

# HOW SHOULD AN EXHIBITION BE VIEWED?<sup>1</sup>

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Quickly, like women who have just finished one job and are rushing, trying not to miss the next: this is how we set off

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<sup>1</sup> Translated into English by Raino Isto.

from Kamza, hoping not to miss (for the second time) the exhibition *Ambitions*, on view in Prishtina. It is the last day the exhibition is open, and the last day of June, and the constraints of insufficient time are weighing on us. We have that feeling, the feeling of being always almost late, without even the time to think about the delay. It's a struggle, like everything else that takes us outside our everyday routine, like every effort that doesn't directly connect to our work, our daily tasks, our obligations. But that feeling of obligation makes it easier for us. It is easier to get work done, than to realize your desires.

In the morning hours, after lunch, or late in the evening, if we were to wait by the first bus stops in Kamza, looking out towards the road, with the door of the bus as a frame, we would see the rush of women who can't afford to miss a single bus on the line connecting their workplace to their home. No matter how full it is. Waiting is not an option and the burden of patriarchal domination feels lighter on the move. An abrupt dynamic accompanies their (our) image, as the women hurry along with their bags and clothes (as if they were on their way to give emergency aid), only to come suddenly to a stop as they sit frozen like a bust before the windows of the bus, their gazes lost somewhere beyond the glass. As if this tension between rushing and sitting still weren't enough, if we looked closely we'd notice spasms here and there, muscles twitching in their cheeks: the physical traces left on their bodies by the factories, by their homes—wherever they labor. These are our women: they are the women we want to speak to, and the women we want to speak to us, as they go about their lives between their housework and their work elsewhere, wherever it may be. As

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we enter the exhibition, it is their judgments, their expressions, their reactions that stay with us, whether we like it or not. We are curious to see what these women, and the women artists in the exhibition, will have to say to each other and to us. We are curious if they will even be able to say anything at all.

The women artists we know are the ones who have approached us in Kamza and who have expressed their desire to work with us, or else the ones we have invited to participate in artistic projects, which have been, for the most part, performative. We can count them on the fingers of one hand, and as soon as we count them off, we clasp our hands tightly, not wanting to let them go. It was our mouthless bodies, like the speechless, voiceless “other” who is repudiated, that led us to poetry, theater, literature and photography. Thanks to them, we have been able to open up, to express ourselves, and we understand the strength they possess wherever they are practiced. But other forms of artistic creation—much less those practiced by women—have rarely come to Kamza, either in the form of interventions or as institutional projects. We are conscious of the fact that the women of Kamza would never encounter an exhibition like *Ambitions* in their own city. Kamza has no art gallery, and *Ambitions* seems as if it were made precisely and only for a gallery space. Kamza’s art scene does not even have the historical privilege of having possessed a cultural center during the period of Socialist Realism, since the city was created after the regime change, and it remains as an exemplary case study in the ways post-socialist towns were constructed in Albania. The cultural center that opened in 2011—which possesses all the necessary facilities for visual

and performing artists alike—has a history full of institutional manipulation and occupation. Indeed, one could extrapolate from the layers of injustices that characterize that history a narrative of Kamza's own art and cultural development.

At its inception, and during the first 8 years of its existence, the institution was (mis)used by the directors of the municipality (controlled by the Democratic Party) for election meetings and an annual folklore festival. After the control of Kamza's municipality passed (illegitimately) to the Socialist Party, the cultural center was allocated to several local directorates, including those of water supply and sewage, of media, of market and social services, of bars and cafes, and of two banks. Thus, the space devoted to film direction became the office of the director of water and sewage, the actors' room became the office of finance, media, and IT, and so forth. The cultural center turned into the cultural center of water and sewage. Wires get crossed, and the doors of the building will lead you anywhere except to culture. In fact, the only door in the building that still says it will direct you to some function related to culture now takes you to the space designated for COVID-19 vaccinations: a passerby looking for the city's library suddenly comes face to face with the gaze of embarrassed men and women with their sleeves rolled up, clasping bits of cotton to their arms. What is offered to us as something public gets taken back as something private. A public institution ends up hermetically sealed to the public, making it all the easier to privatize. This happens in broad daylight. It is this experience from the periphery that shapes our perceptions, but even the institutions of the center seem to us

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‘peripheral’: a National Theater destroyed, a National Gallery that lacks even the most modest budget. In the periphery, even that which is national remains closely tied to the local. This is where activism clashes with its own limits. Creative action has helped us to surpass those limits, and we have borrowed a great deal from art, without ever calling what we do art in itself.

### **About the Exhibition**

We bring with us the perspectives of the women of our city, who do not have the language to say where it hurts or a solution to their condition. And our feeling of being in-between jobs, where the only time to ourselves is the time it takes us to go from one job to the next. This is our mindset as we enter the exhibition. *Ambitions* opened on 1 February 2021, at the National Gallery of Arts in Tirana, where it remained on view through 1 April 2021. It then opened at the National Gallery of Kosovo on 30 April, and remained open through 30 June 2021. Curated by artist and curator Adela Demetja and researcher and curator Erëmirë Krasniqi, the exhibition presented a diverse collection of works created by Albanian women artists spanning a period of 70 years.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The artists included in the exhibition are (according to the list of artists given in the publication accompanying the exhibition): Silva Agostini, Brigita Antoni, Bora Baboçi, Alma Bakiaj, Lumturi Blloshmi, Lirije Bulliqi, Liljana Çefa, Donika Çina, Flaka Haliti, HAVEIT, Blerta Hoçja, Majlinda Hoxha, Shpresa Faqi, Fitore Isufi-Koja, Shelbatra Jashari, Ledia Kostandini, Edona Kryeziu, Hyrije Krypa, Iva Lulashi, Diana Miziri, Silvi Naçi, Matilda Odobashi, Greta Pllana, Edit Pula, Nurhan Qehaja, Alketa Ramaj, Miradije Ramiqi, Anila Rubiku, Merita Selimi, Marina Sula, Alije Vokshi, Eli Xoxa,

There are four of us traveling to Prishtina, all activists in the Grupi Ata (Them Collective). Mariana and Mira are in their twenties, and both have been part of the group since they were in their adolescent years. Both have been active in Their Theater, one of the regular practices in which the Them Collective has been engaged since its founding, in collaboration with novice and professional directors alike (including Ergys Malësia, in two theatrical productions, and Anila Balla in six productions). The roles Mariana and Mira have played have not been easy ones. Dario Fo's *Monologue of a Whore in an Asylum* and Franca Rame's *The Rape* have left their marks on their faces, on the tone of their voices, deepening these young women's connection with themselves.

They don't speak much during the trip and they remain just as silent during our visit to the exhibition. Even afterwards, as we try to get them to say something, to make some kind of comment on the exhibition, nothing is forthcoming. They had tacitly agreed, in our text exchanges, to give us at least a few words on their experience of the exhibition, a summary of some sort. But to this day, our expectations have only been met with a cold response. On the other hand, our other fellow traveler, Aurora, one of the co-founders of the Them Collective, engages closely with the works, reacting to them based on their colors, not the names of the artists.

For our generation, raised in this town, the artworks on view in *Ambitions* and the artists who created them are essentially foreign to us. We had never heard the names of

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Alketa Xhafa Mripa, Rudina Xhaferi, Violeta Xhaferi, Androniqi Zengo Antoniu, Sofia Zengo Papadhimitri, and Valbona Zherka.

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many of these artists before. We don't know their practices, or their body of work. Looking at them one after the other, it is difficult for us to understand their language, their ambitions. We have to improvise, shifting our gaze and our steps between the curatorial text, the artwork and the one right after it, in the effort to establish a certain feeling, an idea, a meaning. Our bodies feel disoriented inside the space, and our minds feel disoriented by the processes of considering each work. There is nowhere to sit, which makes it even harder to concentrate on a single work, forcing us to move continuously from one to another, without stopping. There seems to us to be great diversity in their aesthetic language, in their colors and their forms, even amongst the works of a single artist, and this makes it harder to identify the works with their creators. We keep trying to remind ourselves to be patient, to take time and give the works a second chance—every work deserves that courtesy. But the truth is that we don't feel like the public that this exhibition has in mind. Or rather, we feel guilty that we are the public this exhibition has—guilty that we haven't read more, haven't seen more, haven't given ourselves enough time to prepare for the exhibition. And the artists, why don't we know who they are? Why don't we follow their work? Why do we encounter them only in the context of an exhibition, outside of our everyday life, far from the place we live? All of the answers we silently come up with are mere excuses.

The same questions hold true for the other side, though. Does this exhibition see us as its public? Does it intend to make us feel guilty? Has the exhibition considered what Judith Butler would call negative narcissism, the process of holding oneself

together by way of self-criticism and self-blame? What would the exhibition say to a public that has not read enough, that has not seen enough works of art before visiting? How does it feel about the fact that women from the periphery perceive it as so distant from their lives, so foreign? Does it feel guilty, like we do, that we don't understand it?

What if the exhibition, the artists, the curators, or the National Gallery had taken a different approach? What if they had worked outside the established frameworks in which they currently operate—those well-known and worn-out institutional contexts—in new territories, new geographies that still haven't been touched by such initiatives?

We keep looking. As if we were searching for some kind of evidence. Under the weight of our ignorance, the artworks become entangled with other kinds of paradigms of expertise: we examine them carefully, as if looking for the traces of a "crime". What traces does a work of art leave? What are its material consequences? What condition does a particular work describe? Is it possible to put our finger on the precise manner, the time, or the changes that the artist might have experienced, in the course of creating the work? How should one look at an exhibition? How invasive is our untrained gaze on artworks that sometimes seem as if they are vulnerable to us, or to anyone? How should an exhibition be viewed? How can I keep looking at these works without thinking of the other girls—about how they are looking at the exhibition. Since it proves difficult to find a constant thread that ties the works together, we give up on the desire to establish a central idea. We understand, of course, that *Ambitions* aims to resist the



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oversimplification of women's artwork, to resist essentialism. There are many different women artists, and each is completely unique, individual, and exceptional in her own right. You can't manage to capture all of them with a single idea, apart from the general effort to bring to light 70 years of artistic activity carried out in institutions that have primarily promoted only the work of men.

In this moment, I become part of a kind of game that the artworks play, a game that the artists play with the public, in which the public is invited to wonder about how the artist created the work, what kinds of materials she used, and what techniques she deployed to unify those materials. This approach seems more interested in raising questions of process, rather than about the final work; it is a kind of empathetic invitation extended to the viewer: "come to my studio and see how I work". It appears to reflect the artist's desire to place herself between the material and the finished work, to create a bridge between the two precisely by using herself as the connection between the two. It is a demand to understand the creator's process, to observe the effort and the work of imagination that is part of her creative practice. This is a kind of artisanal approach, in which the artist views the process as a work in itself, and it is characterized by a kind of performativity, the mobilization of visual art, galleries, and exhibitions in order to shed light on the very practices of appearance, the work of transforming objects through the work of the bodies and the imagination. Here, I feel that I can establish a connection to all these women artists, whom I view more as workers (as I also view myself) than as artists.

I am reminded of the girls. How are they viewing the exhibition?

We get close to the works; we back away. We share half-developed reactions. “The colors are beautiful,” we say under our breaths while looking at Alketa Ramaj’s *Impurity* (2019). Later, reading the text accompanying the exhibition, we understand why we were drawn to the work. Our own bodies, like pieces of an industrially produced fabric, have soaked up the gray shades of our mothers, so that we may emerge with identities that are neither completely new nor completely different, in geographic spaces that are far from what we dream of. “This is the one I would have picked”: Mariana points her finger at Alma Bakiaj’s *I Remained Too Much Inside My Head* (2020). She crouches for a long time, looking at the work, withdrawing into herself at the same time that she tries to communicate with the rest of us. I sense a certain linguistic tension around all of us. I watch Mira as she passes through the exhibition. Every now and then she stops, her head leaning down to read the artist’s name. They moved. Mira is a painter herself, a talent that she has never shown to the world, a talent repressed with the kind of ease that only our parents are capable of, mobilizing phrases such as: “What good is it to you...?”, as they suggest she instead study finance or business administration.

In our own group practice, we have aimed to use ethnography and art to break down the traditional systems of meaning that have been passed down to us as if they were orders, to say something new through those systems of meaning while still remaining connected to them. This apparently modest

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approach, which takes a tradition—one that might be considered an enemy—and twists it in such a way as to use it to produce a work of art, seems to us to be both a productive avenue for the development of art, and a fruitful method of political action. On the one hand, playing with tradition shows that we know it well—preventing anyone from treating us as foreigners in our cultural context, a worry that has always weighed heavily on us. On the other hand, there is power in the blasphemous provocation of using tradition in order to shed light on its very own presuppositions, to say something with it and against it at the same time.

We take some more time to look at some of the works a second time. “This one speaks more directly to me as a work”—we say to each other, feeling a little relieved that the work (Anila Rubiku’s *Sewn Dreams* [2004]) now seems clearer to us. At the end, we head to a small, dark room. Those few times that we have visited exhibitions before, the darkened room is always the last hope. Its presence makes you feel like you have no choice but to like what you find there, even if you don’t understand it. Silva Agostini’s (*A*) *Current State* (2014) grips us. It shows us a body moving, shaking and dancing. A body caught in a twist, as if it can’t decide if it is trying to repress some inner impulse that wants to be let out, or to break free from the exterior chains that hold it imprisoned. I watch the video, and then I step out to invite the girls in, insistently, telling them to have patience. We watch the video together. The body in this video-performance speaks our language, the language of the body. Its aggravated physical condition speaks to all of us—we know its alphabet. In our bodies, we archive

the weight of judgment, of repression and repression. Our body is that which feels first of all the struggle to speak, to write, to perform. It is our body that first of all experiences the struggle to create something new, to say something new. It is Mira's body as an actress that experiences the violent interference of the man from Valias who tries to interrupt the performance of *Seventh Commandment: Steal a Little Bit Less*; it is Mariana's body that tells us the story of rape as an act of revenge through the self-referential textual fabric of Franca Rame; it is Aurora's body, and my body, that for years we have named as if they were fragmented letters of the alphabet: *them (ata)*. We leave the black box and the exhibition, and we head straight for Kamza. Now we know the names and the works of these women, but we know less about their ambitions. It seems to us less like we are taking them with us, and more like we are leaving them somewhere, at work; they are harder to keep with us than the women of Kamza, the women of the factories that we spoke of at the beginning. It seems that there is still much to be done—by both sides—in order to create new spaces where we can see each other's work, places where we can speak to each other about the different ambitions that all of us have.

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Fig. 1. *Ambitions*, Prishtina (April 2021), installation view, photograph taken by Majlinda Hoxha. Reproduced with permission of the author and the National Gallery of Kosova.



Fig. 2. *Ambitions*, Prishtina (April 2021), installation view, photograph taken by Majlinda Hoxha. Reproduced with permission of the author and the National Gallery of Kosova.



Fig. 3. *Ambitions*, Prishtina (April 2021), installation view, photograph taken by Majlinda Hoxha. Reproduced with permission of the author and the National Gallery of Kosova.



Fig. 4. *Ambitions*, Prishtina (April 2021), installation view, photograph taken by Majlinda Hoxha. Reproduced with permission of the author and the National Gallery of Kosova.

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Fig. 5. *Ambitions*, Prishtina (April 2021), installation view, photograph taken by Majlinda Hoxha. Reproduced with permission of the author and the National Gallery of Kosova.