostly dismissed by the general public. The dominant narrative there was that Kosovar Albanians don't know about art, let alone about contemporary art. But Beograd's art critics valued this exhibition highly – this was a crucial moment in which the complexity of Kosovo's artistic avant-garde was presented to a broader outside public.

*A low engine hum coming from outside.*
*Then ebbing again.*
*There is a tangible echo in the room inside.*
*From time to time, a sort of soft chime resounding.*

Our remake of the exhibition displays some materials that we've collected, such as the sketches of Maksut Vezgishi's large paintings, which were on view in Beograd. The paintings were destroyed during the war, so all that's left from the work are these sketches.

*A reinforced buzz of static electricity briefly fills the space.*

In the space, you are listening to the exhibition soundtrack composed by Ilir Bajri, who is also a jazz pianist.[7]

*Again, the amplified electro hum.*
*Then a quick, bold piano chord.*
*Repeated electro buzz.*
*And then some percussion.*



*The low chimes are now becoming more frequent.*
*They are interrupted by a multitude of low thunderous timpani beats.*
*Bass, powerful piano strokes.*
*The notes have distinct reverb.*
*Two sharp bangs accentuate a short intermission.*

He programmed the electronic music piece on the computer. This might be the most avant-garde piece of this exhibition; he composed the sound piece and he also wrote the code for it, which was remarkable at that time.

*Delicate, digitally modulated string strokes.*

And then we have the work of Mehmet Behluli. He used tar to cover various things, mostly ideological books. Maybe his work predicted what was about to happen even more clearly than the other works. A year after the exhibition, the first massacres happened. The war broke out and Mehmet's house was burned down.

*The sequence once again.*
*Amplified electro hum, a bold piano chord, followed by a repeated electro buzz.*

But each of them had a feeling that something might happen. Maksut, for example, painted a couple lying down, waiting for something bad to happen. Or Sokol Beqiri. He uses cheese barrels to create the bomb-like structures that he presented in Beograd.

*An amused laugh.*

Covered with colors. He played with the barrels and they ended up looking like bombs. It was very strong, the message he was sending, like he said, bombs into Beograd.

*Briefly, the chime sounds.*
*Then there is silence.*

The Center for Cultural Decontamination was not in the best position. They were attacked by their general public – probably not physically, but in the sense of questioning the act of bringing in artists from Kosovo. Who are they to be shown in Beograd?

*Staccato piano chords come in.*

With this exhibition in our gallery, we want to show the surviving fragments of what happened.

*Piano chords become thicker and more rapid.*
*Overlapping. Growing in volume.*

They tell us about a contemporary art scene that was here. These artists were there before us.

*Deep, oscillating electrical hum.*
*Footsteps bounding down a few steps, opens into birds singing.*
*Outro jingle.*



## Endnotes

1 In an email, Shkëlzen adds: The coordinating body of five parties was established between December 1989 and April 1990. The parties included the Democratic Alliance of Kosovo (LDK with Ibrahim Rugova as its president), the Kosovar Peasant Party, the Social Democratic Party of Kosovo, the Parliamentary Party (which initially was the youth movement), and the Albanian Christian Democratic Party. While the LDK was the leading force, other parties were established to have at least a form of pluralism of ideas and interests.

The coordinating body was active for three years. At the end of 1992, full control and power was taken by the LDK and President Rugova, as well as Kosovo's Government, in exile (with Premier Bujar Bukoshi and his office in Germany). Some of the ministries worked in Kosovo, such as the Ministry of Education, the Health Ministry and, in part, the Ministry of Finance. From 1992 on, Kosovo had an elected parliament – but it was not active. The first and last attempt to constitute the Kosovo Assembly took place in June 1992, but was foiled by Serbian police forces. Later, Rugova did not give permission for it to convene, fearing that the situation could worsen. In 1996, Rugova decided to extend the mandate of the Assembly for another four years, as an institution waiting for a state of peace.

2 Xen is a short nickname for Shkëlzen.

3 Having started out as a theater director and dramaturge, Borka Pavićević worked across genres and art forms to foster public expression that takes action against intolerance and cultural homogenization. In 1992 she co-established the Belgrade Circle. In 1994 she co-founded the Center for Cultural Decontamination.

4 In an email, Shkëlzen added: "The gallery was part of the Dodona Theater. The space was rented from the Serbian administration by a registered private firm of the actor Faruk Begolli. This is how we organized a set of parallel institutions in the nineties to resist the repressive Serbian system."

5 The Hani i 2 Robertëve was an active underground art space and restaurant started in 1989. Run by Merita Dragaj and Fadil Dragaj, it also hosted the November Salon, an annual exhibition for the Kosovar art scene.

6 *Shtatëmbëdhjetë* means seventeen. In 2021, the members of Prishtina's Foundation Shtatëmbëdhjetë turned the workshop of a racing champion and car mechanic, well-known across the city, into Galeria Shtatëmbëdhjetë.

7 Ilir Bajri, *Përtej* (Beyond), electroacoustic composition, 6:37, part of a sound installation, shown in the exhibition by the same name, 1997.

# 5

[A video chat between Novi Sad and Prishtina.]

*An elevator stopping.*
*Rusty manual elevator door opening.*

Anna Bromley: Why Kafu went from the Gjakova Singing technique to Radical Love.

*Steps on concrete, running up another flight of stairs.*
*Key turning in lock.*
*Door opening.*
*Key being placed on a surface.*

Was it Kaltrina who mentioned Kafu? Whatever the case, I certainly had heard a lot about this charismatic musician and activist. For a couple of days, I would try to contact him through every possible channel. The moment I mention Kaltrina, a prompt reply comes with an invitation to visit him in Novi Sad. Because of border conflicts with Serbia, it is necessary to take a several-hour detour. So instead, we set up a video chat.

*Summer sounds from a lively plaza coming in through the window.*
*Church bell ringing.*

Kafu: My name is Kafu but my real name is Bajram. I'm almost thirty-seven. I'm from Gjakova – a small

town in Kosovo that I love and miss. My mom lives there as well as my whole family. I'm a singer and songwriter. Since I was twenty, I have been working as a human rights activist. I chose to fight with love and music. Two years ago, my wife and I adopted a child. He is four. His name is Boban and I call him Bobby. Raising him is my biggest project so far. My other projects, like my band Gypsy Groove, are less important compared to that.

Anna Bromley: You are in Novi Sad, Serbia, right now while I am in Prishtina, Kosovo. You live between both of these cities. Isn't there a passport issue when you commute?

Kafu: I married a Serbian girl. Some people call me a traitor, some call me John Lennon. But that doesn't mean anything to me. In all these war years, with all the pain I had to face, I learned something. I chose love. You can do anything for love, like dealing with the impossible document situation for people in Kosovo.

I met my wife in 2009. Back then I couldn't travel to Serbia to meet her parents, so I decided to try something. My generation in Kosovo still has Yugoslavian documents, simply because we were born in a state called Yugoslavia. After this state disintegrated, the then-ruling Serbian authorities converted them into Serbian documents. I took these to the current Serbian authorities to request a copy of my birth certificate. After receiving it, I had it with me at the border. The Serbian border police said they couldn't let me in with



this document. I tried again. Again, they refused to let me in. This time I told them to recognize me as a human being, born in Yugoslavia – which they claim is Serbian! Even though we don't think of this place in the world as Serbian at all, I used their logic and said, "If you regard Kosovo as Serbian, then why can't I get Serbian documents? I'm born here. I have a birth certificate." What a paradox! After that, I traveled in and out of Serbia every fifteen days, since fifteen days was the legal limit for my stays there. Even after we had bought a house in Serbia, I still wasn't recognized as a human being in this country. But I had read their laws well, so I went to court.

It took me another two years to win the case. Now I've got all the legal documents to live in Novi Sad, near the forest with my loved ones. To get them was one of the most annoying tasks in my life. It's not that I was particularly keen on having Serbian documents. It's also not that I particularly like Serbian politics. And I don't exactly feel culturally connected with this country. But these documents allow me to live the life that I want for myself.

Anna Bromley: You grew up in Gjakova, which used to be an important trading center on the route to Istanbul. There is a significant Sufi legacy, among other Muslim faiths and Catholic communities. The city has always been a hub for musicians. Your great uncle Hadi Bajrami was a renowned singer of the Gjakova style, which has been passed on from one generation to the next.

Kafu: Gjakova is home to a rich variety of religious practices. I am from a Sufi family. We call ourselves the Halveti order. Our prayer practice is based on singing excessively. When I was young, Hadi Bajrami was one of my idols. Growing up in a small city, you just need a living idol! At that time, I also was into Bob Marley. But Hadi Bajrami's music was huge in Gjakova. The songs were mostly about love. The take on love was quite open; it included homoerotic love. The singers weren't always aware of that.

Hadi Bajrami taught me all about our cultural heritage and the song-based Gjakova style, which is oriental. He used to tell me: Just sing what you love the most and that will be the best! I remember him being a modern old man. He knew how to cook, how to live by himself – unlike my father, who behaved like the traditional type of man, like a leader, keeping a *tekke* in our home, the traditional men's only room. But Hadi Bajrami was a social, intelligent person. And I have taken my cue from him.

Anna Bromley: On the internet, I watched the Hadi Bajrami band perform long after he died. A male-only group with Albanian flags on their instruments.

Kafu: As long as they don't promote hate, that's ok with me. I just wish we'd emphasize the Kosovo flag more than the Albanian to underscore that we need to be recognized as a country. Because of the war crimes that happened in Gjakova, most people there are quite patriotic. As Roma people usually go with the majority, Hadi Bajrami decided to be on the side of Albanians.



The band consists of the musicians that are still around. I don't think they are nationalists. All five of them are Roma. I think the flag is a kind of passport with which these minorities can be invited into Albanian society.

Anna Bromley: If I were part of the community, could I learn the Gjakova singing style – I mean, even though I present as a woman?

Kafu: The audience is mixed in public concerts, while in religious events, men and women are physically separated from each other. That's tradition. Well, like most religions, ours is also not really updated! Even though Sufism respects women more than other Muslim orders. But I can start being a feminist by acting respectfully within my partnership and my family. A good way to learn how to treat others is to imagine being one of Prishtina's stray dogs. You'd try to sniff out the good and the bad, to choose with whom you stay, and how you're gonna fight things through in your own way.

Anna Bromley: What a beautiful closing sentence!

Kafu: But I have more time for you!

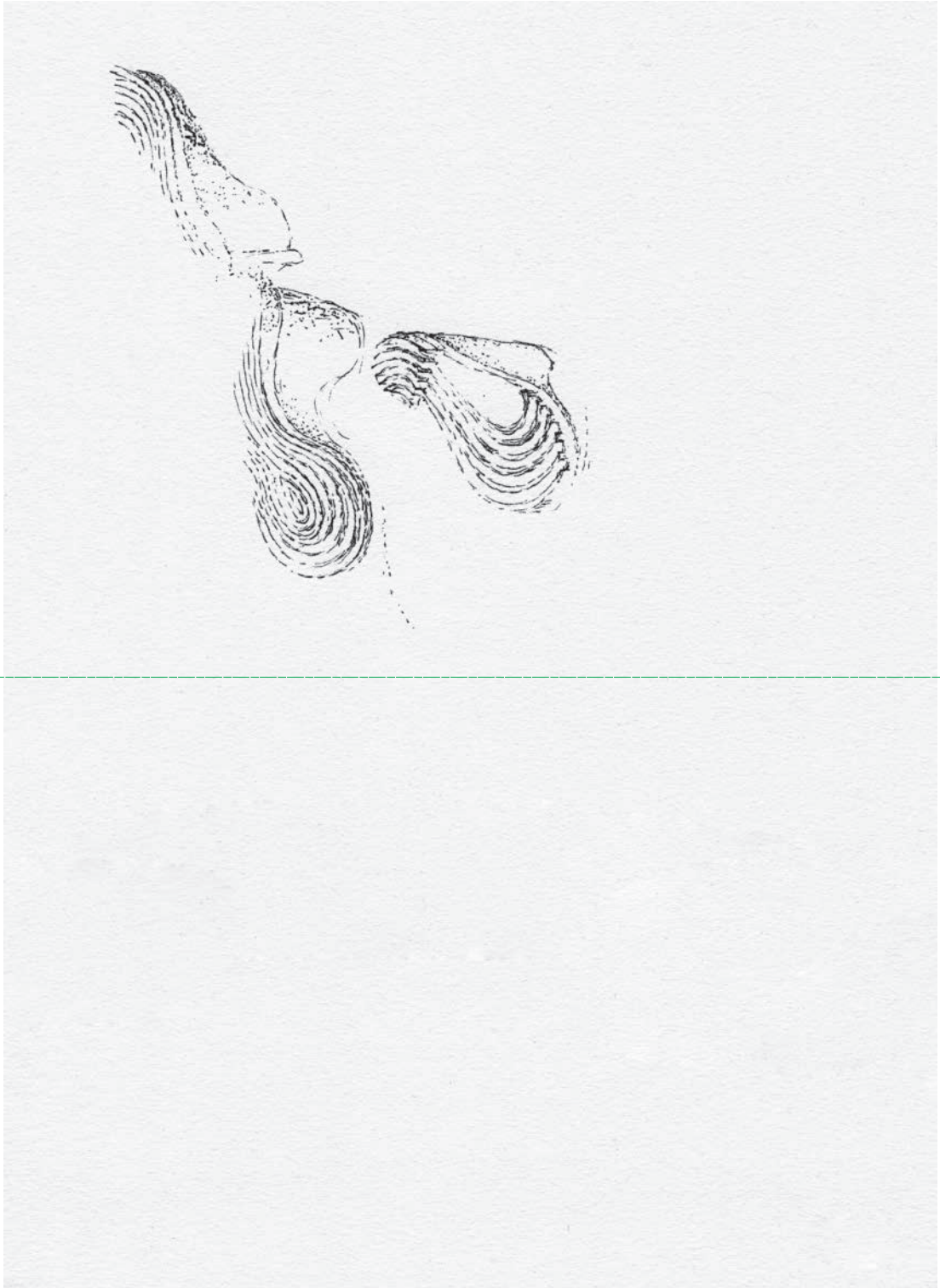
*A gentle motor sound coming in through the window.*

Anna Bromley: In an email you wrote that if I came up to Novi Sad I would be taking the road that Roma used to escape the city during the war.

Kafu: Do you know what I meant? Before the war, we had at least four streets in Prishtina where about ten to twenty thousand Roma lived. Now there are only five or six houses left. When you see the road, you can feel …

When I went to see the Manifesta in Prishtina, I thought that an integral part of the city wasn't really included; that city has also been created by Roma and Serbian communities, not only by Albanians. One of the projects had painted the railways in a neighborhood that was a Roma Mahalla before the war. The people who lived there were forced to migrate to Serbia. I didn't see this mentioned anywhere. Of course I know about the prejudices against Roma, the claims that they supported the Serbian occupation. But let's come back to the facts. I wish that both the artists, but also the producers, would engage more with what happened to the Roma and the Serbian community in this city. Why is it only Roma artists that have to address these issues? I mean, don't we live together? When it comes to people who were not connected to war crimes, shouldn't they have the right to return to their homeland, like everybody else? If the city only includes white people, then what the f*ck we are talking about?

*Low-pitched, electrical hum.*
*Footsteps bounding down a few steps, opens into birds singing.*
*Outro jingle.*



# 6

[Up and down the wooden stairs of the Kinema Jusuf Gërvalla in Peja.]

*Wooden benches squeaking in an aging railway car.*

Anna Bromley: How constipation caught Arba Hatashi's and the Anibar team's attention

According to the Foundation 17 crew, I should visit the young makers of the animation film festival in Peja.

*Train rattling.*
*Tracks squeaking.*

The worn-out Austrian train takes two hours to travel from the capital to the small town of Peja. Anibar is based in a massive vintage cinema. They have a work installed there by Sokol Beqiri, whom Shkëlzen and Alisa Maliqi featured in their '97 "Përtej" exhibition.

Arba Hatashi: There is a lot to say about everything in the cinema!

*Laughing.*

I started working for the Anibar International Animation Film Festival as a volunteer when I was

fourteen years old, in 2013. I have been working full-time for the festival since 2018, and then in 2019 was appointed director.

Anibar was founded in 2010 as an initiative of seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds who wanted to do animation. Their idea was to organize a festival and bring everyone here – so that they could learn how to do animation themselves. What started out as a group of friends grew to be one of the biggest festivals in Kosovo, backed by a cultural organization, and with different components – in cultural education, non-formal education, and public spaces in general. And this is a festival that is active all year round.

Right now, we're at the Jusuf Gërvalla cinema. It's one of the four remaining cinemas in Kosovo from the Yugoslavian period. Built in 1955, it's a protected heritage site today. The cinema was severely damaged during the war; it's been renovated and no longer has the communist, Yugoslavian look of its origins. Once we started working for the festival here, we saw that there was a need for activities to take place all year round, in the sense that in general there isn't so much culture or non-formal education happening in Peja. In 2016 we were the first nongovernmental organization to gain use of a public-owned space.

Everybody knows the cinema. It holds a well of collective memories for all of Peja's inhabitants and is a key reference point for so many. It used to be called Bioskop, then Kino Rad, or Filmi, which means "at the movies." I was maybe in the first grade the first time I was inside this cinema.



*Footsteps going up a wooden staircase.*

Anna Bromley: Tell me about that "Reclaim the City" postcard over there!

Arba Hatashi: "Reclaim the City" was the title of the festival in 2017. As I mentioned, that was the year we got the lease to operate the cinema. On the first day of our programming in the space, the Kosovar privatization agency announced that this cinema would undergo privatization. And history has taught us that all of the cinemas that have gone through a privatization process have ended up being demolished.

We started a campaign and gathered around 7,000 signatures on a petition. That managed to stop the cinema from being privatized at that point. "Reclaim the City" was the slogan about the people's right to public spaces in general, proposing their handover to various cultural or nongovernmental organizations that were lacking spaces of their own.

*Wooden floorboards creaking under footsteps.*

All of these posters are part of the cinema's archive. These international films were touring Kosovo and the rest of Yugoslavia at that time. The writing on the posters was translated into Serbo-Croatian. Kosovo had thirty-three cinemas during the Yugoslavian period.

Anna Bromley: And here, Grace Jones's name in Cyrillic letters!

Arba Hatashi: Yes, they produced the posters in Cyrillic font. And the English words have also been phonetically adapted to Serbo-Croatian, making it more accessible!

*Sparkling laughter taking over.*

Here we have old projection machines and film reels. The projector upstairs was the last one that was in use. It is still functioning and can still screen a 35-mm film if needed.

We're now entering the main hall of the cinema. It has 275 seats including the ones on the balcony. We aren't a fully functional cinema because we lack the DCP projector necessary to screen films, so we do screenings using an outdoor projector. Although we are limited in terms of the types of films we can screen, we organize plenty of concerts, panels, and poetry nights. And it's not only Anibar that produces the programming; other initiatives can also contribute to the program.

Anna Bromley: What was the last edition about?

Arba Hatashi: It began last year when we organized this year's festival. I was told that everything would go wrong because it was the thirteenth edition. Thirteen is an unlucky number, which led to an open discussion between guests and staff members about superstitions. The inhabitants of the Balkan region, including Kosovo, are really superstitious. So, our last edition and panel sessions revolved around that theme.



The topic of the previous year's edition had been isolation. We chose this theme because of the general feeling of isolation during the pandemic. In other countries, people felt isolated due to a lack of freedom of movement, which is what Kosovars are experts on! We've been isolated for such a long time now. We know the feeling of not being able to go to another country. Isolation is also the opposite of an open mindset.

Anna Bromley: We looked at all the posters in the hallway. How did the Yugoslavian film tradition influence you?

Arba Hatashi: It's part of the history and it can serve as an educational reference. In terms of animation, we only know of three films that were produced in Kosovo in the Yugoslavian period. And only now we've found out about the second one. Almost thirty-two years after the first film came out! A month ago we were able to digitize it – and to see it for the first time.

Anna Bromley: What is the film about?

Arba Hatashi: It is a hand-drawn animated film by Gjon Marku. Really captivating in its editing style. It's still in its original '88 form, and was never digitized. And it doesn't have a name. Back in the eighties, Gjon used to work for the Radio Television of Prishtina. He made the film shortly before the radio station was closed down in '89. After that he fled to the US and then to Canada. When we started the festival in 2010, Gjon

was very supportive and came to the festival. A few years later, he gave the Anibar organization his original film copy, as a present. The digitization is being done in Germany these days. Since you cannot digitize it anywhere in Kosovo, a friend took it to Germany to do it.

It's quite funny. Not only because the medium of animation can be quite funny, but because the film is about …

I need to be careful since you're recording! Give me two seconds! Ok, I'll google translate it and pronounce it correctly.

*Laughing.*

Constipation! It's the first animation film that we've ever had about this topic! It's very beautiful. The animator is quite old now. He doesn't want to give the film a title. For him, it represents an unfinished work.[1]

To have something produced in Kosovo, dating back to the Yugoslavian time, is quite important for the whole medium. And for all of the work that we've been doing for thirteen years now.

With animation you don't have the limitations that live-action poses. You can play it with a range of characters, experiment with story lines, use archival material, and tell stories from which no existing images remain. I think this is also something that pushes filmmakers to topics that they personally find important to transmit to wider audiences.

Unfortunately, there isn't that much support for animation productions that express something artistically or experimentally. When we do the festival and the educational programs, we push to represent as many artistic films and different techniques as possible, so that the audience can get the range of visual references, in other words, the artistic richness of the medium. And of course, to empower the audience to find their own artistic choices, and voices.



*Steps creaking on wooden stairs.*
*Door opening jarringly.*

In the fifties, during the Yugoslavian times, the cinema was built with money from the workers' union. In the seventies, the union had built their offices in the back, with a separate entrance and a connecting hallway to the main hall. This is where the syndicate used to have its office. The room is now home to the Peja Animation Academy. It is also being used for French courses in collaboration with the French Embassy. We have our offices upstairs.

*Footsteps climbing up a wooden ladder.*
*Chuckles.*

Let me show you one more space that we refunctionalized. I have to warn you that it's quite hot underneath the roof. There are varying levels of heat in each part of the cinema building, and up there it's like in a mini-sauna!

During winter we use this space for workshops. Our idea was to restore the roof to use it like a multifunctional space for initiatives and communities.

*Wooden ladder creaking as footsteps descend.*
*Gasping.*
*Then footsteps on wooden floor.*
*Eventually steps on flat stone ground.*

And here, near the cinema entrance, is Sokol Beqiri's work! We're preserving it. You know him, don't you? His work was featured in documenta 14. Shkëlzen Maliqi wrote about it.

Sokol is from Peja. This rock was once the pedestal of one of the Boro and Ramiz statues from our city park. The writing on it said *I popullit* – of the people. During the war, they removed the Boroz bust from the statue.[2] In 2002, Sokol managed to get the original stone pedestal and placed a Pikachu Pokémon stuffed animal on it. So here, Pikachu is the people's hero.[3]

*Sound of footsteps walking further.*

We also used to have a picture of Tito here in the office, in this frame. Back in the Yugoslavian time, Tito's portrait had to hang in every office. We found one and kept it here and there in the house, but then somebody stole the picture and left the empty frame hanging there. If you scan that QR code over there, you'll find an article that Vullnet Sanaja, the founder of Anibar and the director of the organization, wrote about the missing picture of Tito. It's not that it was precious! It was just one of the many Tito portraits from the time of the syndicates. But whoever stole it removed the frame extremely carefully, then reassembled it, even putting



back all of the tiny nails. Taking the picture and leaving the frame – why? It's a mystery! Who would do this?

*Amused laughter.*
*Creaking footsteps on wooden floors.*

We have some theories that we're not willing to share!

*Laughing.*
*Door creaking.*
*Footsteps bounding down a few steps, opens into birds singing.*
*Outro jingle.*

## Endnotes

1 In a chat message to Anna, Gjon Marku explains, "The animated film restored by Anibar was a demo reel which I produced in 1988. In it, I wanted to draw a parallel between a sick man sitting on the toilet, struggling to relieve himself, and the situation in Yugoslavia at the time. Back then I tried to get funding, but that didn't work out. In 1989 I left Kosovo and migrated to the US, where I first worked mainly as a roofer and then as an animator for Howard Beckerman's studio in New York. After four years, I moved to Canada to do animation for the National Film Board and joined the animation team for a few TV shows. Today I live in a small town in Ontario, not far from Toronto, spending my days playing guitar and with my cats. I'm still involved in animation, illustration and graphic design – as a freelancer."

2 Boro and Ramiz statues were erected during the Yugoslavian time in many parks to memorize Ramiz Sadiku and Boro Vukmirović. These two were close friends and co-organizers of the Partisan uprising against the Italian Fascist occupation in Kosovo and Albania in early 1941. When the Italian occupation forces caught them in 1943 and prepared for their execution, the two young men refused to die separately and embraced each other tightly. They were then both shot together.

Many incidents of vandalism were reported during and after the war, especially in 1999, when the Boro bust was removed, while the Ramiz bust remained. This was a consequence of the perspective that regarded Ramiz as an Albanian, while Vukmirović, as a Serb, was considered symbolic of the aggressor country.



3 Beqiri titled it *I popullit*. With this, the artist highlights the pedestal as a site of the manipulation that is done in the name of the people. Placed near the entrance to his solo show at the National Gallery of Tirana in 2019, it was the first thing that visitors encountered. In the Jusuf Gërvalla cinema, it is similarly placed near the entrance.

# 7

[Going up to the Drenica Valley.]

*Jingle.*
*A buzz of synthesized crickets.*
*Fading into a haunting sound.*

Anna Bromley: Why Vullnet Krasniqi thinks that a cultural journalist is better off staying in the countryside.

*Door creaking.*
*Fast, bouncy footsteps are approaching on a stone staircase.*
*Going from the staircase out onto the street.*

Why don't you come to my village, writes Vullnet. Today? Or maybe tomorrow? Well, tomorrow is fine. I go to pick up the culture journalist at his newsroom. Via the wide arterial roads, we head for Prishtina's bus station.

Vullnet Krasniqi: You keep introducing me as an investigative journalist, but I would call myself a multimedia journalist. Investigating in Prishtina is like a hamster's wheel. For six years, I worked at the daily newspaper *Koha Ditore.* That was the main newspaper here. I focused on investigating how public money is spent in culture. Since the art scene in Kosovo wasn't used to talking about money, or, more precisely, about

how public funding was spent, the whole art world here was irritated and angry at me.

After two or three years, I found myself writing about the same issues and problems over and over, knowing that nobody was going to change anything. As an investigative journalist, I was unable to do anything to bring about change. What I can do, though, is expose the existing problems in a series of another kind of stories. I can reveal how the institutions make their decisions and what patriarchal attitudes are at the root of these.

But where is our bus?

*Bus honking in the background.*
*A low melodic voice announcing things through a poor speaker.*
*It is talking and talking in the background.*
*A flow of city names.*

Wait, actually there are a number of buses we can take to my village. I think we should take the one back there, at seven.

*Vullnet wanders off, briefly talking to someone.*
*The announcer keeps repeating her list of city names.*
*Each name is then repeated again very slowly.*

Before I moved to my village, I walked home through Rakia Street after finishing work. Every evening I found the same circle of people sitting there. Most of them were subjects in my stories and I had to



pass by them every time I published something. I saw this as my bubble – in which everybody critiques my articles and then I develop my ideas further. My brain was occupied nonstop with this.

But now I get off work, let's say at six, and I come here. I use the twenty-minute wait at the bus station and the thirty-minute bus ride to reflect in a very personal way about my job. I never really had a quiet moment for this when I lived in the city.

Ha … recording.

*Laughs gently and chats to a passerby in Albanian, interspersed is the word "audio."*

Now I have these kinds of conversations!

*Engine noise of a waiting bus.*
*Then the sound from inside a bus.*
*A fuzzy ambient murmur of soft voices in conversation, and the Shqip Dancehall from weak speakers.*
*Occasionally the beats and the higher voices come through.*

In late spring, oil prices started to increase and since then I've been taking the bus on a regular basis. The number of people taking the bus has doubled; I became interested in the fact that so many people can no longer afford to drive. Maybe it wasn't only the gas prices, but also the difficulty of parking in Prishtina.

From April to July, I took a variety of bus lines, collected stories from these conversations with other bus

passengers. People here like to chat – about everything, really. They usually ask what you do for a living and when they find out that I'm a journalist, they want to discuss all sorts of things.

I did a series of seven articles about usual topics talked about on the bus. And about how the main topics of conversation were those that the media wasn't covering. I would have expected that people wanted to talk about the situation in Kosovo. But instead, they kept asking me why we aren't covering this or that of their concerns. In a way, this was an examination of my own job, a reflection of what to talk about in the podcasts I recorded.

*Hissing sound from a bus door opening.*
*A couple of voices are getting louder, apparently discussing something urgent in Albanian.*
*Aahahaaaa. There's a pop arabesque playing through the speaker.*
*Vullnet laughing.*

Fun fact, I have a new fanbase now – people riding the bus from various villages and cities, with various problems, and manifold reasons to take a ride to Prishtina in particular moments of their life.

*An announcement in the bus.*
*Hissing sound from an opening bus door.*
*Then the panting of a dog running down a dirt road.*

I found the dog in the village. They buried him



alive, about three meters deep in a pit for electrical wiring. I heard him cry during a walk and started digging.

*Dog breathing.*
*A long roll of thunder. Still distant, yet already clear.*

Take a look, here's my garden!

Have you seen these stores for organic products in Prishtina? The internationals do their grocery shopping there. When my monthly salary went over a thousand euros, I fantasized about belonging to this group of internationals, and started buying organic products too. Suddenly I was spending around thirty percent of my income buying things that looked so "organic"!

After moving to the countryside, when I harvested my first tomatoes from my own garden, I got pretty pissed off. My tomatoes just don't taste like the ones from the organic store, but I know for sure that they are organic! Perhaps the ones from that store weren't even organic, but just cost more than the ones from the market?

See the potatoes over here? In this lot, I grow potatoes, paprika, tomatoes, and carrots.

*Rolling thunder.*
*Footsteps in the high grass.*
*Tractor driving past.*
*The sound of someone's hands plucking bunches of weeds from the soil.*
*The plucking of a carrot from the patch.*
*The greens are being removed.*

This goes into my salad. I like my carrots best when there's still mud on them. They are way smaller than the ones you can get at the market – and way tastier. I am one of the few people around here who is taking care of a garden. My neighbors think this belongs to my leisurely lifestyle – that I'm gardening just for the fun of it, or because that's what's fashionable for my generation. Nowadays, people in the village don't grow anything. They also don't have cows anymore. They fantasize about adopting an urban lifestyle. My neighbors order pizza or have risotto delivered for dinner. People think it's provincial to prepare food at home.

Everyone wants to move to the city. The house over there hosts no more than two people. That one is empty. This one as well, as they live in Germany now. Also, this one over there. That one is my brother's house and nobody lives in it. And no one lives in that house there.

*Steps onto a gravel path.*
*Intermittent, high-pitched buzzing of cicadas.*
*Gusts of wind.*
*Thunder is rolling in closer and is now more frequent.*
*Vullnet is whistling for the dog.*

In 2018, I organized a protest rally in Prishtina. It was the first ever protest event against air pollution in Kosovo. There was a joke going around about my background – I'm from Drenica, a region known for its armed rebel uprisings during the Kosovo War. So we have a reputation for being rebellious. I referred to this, joking on TV about the air quality being such a lost



cause that someone from Drenica will have to organize a protest!

Even though the city is constantly under construction, there's no urban planning addressing the density of Prishtina's population. Every time I come to Prishtina I see building sites everywhere. But what about the quality of life in this city?

During the pandemic, like many others, I had to stay in my apartment. Everything was closed and so I had lots of time to face this city I live in. I opened my windows and noticed smells that I hadn't been aware of before. I suddenly realized how close the buildings were to each other. When I opened the window, there was no way not to listen to my next-door neighbors' conversations. That's how shoddily these new buildings are constructed! So, I kept the windows closed and played YouTube bird sounds. Then I remembered my piece of land out here.

*The cicadas are chirping more softly and steadily now.*
*Vullnet is saying something in Albanian, mentioning the word cigarette.*
*A gravelly voice replies from a little further away.*
*Both laughing.*
*Footsteps that move away on the sandy ground and then come back.*
*An airplane approaching landing makes a long whoooosh …*
*Vullnet begins to talk with his mouth full, biting off chunks of a juicy piece of vegetable.*

Even I, as a journalist, was a victim of the capitalist promise. This idea that organic just costs more, you know? But look, I grew this from the seeds of a cucumber I ate last year. Almost everything here has seeds, so you can grow them again next year. All you need is to keep the seeds. And to be boring enough – just like me – to live in a village.

*Takes a large bite of his cucumber and chews gleefully.*

Wait, let me clean this for you!

Anna Bromley: You don't need to, I can eat it like it is.

Vullnet Krasniqi: Well then, cheers!

Anna Bromley: Cheers.

*Both chuckling.*

Hmm, very tasty!

*Vullnet is chewing.*

Vullnet Krasniqi: Delicious! I like it when they are still so crisp. And you definitely have to try this one too! Hmm. And this!

Anna Bromley: This one? Oh my, that's pretty sour!

Vullnet Krasniqi: Hmm, yes?



Anna Bromley: Oh yeah, really!

*Both cackling.*
*And the crickets keep chirping.*
*Now it's almost like a high-pitched soundscape from the background.*

Vullnet Krasniqi: This idea, that if you're not living in Prishtina, you're disconnecting yourself from the life as a journalist, is no longer true. But isn't it weird that people here seem to want to live as if they were big city people? I think the real problem is the disconnection. When you go for walks around here, you just can't avoid these megastores. Only twenty minutes from here, you bump into huge retail stores and restaurant chains. Why do we need these out here?

Anyway, the point I was actually going to make is that people in Prishtina think that as a culture journalist I would always be in working mode. When I tell them I need a break, they think it's arrogant, as if I don't care about their stories. But here in the country, my neighbors are not that curious about my job. They just see me as Vullnet, a person. We talk about the garden, or about the lack of rain. They only approach me when big political scandals happen, thinking that, as a journalist, I might be a part of the government and know things earlier than everyone else. And that journalists hold back the news until they decide it's the right moment to share it.

It's not their fault that they think this! After the war, many journalists in Kosovo attempted to cozy up to

politicians. They wanted to be seen on Facebook and Instagram as the close friend of this or that politician. So, of course, people got the idea that journalists and politicians work together, and that journalists know all kinds of secrets which they wouldn't share. I'm eager to fight that, which is why I've made it my motto to simply oppose all politicians. This is how I seek to create a relation with the audience. I'm against every person who comes to power.

*Low voices of animals coming and going.*
*Of pigs, perhaps.*
*Vullnet whispering.*

Want to bet we're about to have a blackout?

*Returns to his normal tone of voice.*
*Chews and munches.*

The company that privatized the power supply is called KEK. They cut off the electricity every time it rains, citing technical problems. Because it's raining! I mean, just normal rain, not like a tornado. The people in the village don't usually call the officials when there's no electricity. Now I do! And when I sound a bit annoyed on the phone, it takes about thirty minutes to have the electricity working again.

I think what we need to take care of is a parliament that is diverse, in terms of class backgrounds. Our prime minister has never been employed in his life. Did he ever have to get up at six to go to work? Did he ever have to



wait for his paycheck? When I asked people in his office, they were like …

*Disguises his voice.*

But he was building the Party!

*Returns to his normal tone.*

Only eleven percent of the ministers and deputies has ever worked in regular jobs, according to the sources that I checked. This means that almost ninety percent of the people who govern us have no idea about our daily lives. My brother is a truck driver. He gets up at five every day. To negotiate a hundred-euro pay raise, he and his colleagues had to go on strike. Members of the government have no idea what it's like to earn six hundred euro per month when you need eight hundred to live. How do you come up with the missing two hundred?

*Inside a room that reverberates.*

Let's see where the lighter is.

*Clicking a lighter several times.*
*The friction of a match on the ignition surface.*
*Sizzling of wood as it flares up.*
*Hands leafing through a book.*

Anna Bromley: Shkëlzen Maliqi's book!

Vullnet Krasniqi: *Arti në rezistencë* (Art in the resistance) has really been important for me! When I worked for *Koha Ditore*, I wanted to write about events that happened before or during the nineties, or in the beginning of the 2000s – but there weren't any sources for research. There were a few archives, but you had to know people to be able to access them. I remember that my articles were so short and incomplete. I simply couldn't find material to make them denser and richer. Shkëlzen did a really good job with this book! Not only as a result of his profound research, but also because he has been part of that art scene. Did you know that? He organized the first exhibition of artists from Kosovo in Beograd – at a time when everybody feared the war that was about to come. He and his partner, Alisa, found the courage to go there, with Kosovar artists, and to curate a show.

Nowadays, when you go to the exhibition openings in Prishtina, everybody's just wondering about the after-party. Ten years ago they were curious to know what I was going to write. Now no one gives a sh*t about exhibition reviews. When asking artists for interviews, I always sought to deliver a thoughtful – but also a sharp – critique about the work. Today, I notice a pattern: You can ask artists whatever questions you've prepared, but most of them will answer using a prepared PR narrative, which is being supplied in all their interviews as well as in all their other materials. And if you want to dig a bit deeper into something that doesn't belong to this PR narrative, they seem to regard you as an enemy, and actually not as an art critic.



*Public transport announcer's voice getting stuck on the name of a place.*
*Like a broken record, she repeats it over and over.*
*Footsteps bounding down a few steps, opens into birds singing.*
*Outro jingle.*

# 8

[Sipping Turkish coffee while sitting on a patio in North Mitrovica.]

*Jingle.*
*Brisk steps on the sidewalk,*
*A car speeding by very close.*

Anna Bromley: What Miljana Dunđerin feels about Kosovo.

*Now the surface of the steps changes.*
*It is no longer paved.*
*Steps of a passerby mixing in.*
*A car passing by, going uphill, as another comes down the hill, motors rumbling.*

Boarding the bus to Mitrovica, I get what Miljana was trying to tell me. The north of the country has been left behind. You can see this on the buses, which have neither official tickets nor seat belts. Upon arriving, I begin to feel a slight vertigo from the soft-soaked 1990s pop cover versions playing in the sidewalk cafés. All of which are quite interchangeable.

Across the bridge on the north side, hard rock is playing. You can't really go wrong with the landmarks Miljana painted for me on the city map: a monument and a local banking branch.

Anna Bromley: Hi! Gidje Miljana i Aleksandar Dunđerin?

Passenger: O …

Anna Bromley: Ovaj?

Passenger: Yes.

Miljana Dunđerin: I love my first name. It comes from Old Slavonic and means dear and precious. This was also my grandfather's mother's name – although in a slightly different variation: Milja. This also means dear, something that is very close to you. I bear this name and it continues with me. And what is close to my heart is art. I am really enthusiastic about it, I'm an art lover!

Anna Bromley: You studied art and psychology.

Miljana Dunđerin: Psychology first. But then my determination to make art really made me want to change careers. So I enrolled at the art school, in the painting department.

*The rustling of trees in the wind.*

Anna Bromley: You and your partner run an art center here, and you also cooperate with the local university.



Miljana Dunđerin: Yes, with the Univerzitet u Prištini, which was established in Prishtina in the sixties. After the war, in 2001, it relocated – or I would even say it migrated – to North Mitrovica.[1] A university in the city immediately boosts the general quality of life. Especially when it has an art department with printmaking, painting, sculpture, graphic design, theater, and music. Having art students in the city actually makes it more bearable to live here.

Anna Bromley: After crossing the bridge and entering North Mitrovica, I walked through a street with lots of cafés. They were full of tattooed guys – not hipster tattoos, but the ones that let you know …

*Speaks in a disguised voice.*

"We are the tough guys."

*Both laughing.*

Miljana Dunđerin: Yes, that's right, people here really like tattoos. They'll probably never go out of fashion around here. And it's not a youth thing either – we've always had older people with tattoos. But nowadays, tattooed people also want to look like bodybuilders with torn clothes and all that. It's a year-round catwalk here! But I see the exact same look also in Serbia, Macedonia, and Croatia. And there's absolutely no gender distinction, everyone does it. These are really trashy times, aren't they?

Anna Bromley: I didn't see that many tattoos in Prishtina.

Miljana Dunđerin: I think this might be because of religion. But I'm really not sure. I don't know if tattoos are permitted in Islam. I remember that there were quite a lot of tattoos in Yugoslav times. People who had just joined the army had them done. You can still see them on older people today: JNA tattoos, the abbreviation of the Yugoslav People's Army. Many have JNA on their hand.[2] Or Tito – our ex-president. Isn't that funny?

Anna Bromley: You have to be a fan to have a presidential tattoo.

*Laughter.*

Miljana Dunđerin: That is a bit funny, indeed. Or actually a disaster. A catastrophe. We've always had identity issues. There was always this pressure. Everyone was always trying to cast something as theirs. All sides. Well, and the tattoos tell you: I am Serbian.

And have you heard of this yet? People who want to identify themselves as Serbian make the victory sign with three fingers, while everyone else just uses two fingers. You only need two fingers to make a V, right?

And did you see all these flags on your way here? One half of the city is covered in Albanian flags, supporting the idea that Mitrovica and Kosovo should really be part of Albania. Then you cross the bridge and –



bam: everything is full of Serbian flags! This region is so crazy with these flags and tattoos, and even fingers, but we've long been a mixture of people from all sorts of regions and languages. Our positive and negative aspects continue to mingle. You can write a whole history of survival and licking wounds here.

We've definitely had enough war! But one of the difficult questions we need to confront is how to be able to forgive the killings. And then I wonder whether it wouldn't actually be more fundamental to think about how we can actually survive on this planet.

*A car drives past in the background.*
*Its engine hums smoothly, barely audible.*
*A breeze rustles the leaves on the trees.*

I have to admit that Kosovo has a very special place in my heart. It awakens certain feelings in me. A deep love. A mad desire, beyond reason. Some important places for the Orthodox Serbian population are in Kosovo, holding ancient scripts from the fourteenth century, like in the Visoki Dečani Monastery. I really adore these books! These are very important for my identity. It's not easy to tell myself that this is not ours, this is not my land, this is not my home. It's hard to tell myself to wake up, to not live in the past, that it belongs to other people now. They are now simply the majority of the population and I have to accept that. They make the laws now.

Anna Bromley: At some point in your life, you became part of a minority.

Miljana Dunđerin: Well, yes, I am seen as part of this ethnic group, which is thought to have no manners. At least that's how I always feel. When I mention somewhere, in another place, that I am Serbian, it's as if I'm saying that I eat human flesh. This is really a bad ticket. A tough ticket, but unfortunately, it is our ticket, my ticket now. I wouldn't wish this on anyone.

Anna Bromley: You suggested calling me a cab, although it is quite an easy walk from the South Mitrovica bus station. Did you think that I might feel uneasy in North Mitrovica?[3]

Miljana Dunđerin: Actually, it was only because some people have difficulties in finding our house. Mitrovica is absolutely safe these days. In the past it wasn't. A lot of bad things happened here. I don't want to live through something like this ever again. After all that I've lived through in the past, I need a safe place to live now. The moment when Mitrovica turns out to be not safe, I'll be gone, even if moving on is the last thing I want, really. I'm tired of moving. I don't even want to talk about this anymore. Mitrovica is the sixth city that I've moved to. I want to delete this past, this having to move all the time because of the war. I want it to disappear.

But what can I do? The whole world is watching right now: all eyes on Serbia, waiting for another mistake. What people say about Serbs doesn't necessarily apply to us! Nevertheless, we do certainly have a past that includes numerous war crimes. It is so difficult to



overcome this dirty past, to unburden ourselves of it. Another war – who could want that? Nobody! People are already leaving the country anyway. Parts of my family live in Austria, Australia, and Germany – around the world, but not in Serbia.

Anna Bromley: I can't help remembering something you told me once, that you feel like a refugee here, when it's also your country.

Miljana Dunđerin: Exactly. See those houses over there? They belong to Albanians. But they don't live here.

*The gusts of wind are getting stronger.*

Anna Bromley: Large houses with gardens. Are these empty?

Miljana Dunđerin: Not really. There are still Albanian inhabitants in the northern part of the city today. But there are no Serbian residents in the southern part of the city. We also have Muslim burial sites here in the northern part. The city council takes care of them, although the Serbian graves in the southern part have been vandalized and no one takes responsibility for them. The Serbian community in Kosovo makes up only four percent of the population. So we have far too few votes to make use of our democratic rights. Sometimes I'm optimistic that we can do something, but I'm also discouraged. Nobody notices us, you know? We're

a tiny little dot in this country, too small to make a difference.

On top of that, the situation of the Serbian minority is very bad here. For example, there's only one real urban center for us. The only city that has a Serbian population here is North Mitrovica. And the thing is, the Serbian community only lives in twelve percent of the town – the northern part. In the rest, we're not really welcome. So if you want to live as a Kosovar Serb in an urban environment, then you simply have to live here.

*Palm smacking firmly on the table.*

Anna Bromley: Living in a divided city being the only choice.

Miljana Dunđerin: We do our best to look after our language and to make sure that art and cultural events take place here. There is also a seminary for Orthodox priests in Prizren – the Bogoslovija, which survived, miraculously, in Kosovo.

*A vehicle driving by quietly in the distance.*
*A high-pitched honking sound.*

Anna Bromley: What about the Albanian language, do the Kosovar Serbs also learn it? So that you can speak with the people from the southern part?

Miljana Dunđerin: Actually, only a few people in North Mitrovica can speak Albanian. The younger



generation from the two districts have no interest in meeting each other.

Anna Bromley: No love stories between them?

Miljana Dunđerin: Even if there were any, they would only be regarded as mistakes. I don't know what's going on with the young people either. I do have Albanian friends and I love being together with them. Some of us already know each other from the past and so we talk to each other. I mean, we've been living together in the same city for twenty-two years now. Isn't it sad when whole neighborhoods don't talk to each other?

Anna Bromley: You have lots of exhibitions, concerts, and readings at your art center. Do people from the southern part also attend?

Miljana Dunđerin: Sure, there are also artists living there. And yes, they do come here. Actually, it's a particular group that keeps coming back. All artists.

Anna Bromley: The artists dare to cross the bridge. Across the border, that is.

Miljana Dunđerin: We often wonder how we manage to bring art here with so many borders around us. Before we invite artists, we first have to check their political stance. Are they able to communicate in a culturally sensitive way? In the case of Albanian artists, for example, it is of course about ensuring that the

Serbian community can feel ok and safe. It's not easy to talk about these issues. We don't often talk about how we feel, since many of us generally just feel like we are somehow invisible. But everyone can see us, even if Prishtina doesn't want to see this part of the city. We are not visible in their news.

Most of the people here in North Mitrovica originally came from the center of Kosovo. Me too. After the war, it took me quite a while to get used to this city. After twenty-two years of living here, I still wonder every single day if I have a future here – in that we may have to leave at any time. Now we're trying to understand the processes. So many people were killed. What does it matter whether they were Kosovars, Roma, or Serbs? Every life on this planet counts. How did this happen? But to tell the people in North Mitrovica now, after twenty-two years, that they have to move again, that wouldn't be right.

My mother is now sixty. How would she bear losing her home again? And yet she has lived in a horrible situation for the last twenty-two years. The Serbian enclave she lives in is like a cage. Only very few Serbs live there. She no longer goes out on the street in the evening. My mom lives there as if she were a bug or an accident in the system. She doesn't experience any physical aggression or anything, but there is no one among the neighbors who treats her with compassion or empathy. People just don't want her there. Don't tell me that's a good quality of life! Neither for the Serbs like my mother, nor for the Albanians, nor for anyone else.



I worked with Roma and Ashkali kids for a long time. Some of them have constant problems because of their identity. They insist on their way of life, their own rules. They have always been pushed to the margins. In the last forty years, I haven't seen any change in the way they are treated. Most of them live in inhumane conditions now, or have in the past – under the Serbian or Albanian government. Everyone just turns a blind eye.

*Di dang-dong.*
*A wind chime makes a number of irregular chords.*
*Dang, dong, dong, it moves all the time and mixes with the murmur of leaves.*

Anna Bromley: How do you actually feel about patriarchal structures here?

Miljana Dunđerin: In this part of the world, it's a real disaster. Things have changed here too, but well … phew …

Anna Bromley: Do you think this was better when Yugoslavia still existed?

Miljana Dunđerin: There were certainly many successful women! Patriarchal structures have something to do with life in the countryside. And with the ownership of land, since men own the largest percentage of property. Women rarely own their own property. I can certainly say that for the Serbian community. I don't know about the Albanian community, but I suspect it's

not any different. Besides, under communism, religion didn't seem to play such a big role. And we lived in peace. The return of patriarchal crap is connected to the war. After the war it was acceptable again, whereas before it was seen as ridiculous. But as I said, there were also differences between urban and rural areas. So you're quite lucky if you don't get stuck in the village.

*A car speeds up in the distance, the engine whines.*
*An ascending engine glissando.*

We have a festival here, four days of art by women only. A guy there asks me how I feel, whether I'm scared or something. I tell him, well, I don't feel free. I do in my few square meters, but I need a few thousand hectares. As an artist, I need a lot of space to move freely, you know? I want this kind of freedom.

Anna Bromley: What if more women entered politics?

Miljana Dunðerin: I would love that! Well, we have female politicians, but they are only decoration. When I see the politicians gathering … they make decisions about places they have never been to in their lives. Don't even bother to go there. About fifteen percent of them are women. Never mind that they don't talk about the many other forms of discrimination.

*Kitchen noises are coming from the house.*
*Miljana is slapping her hands on her thighs.*
*The chimes go dong, ding, dang, ding.*



The other day I was talking to an American who works here. He was like …

*Speaks in a disguised voice.*

"Really? You're from here? But you look European!"

*Back to her usual voice.*

So really, Mitrovica is in Europe, just not in the EU. I'm European, for heaven's sake. Really, can you imagine the guy has a huge management position in some NGO here? I can tell you a thousand stories like that.

*A bit further away, a car brakes with a squeal.*

Sometimes I think we're just extras for their NGO salaries.

Anna Bromley: NGOs also sometimes support art projects, don't they?

*Miljana becomes very quiet.*

Miljana Dunðerin: Yes, all kinds of organizations do this, for example Caritas. And that is certainly a form of support. But then they always want to include the term "multiethnic art" in their reports. Isn't multiethnic art a paradox in itself? It's an NGO token, I think.

Kosovo has always been inhabited by all kinds of communities and diasporas. When there are people

from different communities living together, almost everything becomes something of a multicultural affair anyway. My view of the world and my mentality has many Albanian influences: habits, words, dishes, and so forth. I'm surrounded by the Albanian language. Like me, almost everyone here has Turkish, Serbian, and Albanian ancestors. And perhaps others have come along and inscribed themselves in my genes. I would describe my mentality as a mixture, as something hybrid, as a crossing of all these ways of life.

The so-called multiethnic can't simply be engineered in collaborative artistic projects. It grows by itself in making a shared place, in meeting each other, spending time together, experiencing yourself in each other's presence, cooking together, learning each other's language, developing empathy for each other, sleeping together. All of this is what it means to share a culture, isn't it? It's all about synergy! And about realizing that we, who live together with different languages and faith practices, that each of us is multiethnic. If you want to use this expression at all, then use it like this!

So everything I do in my individual artistic practice is also multiethnic, isn't it? I insist that even ten more wars will never compel me to deny this hybrid belonging! Its beauty and garbage – all in one! Of course, I know that it's not very popular in this region right now. What is fashionable around here is to consider oneself as part of a country, a nation. But I don't care if I'm trendy, because I've really been through enough in this life so far. As far as I'm concerned, I could just be invited everywhere to talk about it for the next



twenty-two years, like with you right now. So that I can describe what it feels like to live here.

*The wind suddenly stops.*
*Footsteps bounding down a few steps, opens into birds singing.*
*Outro jingle.*

## Endnotes

1 The Univerzitet u Prištini | Universiteti i Prishtinës (University of Prishtina), founded in 1969, was among the more prestigious Yugoslavian universities. Although initially offering courses of study in Serbian and Albanian, the educational language subsequently became exclusively Serbian. From 1990, Albanian-language education continued only in private institutions, as part of the self-organized parallel infrastructure in Kosovo. The war in 1999 substantially interrupted educational activities. The majority of the Serbian-speaking population left Prishtina but their "University-in-exile" remained active until the Serbian Republic relocated it to Mitrovica and Metohija in 2001. It kept the name Univerzitet u Prištini and continues as a Serbian state university – being one of two universities claiming the same historical name. In Prishtina, the emerging Republic of Kosovo also reestablished its own Universiteti i Prishtinës (University of Prishtina).

2 The Jugoslavenska narodna armija, or JNA for short, existed from 1945 to 1992.

3 Since 1999, the city of Mitrovica has been divided into two parts: The predominantly Albanian-speaking part to the south and the predominantly Serbian-speaking part to the north. North Mitrovica is the urban center of northern Kosovo, with its Serbian majority. Both parts of the city have faced repeated periods of unrest, especially around 2008, when the Republic of Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence from the Republic of Serbia. A sovereign Kosovo has never been recognized by Serbia. Nevertheless, there are ongoing negotiations to establish joint administrative structures for the entire region of Kosovo.

# 9

[A quick hike from the National Library to the Hivzi Sylejmani Library.]

*Jingle.*
*A thin, high synthesized tone, slowly descending in a glissando deconstructed into loose sound layers transitioning into low-pitched chords.*
*Slowed-down artifacts of spoken words.*
*These are accelerated, forming a space with many voices chatting softly.*
*Suddenly, they lose their tempo and drop into a haunting drone.*

Anna Bromley: How Dardan Zhegrova looks back on experimental art venues.

*Engine sounds on a busy street.*

In the late afternoon, Dardan waits for me at the National Library. When I asked around about his appearance, he was described as soft-spoken. I would certainly recognize him from that description, I was told.

I find Dardan quite easily at the library gate, proving that soft-spoken people are not necessarily shy! Since we're running late, we take a step forward to reach the Hivzi Sylejmani Library in time.

Dardan Zhegrova: A few days ago, I asked my friends how they would identify. What comes first? I am a human being. And then what? And I thought, I'd maybe say "male." Even though I identify more and more with nonbinary gender. But then would I identify with nationalists, or nationalism? Like Kosovar? Or Albanian? Or what?

I don't feel very comfortable with this, but I would still say Kosovar because I live here and have a passport from here. And … I mean, so I am human, artist, male, nonbinary, Kosovar. Kind of all this, my dear. And Dardan, of course, as a kind of an umbrella.

*Laughing.*
*Very high reverse beep alert from a car.*
*Engine sound of mini-truck passing by.*

Anna Bromley: Together with Lola and Alketa Sylaj you ran a space in Pristina that became important for artistic productions.

Dardan Zhegrova: Yes, it was called Te Dudi. *Dudë* is the Albanian word for mulberry fruit. A friend of ours, who is also an artist from here, Lulzim Zeqiri, found this small house with a garden that had a huge mulberry tree in the middle. Lola and I went there to check it out. We liked it and decided to keep it as a cultural art space for parties, exhibitions, or to just gather and do things together. For instance, Angry Youth, a collective of artists, designers, musicians, and DJs, formed there. Lola, Vigan Jadroqi, who is another



friend, Alketa, and I organized different events in the house and its garden. Lulzim also came sometimes.

We were running Te Dudi for about two years, from 2011 to 2013. That was such a special time! Some say that Te Dudi was Prishtina's last underground space. After it was closed down, the art spaces around here became more commercial.

*A siren wailing.*
*Then pop music blaring from a car radio right beside us.*
*A scooter driving past.*

This way!

Anna Bromley: What was Te Dudi like?

Dardan Zhegrova: It was a collectively run space. We had a small bar where we would sell drinks: Turkish coffee, Russian tea, rakia, and beer. The drinks didn't cost much, and the money we raised paid the rent. The Dudi was all about collectively doing whatever we collectively thought was necessary at the time.

The house was tiny. We would organize exhibitions or performances and opened the space up for anyone who wanted to do something in it. We didn't have money to pay fees, but whoever organized something, showed work, or performed would get free drinks. It really was an artists' space. For a while it continued, getting better and better, but then there were issues with neighbors and the police started coming weekly. I had to come along to the police station about ten or fifteen

times. Finally, the owner came and decided "enough of this"! And he turned the space into a parking lot, which I still find hard to believe.

*A car driving past.*
*Ahaha, sings a high-pitched voice modulated by vocoder to an electronic reggae-dubstep soundscape.*
*The pop sound is reminiscent of Era Istrefi's idiosyncratic style from Pristina in the 2010s.*
*As the car moves away, it becomes lower and softer.*

The tiny house and the tree are still there, surrounded by concrete, a parking lot. No more dirt, no more greenery. It's weird to see the space like that. But I'm happy when I talk to people about it. Everyone seems to appreciate what it used to be and how much we were connected by it.

*Short, quick taps of a hammer on metal.*
*In passing, somebody is saying something to someone else.*
*An engine tailpipe roars as it goes by.*
*Then several different engine noises.*
*All stuttering a bit.*

At Te Dudi, you didn't have to pay or to consume anything to be there. Since it was closed down, there are almost no spaces left that allow you to just hang out and do whatever you want. The business-driven spaces that we frequent nowadays are quite the opposite of what Te Dudi was. Of all the spaces I go to, the only



non-commercial space is Termokiss, which has a similar vibe. It is also a collectively run space. You can go there and be creative without feeling obliged to drink all day. Te Dudi was dirty! But in a fun way, as it gave us the freedom to feel okay to experiment and do things.

Anna Bromley: It was at Termokiss where I first met you! You were part of the research group who edited the Manifesta book *Mapping Subculture Movements in Prishtina*.[1] I remember you talking about a zine you were producing from the research material and then you said, "We like it messy!"

Dardan Zhegrova: Ehm … sorry, can you repeat this? Was that … a question?

*Both laughing.*

Anna Bromley: Well, I wondered how you approach the process of zine-making. Was it based on lots of interviews about underground spaces?

Dardan Zhegrova: Ah, okay. Got it! The making of the zine follows our intention to remember spaces that don't exist anymore, but which had an impact, an influence in our own circles as well as on Kosovo's cultural and art scene. One of the spaces was Te Dudi.

*High-pitched engine hum from an accelerating motorcycle.*
*Voices murmuring in the background.*

Reflecting now on my memories of it, I have to say that at the time I experienced these spaces as nice and free and cool and whatnot. I keep thinking that Dudi was quite queer-friendly … But thinking back from my perspective today, I'm quite sure it could have been more welcoming, had our collective been more aware of the support that the queer community needs. I mean, we were in our early twenties … finding ourselves, experimenting.

*A notification sound for an incoming message on Dardan's phone.*
*We are approaching a busker playing folk melodies with an electronically amplified shawm – a wooden folk wind instrument.*

As for the zine, we want to find a way to not only show one side of the narrative, but to also address questions about things we were not aware of at the time. For example, most of the other spaces were run by straight men – a small circle of friends.

*The high-pitched, intrusive timbre is swallowing the sound of our voices.*
*It is all accompanied by a noisy playback of poor audio quality. Ping, ping, ping, adds a triangle.*

Dardan Zhegrova: Can we pause?

*The musical theme is electronically stretched and deconstructed into sound artifacts.*



*It turns into a high, persistent humming sound which fades out.*
*Children's voices flash up very close to us.*

The zine is really making me think of how we perceived things back then, how we acted. If I had Te Dudi now, I would do quite different things. At the time it seemed really good. But not so many queer people came by after all. Well, we also didn't host as many queer events as I would love to now.

But for all of us this was a process of finding our identity, dealing with our sexuality, and finding out what fit for each of us and what didn't. If not for Te Dudi I wouldn't be the same person, obviously. I wouldn't be where I am today. But I can't help but thinking that it was not necessarily better than we could do today. And I realized that my local scene tends to romanticize this period and the things that our generation did back then. We compare it to nowadays and say that this was the real thing, and that now it's all about business. Sure, but the younger generation, Gen Z, is way more open than we were back then in our twenties.

I know I'm going in a loop. What I want to say is that the zine will show different layers of the story. It will not necessarily be the definitive record of what happened in Prishtina or Kosovo. I want it to be a fluid open thing to which we can continuously contribute. I think I'm gonna … end with that.

*A roaring engine is starting and drives off alongside us.*
*Ding ding dong ding! Dardan's cellphone is ringing.*

*Tatatatata … Ding ding dong ding … Tatatatata …*
*Smartphone chiming more and more insistently.*

Qerkica is here.

*Chuckles and picks up.*

*Allo!*

*His footsteps drift away along with his telephoning voice.*
*A bird chirping.*
*Footsteps bounding down a few steps, opens into birds singing.*
*Outro jingle.*



## Endnotes

1 Mapping Subculture Movements Research Group (Jeta Rexha, Rozafa Maliqi, Endrit Jashanica, Artan Sadiku, Gjorgje Jovanovik, Arba Bekteshi, and Aurora Birlibaj), *Mapping Subculture Movements in Prishtina, Tirana, and Skopje* (Prishtina: Manifesta 14, 2022).

# 10

[In the garden of the Centre for Narrative Practice, formerly the Hivzi Sulejmani Library.]

*Jingle.*
*A haunting, low-pitched voice utters an extremely prolonged aaaaaa with reverb.*
*The aaaaaa drops one or two tones and is mixed into electronic sound artifacts, like phantom breathing.*
*It then transitions into a synthetic buzz, oscillating at a medium pitch and fading into the calm chatter of a small crowd.*
*The high-pitched song of cicadas.*
*From time to time, a running child's voice emerges in the scene.*

Anna Bromley: Why Qerkica Rexhepi feels a hundred years old.

Prishtina has been shaken by the suicide of a young woman whose first name was the same as mine. Anna Kolukaj had just started hormone therapy, which neither the Kosovo health system nor society provides for or supports. Yet transwomen have long been visible in the region. A few weeks before she passed away, Anna had told me about

Initially, this conversation was simultaneously translated from Albanian into English by Donjetë Murati. Qerkica's words were later transcribed and retranslated by Plator Gashi, a researcher in the field of Albanian studies. He has additionally provided explanations of the connotations of particular words.

Qerkica, her eyes sparkling. I meet the queer icon in a lush tea garden.

Qerkica Rexhepi: I am a woman. I'm part of the LGBT community from both before and after the war. I am very old. Or I feel like I'm very old because I've experienced a lot, many good things but also many bad things. It just makes me feel like I'm a hundred years old, whereas I'm actually only forty-six.

*A husky voice breaks through the general mumbling, singing a few notes in Albanian.*
*The full, high-pitched sound of a bell resonates.*
*But just once.*

Anna Bromley: Your adolescence was in the 1980s. Who were your friends? How did you find out about other queer people?

Qerkica Rexhepi: When I was thirteen, I would always hang out with other girls. I just knew deep inside that I was also a girl. But back then there was such shyness, we didn't discuss with each other what and who we were … When I moved to Prishtina and people asked my name, and I told them my given male name, they were surprised and said that I look like a … that they thought I was a female! And I would say, "But I am a woman!" – I didn't even know what I was in the first place.

This was before I met Mustafa, who told me that I was one of his kind. I was surprised, "What do you mean Mustafa, you present yourself as a man, so you're



a man!" He answered, "You're also a man – Enver is a male name." That's when Mustafa told me that I was gay, part of the LGBT community, like him. Well, they didn't call it LGBT at that time. We had no idea what LGBT was or even the word gay. We only knew *bulash* and *peder* and also *peshkir*. It shocked me when I was called *peshkir*. We also used *dylber*. There have been gay people for centuries, but I only learned that later.

Do you want to hear how I got the name Qerkica?

Anna Bromley: That was my next question!

Qerkica Rexhepi: The first gay club was at Mustafa's. Everyone who saw me there, said, "She is so beautiful, just like a girl." They would say it in Serbian, most of them were from Serbia. We *gejuca* almost always spoke Serbian, not Albanian.

"We will name her Qerkica," which means daughter in Serbian. *Ćerkica*. Everybody said, "She is beautiful like a *ćerkica*," and that's how I got the name Qerkica.

Translator's note: These are derogatory terms for queer persons; the origin of the former likely from Serbian *bulja* -butt, buttocks (with *-aš* being a suffix that forms related nouns), whereas the latter is an abbreviated version of *pederast*. *Peshkir* is a word meaning towel.

*Dylber* is a term used by the LGBT+ community to mean gay or queer, with no negative connotation. This reclaimed word of Persian origin, which had been used in Ottoman songs and poetry, originally meant sweetheart, beloved, or more generally, the object of romantic feelings. The Ottoman term referred ambiguously to men and women. In modern (Kosovar) Albanian, it appears to refer mainly to gay man.

*Gej*, meaning gay along with the suffix *-uc*, which is often used to form derogatory words.

*Ćerka* means daughter, whereas the suffix *-ica* adds endearment.

I had a friend who died young. When we met, she asked "What do they call you?" and I said Enver. I asked what her name was, and she said Zekir. We laughed and that's how we got to know each other.

From the first time we met, I thought she was a woman and she also thought of me as a woman. She said, "My family gave me freedom. My mother loves me, my father passed away, my brothers love me, my sisters-in-law respect me as a sister-in-law, not as a brother-in-law," and so it was. When I went over to hers to spend time, her sisters-in-law noticed my facial hair and they waxed my face for the very first time.

*A few children are shouting to one another.*
*Wah! Waha!*
*The sound of a bouncing ball, footsteps of running children.*

When I was thirteen, my family found out that I was gay. They would say things like, "He is a man but dresses like a woman, so he cannot be among us." They kicked me out, but where could I go? I made my way to Prishtina's main boulevard. It was just after New Year's, it was cold, I was thirteen and didn't know where to go.

I was standing there in my fluffy red jacket with big, almond-shaped buttons, looking at a boy, who said his name was Ajnur. I still wonder if this was his given name, but I told him my name, Enver. He looked shocked and said, "You're a woman! I'll take you somewhere to hang out!" My feet were soaking wet, I was wearing sneakers in the middle of winter, and I couldn't wait to go someplace and sleep.

Her name could either be Zekire or Zekira, here she is using the indefinite form Zekir, in other words, neither the male or female form; this is typical for some female names of Turkish origin.



Ajnur promised to take me to this guy he worked with, without mentioning his name. Mustafa's house was by the Sahat Kulla, the clock tower. Mustafa was blind, which I couldn't believe at first, since he managed to make me a coffee on his own. Then, from the joy of having made it for me, he tripped on the heater, but I was agile and strong enough to prevent him from falling and to prevent the coffee from spilling. I gestured in front of Mustafa's eyes, just to check his vision. When I realized that he didn't react, I teared up and cried for him. That was the moment he entered my heart and I promised I would always take care of him.

He knew a lot of people, they came to Mustafa's from Beograd, from Kragujevac, from Niš. The person who named me Qerkica was an older man. He had a hotel and his own swimming pool in Kragujevac. Those people really bothered me, because they wanted a lot of sex. More and more people started coming over. I told Mustafa I wouldn't stay there but he said, "I'm sick of it, I'll sell my house." I thought, he can't do this, because where is he going to go?

*It's suddenly quiet.*
*In the distance, there is a crisp, high-pitched, prolonged sound, like a trumpet.*
*Then, one by one, the voices again begin to speak gently in the background.*

*Glassware ringing softly.*
*Every now and then a car horn drifts in from a distance.*
*The weakened tone sounds clear and delicate.*

I was in Peja when Mustafa sold his house. I was about seventeen. I had a female friend in our neighborhood in Fushë-Kosova who was from Peja and still had paternal uncles and aunts there. She asked, "Qerkica, do you want to come to Peja with me?" Actually they didn't call me Qerkica back then. They didn't know I had this name; they called me Enver. On the way to Peja, she asked how I would like to be named, since I considered myself a woman. We decided on Valentina.

There was this boy who really fell in love with me. He chased after me, begging me to be with him. I told him that I couldn't. Because he chased me nonstop for two months, I told him, "Look, I'm gay." He said "I accept you as a gay person, don't change your name, Valentina suits you well, and I want to get married to you. Only my mother and I will know that you are gay, nobody else will."

Other gay people came to pick me up during the wedding with *defs* – in my wedding dress, from my friend's aunt's house, and took me to my new husband's house. Even to this day there are gay people in Peja who play the *def*. I got married in a traditional wedding and lived with my husband. Nobody could tell that I was gay. I had a girl's name, Valentina. Of course, I spent a lot of time with women and I behaved like a woman.

A *def* is a Balkan tambourine-like hand drum, usually associated with and played at weddings.



Nine months later, my friend's mother visited me and told me, "Your family found out that you got married and they plan to call the police." When she mentioned the police, my whole body shivered. The Serbian police back then were cruel; if they found out you were gay, they would take you with them and break your arms and legs. That period was a nightmare. "Don't say anything," I pleaded, "please don't tell anybody where I am. I'll come to your house in two days."

*Someone calls for something then repeats it a few times.*
*It sounds like it is coming through a microphone with a lot of reverb.*

My husband's family also threatened to call the police. So I had to leave Peja. Back in Fushë-Kosova, I stayed at my friend's mother's place but then finally went back home, to my parents. My brother said, "You grew your hair and curled it, now you look like a bride!" He was about to cut my hair. I ran away to search for Mustafa in Prishtina. I saw him there with a mutual gay friend, but that person was not looking after him well at all.

*The voices in the background get louder.*
*It sounds like an argument.*

Back then, everyone would carry a certain kind of Adidas bag on their shoulder. People also wore a certain style of denim coat. And there I was, with my long denim coat, my Adidas bag and curly hair, like a woman.

But I didn't have sunglasses, people just didn't wear them much back then.

I knew exactly where Mustafa's bus stop was for his trip to and from work every day. He had quite a job, as a telephone operator at the water supply company. When the bus arrived, his friends who worked with him said, "Mustafa, your daughter is there to pick you up." His face brightened; he knew I had come back. And there he was, wearing a pair of black pants and a white shirt full of grime. He had obviously showed up at work unwashed. I felt so embarrassed for him: "Mustafa, if you could only see yourself, it's very bad, I cannot leave you in her hands. I am used to being on the streets and I will take care of you, on the streets."

I put my hand on his shoulder and asked him why he had sold his place. He told me it was because they had put pressure on him. The small children would throw rocks at them, and yell *bulasha*, *pedera* at them from the street and the police would show up all the time. And that's how Mustafa ended up on the streets. But that was not all – he also had some vile friends that wasted all of the money he got from selling his house and left him all alone.

*A purring engine is approaching.*

When I saw him like that, I took him in. I was about to go to Italy. I wanted to work there and live how I wanted it. But I stayed in Kosovo because of Mustafa. He told me, "I cannot leave my job." I said, "You won't have to leave your job, I will take you there and pick you up."



*Some lower-pitched voices are calling out something in the background.*
*Others are talking excitedly.*
*Occasionally the chirping of cicadas flickers.*

Thankfully, I had a lot of friends, a lot of female friends. At that time people would move abroad, to Germany, to Italy, wherever. They would go, get asylum and not come back again. A friend of mine asked, "I am moving abroad, could you look after my house?" I said yes, sister, of course I can! "When I come back, you'll have to leave." And I said no problem. So that friend moved to Germany, got all the papers, and I lived in that house with Mustafa for five years.

*The group of voices is humming all together.*
*They are making a long, low, and weird sound.*
*Someone chants or reads.*
*Another claps their hands in a steady rhythm, but only for a short time.*

I met Mustafa in 1985, and since 1993 we have never been separated, he's been living with me. I treat him like a gentleman and he often recounts his stories; they always make me sad. When he was a kid, he was left in a bin. Actually, he's only blind because a woman accidentally threw ash on top of him in that bin, and Mustafa screamed, so the woman informed the police and they took him to the hospital. They realized that he had no one and the hospital kept him for three years. They sent him to Beograd. From there, they brought

him back to Kosovo. The newspaper wrote about a kid named Mustafa who could only see with one of his eyes, saying that his second would also soon go blind. A couple of *beglerë*, a man and a woman who didn't have children, said that they would look after him and that they would leave him their fortune.

Mustafa's mother, Minife – we can call her his mother because she raised him – looked after him starting from age three. I hope Allah accepted her into Paradise. However, having declared that he was gay, Mustafa couldn't inherit that fortune. Obviously, that wasn't smart. He wasn't. But I wasn't smart either. As a young person, you are careless. Back then I couldn't imagine what would happen afterwards, otherwise I wouldn't have let Mustafa sell his house. I would have lived there with him.

*A low-pitched voice giving instructions in the background.*

We also took care of people. Indeed, we did take them in, when they were kicked out of their homes after coming out to their families. I would give them advice and take them in for a few months. Families sometimes can't accept that you're gay, but eventually they come to terms with it. My own family kicked me out, put me through the worst things. They cut my hair, put me in a manhole, beat me with cables, left me in the horse stable – we

*Beglerë* is the plural of *beg*, a title that was used during Ottoman times to denote a wealthy landowner or a governor of certain areas. It is currently used to mean wealthy person or person of high standing.



even had horses back then, my father did. I had been on the streets since I was thirteen, they did so many bad things to me. But I still didn't abandon them.

My family finally came to terms with it after ten years and gave me my freedom. They know Mustafa's story and regard him as a brother. When I go out – like right now – my brother's wife and their children look after him. I can't imagine being without my biological family. And so it happened …

*A low voice is amplified by a loudspeaker, then another.*
*Their sung arabesques taking over.*
*They intertwine, overlapping with our voices.*

There it is, *ispat*.

*Qerkica is reciting the Shahada, an Islamic oath.*
*Ahhhh … the Minaret voices sing simultaneously and then drift apart again, each at their own pace.*
*Sounds of footsteps bounding down a few steps, opens into birds singing.*
*Outro jingle.*

"There it is, *ispat*" is an exclamation meaning proof, evidence; in this case the call to prayer is proof or evidence that what she said before was true.

# Credits

Drawn annotations, dramaturgy, and sound editing:
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Studio recordings and sound postproduction:
Media workshop at the Kunstquartier Bethanien Berlin,
Manfred Miersch
Production and research coordination: Donjetë Murati
Concept, text, voice-over, digital sound synthesis,
and direction: Anna Bromley

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# Afterword

Hedwig Fijen, Director of Manifesta 14
Prishtina

In 2018, I embarked on my first journey to Prishtina, Kosovo's vibrant capital, with a sense of excitement – a palpable anticipation that history was poised for a transformative shift. This young city, Europe's youngest sovereign state, was about to become the host of Manifesta 14, a prestigious international nomadic biennial. Yet, a strict visa regime cast a shadow over the city's aspirations, hindering cultural exchange and connection between Kosovo's communities and the wider European and global spheres. Despite such challenges, Manifesta, renowned for its commitment to fostering cross-cultural European dialogue, recognized the rich potential of Prishtina's cultural-historical landscape. This city, shaped by decades of resilience and confinement, had found solace and expression in its vibrant cultural, social, musical, and club scenes. Havens of creativity and self-expression served as sanctuaries for the youth, those confined within Kosovo's borders, seeking escape, identity, and belonging.

The 14th edition of the European Nomadic Biennial marked the first time the biennial took place in the Western Balkans. Our activities expanded beyond Prishtina and Kosovo, creating a solid network of eleven partners across nine countries, accelerating inter-cultural dialogues and reflecting on regional subcultural movements and their impact during a period of historical isolation. Our conceptual framework, crafted in

collaboration with residents and arts professionals of the host city, sought to reclaim public space in the contemporary moment, fortified by the remarkable resilience of Kosovo's population after Yugoslavia's violent dissolution.

In a changing, post-pandemic world, Manifesta reconceived the biennial on multiple levels: shifting our methodology from top-down to bottom-up participatory, aiming for a more economically balanced approach for our host cities, especially for this edition, and creating a tangible legacy for Prishtina. Over the past two years before its opening in 2022, to embrace a more radical approach and regional solidarity, we closely collaborated with Kosovar urbanists, cultural professionals, artists, and thinkers.

Our focus on research and knowledge production stemmed from the needs and interests of local communities, aspiring to explore new practices and ways of learning and unlearning. This departure from the traditional role of the monolithic, authoritarian curator was pivotal for our approach. Reflecting earlier editions, our biennial steered away from traditional curatorship, emphasizing a participatory collective community program that encompassed diverse countercultures, subcultures, and disciplines. Instead of curators, we collaborated with creative mediators who stimulated and co-produced diverse forms of expression – ranging from photography to poetry, political activism, ecology, and horticulture.

For the urban and architectural aspects of Manifesta 14 Prishtina's development, we engaged the Turin-based



architectural office CRA-Carlo Ratti Associati. Together, they constructed an Urban Vision in conjunction with MIT Senseable City Lab, relying on field research to produce tangible data in various forms: texts, stories, images, maps, statistics, and assessments. This Urban Vision underpinned the program's pillar called "Commons Sense," aiming to reclaim public spaces and support advocates in the ongoing battle for these spaces.

At the helm of the artistic program of Manifesta 14 Prishtina was Catherine Nichols, a Berlin-based Australian art and literary scholar, curator, and writer. Under the title "it matters what worlds world worlds: how to tell stories otherwise," Manifesta 14 Prishtina embraced the challenge of exploring new collective storytelling methods. This concept positioned storytelling at society's core, considering it a vehicle to open minds and envision a different future for Kosovo and Prishtina.

Our commitment to creative mediation's inherent direct democracy model – first introduced in Manifesta 13 Marseille – led us to use various research tools involving citizens, civil organizations, NGOs, and Prishtina activists. Citizen consultations, Urban Visions, action research, and public surveys were conducted meticulously. This engaged a broad spectrum of participants from diverse communities and backgrounds, fostering dialogues about culture and community interplay.

Manifesta 14's program aimed to spotlight national talent, encouraging non-institutional and subcultural activists and artivist movements. The biennial sought a balance between Kosovar participants and international

partners, fostering transdisciplinary collaboration within a biennial perspective. Establishing a regional parcours and a lasting collaborative network connected to the Prishtina program further extended Manifesta 14's impact in cultural policymaking and international exchange. For the first time in Manifesta's history, due to geopolitical shifts, we focused on creating a permanent, multifunctional structure: the Centre for Narrative Practice. This concrete endeavor marked a shift from temporality to permanency, from an ephemeral exhibition to a sustainable, inclusive practice. Our aim was to transform the biennial into a participatory and collaborative catalyst for social change, involving citizen consultations and urban interventions.

Within this transformative endeavour, Anna Bromley's evocative radiophonic walks emerged as a powerful expression of Kosovo's cultural arena and became an essential part of Manifesta 14's role in shaping possibilities and creating a radio canvas that navigated through periods of transition, transformation, and disillusionment. Bromley's work, characterized by its innovative use of sound and its sensitivity to the power of storytelling, captured the stories of Kosovo's diverse inhabitants. These radiophonic walks became a pivotal moment in Manifesta's journey, extending its reach beyond the confines of the biennial and into the broader cultural landscape of Prishtina.

We're grateful for what Anna Bromley contributed to Prishtina and how her radiophonic walks became part of a sonic cultural mapping that brought informal Kosovar



culture into focus, activating Radio Otherwise – a venue on the air in Manifesta 14 Prishtina. *A Voice Exists in Voicing* stands as a significant contribution to radio art, portraying the transformative power of sound. This radiophonic book – essays, radio essays, sonic portraits, and drawings – serves as an essential guide to the intersection of art, sound, and urban culture.

## Annex

Unless otherwise noted, all images courtesy of Anna Bromley. Drawings on pages 66, 94, 108, 128, 138, 152, 168, 188, 200, 214 courtesy of Michael Fesca.

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