
INTERVIEW WITH SHYQRI NIMANI

Pristina | Data: November 30, 2016

Duration: 70 minutes

Present:

1. Shyqri Nimani (Speaker)
2. Erëmirë Krasniqi (Interviewer)
3. Noar Sahiti (Camera)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:

() – emotional communication

{ } – the speaker explains something using gestures.

Other transcription conventions:

[] – addition to the text to facilitate comprehension

Footnotes are editorial additions to provide information on localities, names or expressions.

Part One

[The interviewer asks the speaker about his early memories. This part was cut from the video—interview.]

Shyqri Nimani: I would like to tell you the story of my life and the crucial moments that made me choose figurative art. Destiny was such that I was born in Shkodra because my family, my mother and father moved there before the Second World War, they moved to Albania and settled in Shkodra. That's where I was born.

Two years later we moved to Skopje where my brother Genc was born and after two other years we moved to Prizren and then from Prizren we moved to Gjakova, which was the hometown of my mother and my father, then I continued elementary school in Prizren. And the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit*¹ in the beautiful Peja, after five years of studying there I went to University at the University of Arts in Belgrade, there I spent five years studying in the same academy. Then, I finished the Masters Degree, I mean the post—graduation studies and in the meantime there was an open call all around Yugoslavia according to which the Japanese government was giving a scholarship for a two year artistic residency in Japan, I won it and went to Japan to study for two years.

Then I returned to Pristina when it started functioning... I mean it had been a couple of years since the *Shkolla e Lartë Pedagogjike*,² department of Figurative Arts had started working. Since Gjelosh Gjakaj,³ an artist of ours coming from Montenegro, abandoned the *Shkolla e Lartë Pedagogjike* in Pristina and went to Rome, Italy, to continue his artistic research, where he lived and worked for a long time and then he moved to Munich, in Germany, until the end of his life. Then I...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us what you remember from that time?

¹ *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit*, Art High School in Peja was built in 1926 and started working in 1949. It was here where the first generations of visual arts in Kosovo have received their education in figurative and applicative arts. The education they received here, enabled the artists to continue higher education in the arts. The historical building of Art High School in Peja was destroyed in August, 2017.

² *Shkolla e Lartë Pedagogjike*, The High Pedagogical School, was founded in Pristina in 1958 as the first institution of higher education in Kosovo. In 1974, the academic staff of the Figurative Arts department of the High Pedagogical School founded the Academy of Fine Arts within the newly established University of Pristina.

³ Gjelosh Gjakaj (1933—2016) was an Albanian painter and graphic artist. He was born in the village of Miles in Tuzi, Yugoslavia. After receiving his fine art degree from the Art Academy in Belgrade in 1963 he started teaching in Pristina, Kosovo until 1969.

Shyqri Nimani: Yes...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Since you had moved from a place to another, what was the reason, why...

Shyqri Nimani: To be honest I was seven years old, since my father had died and left me at three years old, my mother was very young and got married and moved to Albania. So I was settled in the Orphanage in Prizren and it was a very interesting environment there because there were hundred to hundred fifty of us who had experienced suffering and had lost parental love. And they had settled, I mean the Kosovo society, had settled us in that house which was a very good one, the pedagogists were good and they let us express our talents, our artistic gifts.

Some played instruments, some wrote poems, some sang while our group was engaged in figurative art. So, they gave us colors, papers, various pastels and so after returning from summer vacation in the Dalmatian sea of Croatia, I had drawn, in the second year of the school of arts, I had drawn a very beautiful landscape, I can say beautiful since my teacher liked it very much. She took and showed it to my fellow students, she grabbed me by my hand and sent me to other classes in order to show it to other students of other classrooms. And, “Look, this is how beautifully your friend has drawn, actually painted a peisage....” where there was a sailboat with white sails in the sea and some palms in the first plan. And that was my first push, I mean my first push and I think that my teacher, who was the oldest sister of Bekim Fehmiu, was a very good teacher and she, I think, had discovered for the first time that I had a talent for figurative art.

Then, then it was important that I went to the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit*. There we had professors that were very important at the time, who had graduated from the Faculty of Arts. They were all qualified. I mean, the staff was very good and we started learning figurative art even though our art history teacher never spoke to us about Albanian figurative art, but only about Yugoslav figurative art, but...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was at that time, since I mean it was early to understand what Yugoslavia was? How many years were there... 16, 17, how many years were under Yugoslavia?

Shyqri Nimani: I mean, at that time I was 15—16—17 years old and I couldn’t understand it. As every child at that age doesn’t understand what politics are, what is the state, what is the occupation and whether it is camouflaged or not, because they spoke about how we were all equal. Brotherhood and Unity⁴ was the banner which of course was demagogic. But, what was important was usually that I had to deal....I mean, this age is important to learn what one has to learn and I was able to express my talent... I have some classmates who later told me, they said, “Each time we asked you for something, you would only draw and do nothing else.” I mean I was preoccupied with art even in other classes when there were other subjects, I wanted to draw and it was something that really spoke about my lifetime preoccupation, which is visual art.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What style, what art movements were promoted in Yugoslavia at that time, I mean

⁴ Brotherhood and Unity was a popular slogan of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia that was coined during the Yugoslav People's Liberation War (1941—45), and which evolved into a guiding principle of Yugoslavia's post-war inter-ethnic policy.

what was the main influence at *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* in Peja?

Shyqri Nimani: Yes, to be honest, Yugoslavia compared to other states of the Eastern Bloc which were under the influence of Soviet Union, which today is called the Russian Confedrate, back then soc—realism happened in all the countries, especially in our mother country, Albania. In Yugoslavia they were abandoned in... around the middle of the '50s. Because a very famous painter from Croatia, Edo Murtić,⁵ returned from the United States of America after having been there on a Fulbright scholarship and had worked in the same studio as Jackson Pollock. Now, imagine, with Jackson Pollock! And I remember Edo Murtić told me that, the latter—mentioned is deceased now, that if he only had a small painting, no matter how small, of Jackson Pollock, he would be a millionaire today. With the return of Edo Murtić, who was a par excellence painter, an amazing expressive painter, I opened an exhibition of his when I was a director of the Arts Gallery of Kosovo,⁶ I opened his solo show here in Pristina. Edo Murtić was also a very good friend of Albanians because we created contact with the galleries of Yugoslavia, especially with the one in Zagreb that was called Galeria Forum and was led by Vlado Bužančić, the best art historian and critic in Yugoslavia.

So when he returned to Yugoslavia, that is when socialist art was abandoned in Yugoslavia and free art began then we, the artists of Kosovo, had the very great luck of not being isolated. We weren't imposed upon by the soc—realism doctrine as compared to our brothers, colleagues, the Albanians in Albania, who suffered for a long time. Even though a part of them created works that had... I mean extraordinary quality, they are good... I mean, Sali Shujaku is a painter who at that time was very expressionist. And when we visited Albania for the first time in '72, we would say good words about how beautiful and expressionist it was, he would say, "Please don't say good words about me because you will be my curse." Because at that time of course they would drag him to a place in Albania where he would not be able to be free, such was the situation there.

So, figurative art in Kosovo was fortunately free at that time, it was free and all the artists, starting from the first generations of Agush Beqiri,⁷ Nuredin Loxha,⁸ Engjëll Berisha,⁹ Nysret Salihamixhiqi,¹⁰ Muslim Mulliqi¹¹ and some others were totally free. Each one of them painted in their own way, each one of them... the names I mentioned are really specific, some of them were more into expressive art,

⁵ Edo Murtić (1921—2005) was a painter from Croatia who was best known for his lyrical abstraction and abstract expressionist style. He worked in a variety of media, including oil painting, gouache, graphic design, etc. He was renowned in Yugoslavia for breaking away from the socialist realist art style.

⁶ The Pristina Gallery of Arts was the first exhibition space in the then—Yugoslav province of Kosovo. The gallery space was established in 1979 and located in the Youth and Sports Center — *Boro dhe Ramizi*.

⁷ Agush Beqiri (1932—2006) was born in Peja, Kosovo. He was a Kosovo Albanian interior designer and architect.

⁸ Nuredin Loxha (1935—1992) was a Kosovo Albanian librettist, set designer, production designer and costume designer.

⁹ Engjëll Berisha (1926—2010), also known as Befre, was an Albanian painter from Kosovo. He graduated from the University of Belgrade in 1954. He was a member of the Academy of Figurative Arts of Kosovo.

¹⁰ Nysret Salihamixhiqi (1931—2011) was born in Zhabar, near Mitrovica. He was a Kosovo Albanian abstract painter. He studied applied arts at the University of Belgrade in 1959 under the mentorship of Vasa Pomorisac.

¹¹ Muslim Mulliqi (1934—1998) was an impressionist and expressionist painter from Kosovo. Born into a family of artists, Mulliqi attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade under Zoran Petrović's mentorship, where he also continued with his postgraduate studies.

some into the surrealist style, some with our Byzantine tradition translated into contemporary art.

And it is a very good luck that in Kosovo however, a tradition was created, compared to my generation that didn't have [a tradition to refer to]. The new generations can be proud because they have a tradition and have those painters whom they can refer to and be proud of because they all attended... I mean all the artists that I mentioned were part of biennial and triennial exhibitions, be it in the region of former Yugoslavia or in Europe as well as in other continents.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What happened to you then, you finished *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* and went to Belgrade?

Shyqri Nimani: Yes...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us more about the time during your studies...

Shyqri Nimani: Yes...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Or your artistic growth?

Shyqri Nimani: After five years I finished the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* in Peja, which let me mention again was a very good school, its staff was very good and I finished it with good success. And I thought that as far as figurative art went, I had learned. But, this was as a... as a, practically a trap of a youngster who no matter what, hadn't seen the world yet, right? Because Kosovo was pretty stuck. Our cities, we still didn't have the University, which is an extraordinarily important thing, we had no exhibitions. We had no gallery and with the lessons I took in the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* and the high grades I had received, I thought that the whole world was mine and when I continued to Belgrade I wanted to...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us about the absence of art in public because it seems very interesting. How... since there were no exhibitions, you actually had no access to art, there were... the everyday was not aestheticized as much, so could you tell us how, how did you decide to engage in something like art while at the same time it was not part of the public sphere?

Shyqri Nimani: Very, very beautiful, very existential question. It is true that such was Kosovo, it was stuck, I mean communism came right after the Second World War. Because Yugoslavia used to be a monarchy before and Albanians had no rights. And with communism somehow, with their slogan that communism was building a society under the Brotherhood and Unity syntagm, which as I told you before, was demagogic.

It could have importance for the Slavs that lived in former Yugoslavia, but to us, nothing was better than starting to obtain some elementary rights, to have elementary and high schools. Even though in the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* in Peja we only had the Albanian Language and Literature classes in Albanian, all the other classes were in Serbian—Croatian, and this speaks about the national and elementary injustice we suffered. And so it all depended on the talent which we expressed.

For example I remember I went to Gjakova from Peja and I met Muslim Mulliqi there. Muslim was, he

was a little older when he started, he was seven years older than me but Muslim was preparing an exhibition of figurative arts with his own paintings, and he invited me to his house to comment on them, I mean this was all we had. Maybe the first exhibition of Muslim and any other painter, in spaces... I don't even know what spaces those were, because we had no gallery. Exhibitions were organized in schools spaces.

So, these were the first extraordinary attempts that not only we, the young generations who were talented in figurative art, but also in literature, because literature had started at that time. Poetry was especially developed, there was the poet Ali Podrimja,¹² he was my friend and we would meet, there were the older generations like Esad Mekuli,¹³ who was a poet and translator, and later he led the first magazine in Albanian, *Jeta e Re* [New Life], which was practically a garden where not only poets and writers gathered. But, Esad Mekuli was a visionary that in every new issue of *Jeta e Re*, which was issued once a month, he published a number of drawings or paintings of a young artist that was coming to Kosovo.

So, I can say that commitment is number one and space can be found even in inappropriate circumstances once there is a spontaneous willing, not an imposed one. That is why, in a way we had nowhere to refer to, we had no art history books which is very important... they only existed in Slavic languages or other languages. But besides Albanian, in the school of arts we had to also learn Serbian, French and German, and I had already started to learn English myself while still in the school of arts, because I liked the songs of the famous singers back then and I wanted to understand what those songs were about.

And so I started learning English myself and this helped us that maybe... to use the chance especially when we went to Belgrade to study. There were libraries, there was the American Informative and Cultural Center, which had an extraordinary library, they had art history books just like the libraries in Belgrade did, and of course our horizons expanded while in Belgrade. Since there were many galleries and 20 to 25 exhibitions could open in a single night, it was difficult for us to decide which one we wanted to go to, but we also had the chance to go and visit them later.

So it was very difficult, we had no spaces, but figurative art was done spontaneously from us, from the first generations of Kosovo who were engaged in figurative art, and this speaks about how we were not inspired by anything else but our spirit. I mean, it exploded and we had opportunities, the environments were really beautiful, the environment of Peja for example, Rugova Canyon, the beautiful Albanian *kulla*¹⁴ and all those. The Rugova Canyon and all the others inspired us to draw, paint and of course some of us still save a number of those works.

I saved them and some of my colleagues have done the same, because no matter what, your first works are important because what have you done if when years pass you have everything but don't

¹² Ali Podrimja (1942—2012) was born in Gjakova, Kosovo. He was the most well-known Kosovo Albanian poet.

¹³ Esad Mekuli (1916—1992) was born in Plava, Montenegro. He was an Albanian poet and scholar. He was the first president of the Academy of Sciences and Arts of Kosovo. He died in Pristina, Kosovo.

¹⁴ Traditional, fortified Albanian house, tower.

have a single work of your own. While still in the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit*, in the fifth year I worked on an intarsia; intarsia is a technique in which one works with wood—based panels, I worked on a landscape, a boat, see it is related to boats again because I loved the sea. It was a ship in the storm and the school director gave it to a soldier as a gift for visiting our school. And today, I would give everything just to see how I worked it so that the director of the school estimated it to the level that he could give it as a gift to an important guest soldier.

That is why I am saying that art is something deriving from the soul of the human, not everyone can do art. Figurative art, theatre, literature are things that only belong to those who have been gifted by God, or by the family pedigree. If somebody from one's family was engaged in arts before, that is going to affect the child as well. But, neither my mother nor my father were engaged in arts; that is why I don't even know where my talent for figurative art came from. I saw my paternal uncle who lived there, he was a director of an institution, and when he met me he said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I am going to enroll..." He met me by accident in the boulevard of Belgrade right in the moment I was going to enroll in the Music Academy. And he said, "No," he said, "you have finished the school of art and you should continue in the Academy of Arts." And he was right, I cannot imagine what kind of life I would have had if I went to the Music Academy.

And I enrolled, it was very difficult because the acceptance exam lasted very long, it lasted for five days and the competition was very strict, at that time there were 18—20 million citizens of that country. And it was difficult, around 300—400 people applied from all around Yugoslavia, and it was very difficult for us Kosovars to stay there for five days during the acceptance exam, we had to go to the homes of students there, I mean to any Albanian, an older Albanian student, and we would sleep two of us in a single bed, for five days. We would travel by train from Pristina to Belgrade, the train was very slow and we were very tired. We had to wait for the day when the results were announced and when we saw that among three hundred—and—something candidates, thirty were accepted in twelve sessions. There were only six people accepted at my University, the University of Belgrade, department of Graphic Design, and it was a great pleasure.

But Belgrade was a metropolis, a city with big historical traditions, which for two thousands years had been ruled by different empires and it gives big opportunities. It has an extraordinary geographical position, it has two rivers, two big rivers, Sava and Danube, it has the castle of Kalemegdan, many museums, theatres, libraries, it had the Arts and Science Academy, it had diplomatic representatives of many countries that were cultural centres where we could go and read also in Italian, French, English and German.

So there were museums where we could look at all those paintings, not only Yugoslav art but also international art. The works of Picasso, Modigliani were exposed in the Museum of Belgrade, there were also exhibitions, we have once also seen the exhibition of Van Gogh, a very big exhibition because there was a time when Belgrade was a metropolitan city where big events took place not only from the sphere of figurative art but there were various fairs during, twelve book fairs for example, I loved the international book fair where I could buy books in foreign languages and art history books. So, our horizons could broaden a lot, it was... it was a totally different world, it was a huge contrast to our small city of Peja, but very beautiful nevertheless, right? But, that city had natural beauties as

well...

We were accepted at the Academy of Arts, the Academy was a very good one with professors who had studied abroad, I mean in Prague, Munich, Paris and who had collected a lot of knowledge in those cities and brought it to their own places, especially in Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana. And the influence was easily noticeable also to a high number of painters from Kosovo who had studied in Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana, I have to mention that they were influenced by those professors who were influenced by their studies in the European cities that I mentioned. And in the beginning of the careers of these artists from Kosovo you could see the influence of their professors. And this is very normal because it is thought that since the thirteenth century Giotto had this influence as well.

Then Leonardo had someone, as well as Michelangelo and Picasso, but in the meantime they got rid of those [influences] and created their own doctrine. The ones who remain under the influence of someone else will be lost, right? But a big part of these painters of Kosovo, I cannot say a pig part, relatively big since I can count them with my fingers, however, have created their own doctrines and came up with very authentic expressions and have their own place in the ivory tower, I can say pantheon, no matter how small or big, of the entire oeuvre Albanian national art.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What were your influences in the art you developed, can you tell us about your work during your studies in Graphic Design?

Shyqri Nimani: I mean in our faculty of arts, for five years, two first years were general knowledge, I mean we learned drawing, painting, sculpture and disciplines, life drawings, nudes and so on... and others, others, those were mutual. After the second year, that is when we would orient. There were twelve sessions, I mean twelve departments, and I decided to go to the department of Graphic Design since we had no one coming from this field in Kosovo. But this is not the reason I decided to go to Graphic Design, because I only found out later that there was no one coming from this field in Kosovo, an educated artist in the field of Graphic Design, but I liked it, I liked it because design has something more than painting or drawing or sculpture.

In order to be a designer you have to be an excellent drawer and painter, you have to feel the color, you have to be, to feel the volume, I mean there is a third dimension. You have to have feelings for the sculpture as well but above all, design has an artistic message, it uses metaphor and it has to communicate. Because when we create a painting, graphic, drawing, sculpture that can be sold to a private person or to a gallery and that is it, there is nothing else, that is unique, while in design we have *tiraž*,¹⁵ graphics has *tiraž* as well but it is very limited, ten to twenty, thirty serigraphs for example, screen prints [in English] as American call it, that can have one hundred to two hundred copies because somehow that turns into a graphic industry. While aquatint, graphics, I mean the graphics of deep press, copper—writing, mezzotinta, have a limited tirage and since the tirage is limited, once twenty or fifteen copies are printed, then with a commission they get scratched and cancelled so the author cannot print more, otherwise they lose their value, don't they?

While in design for example the poster which in French is called *affiche* and in German *plakat* has a

¹⁵ Russian: *tiraž*, printing.

very big tirage and it communicates to millions of people, those people can be intellectuals, pseudo—intellectuals or illiterate. But they will understand what it talks about when they see the visual part, if we have a theatrical poster or a movie poster, or with political ones they are very important to give political messages. We also have the posters against the war and that is when, I mean those figurative metaphors should be very powerful in order to be read. That is why I always liked posters, and I always liked logos or emblems because later on I studied and also wrote books about the Albanian Heraldica because we also have our emblems, which are the oldest in Europe. Especially the emblem of Kastriotis which is, it has the shield, in Heraldica it is known as a Norman shield from the eleventh century.

That is why these all inspired me to engage. Just because everything there should be precise, an abstract poster cannot be made because it is worthless, it has no function, while in painting and graphic design we have fun, we go to the studio, we have the cloth and we paint whatever our soul wants us to, we don't depend on anyone, while in poster—making, in logo—making, there are commissions. Imagine that you have to work, you have to defend your project in front of a commission. There should be five people, there can be seven as well as eleven and some of them can be educated while others can be totally illiterate in the field of aesthetics and that is where you may have very harsh confrontations.

That is why I liked it and decided to engage in design and then I have worked in the People's Theater of Belgrade for four years, for the Opera, for the ballet and dramatic arts, I have also done illustrated books. For example, *Esenin*, the collection of books that was published in Yugoslavia for the first time, I painted its covers and I won the award of the Belgrade fair for the best collection, so I am very pleased for engaging in design. And I had the strength, because design also needs intelligence, one needs to read a lot, to know a lot, because every task for example, I was given the task to work on the poster for *Il trovatore* of Giuseppe Verdi for the theatre of Belgrade. And that is when I first had to read the libretto in order to know, but if I didn't know the music of Giuseppe Verdi or I hadn't gone to the opera of Belgrade I wouldn't have been able to work on the poster, I would have failed. I listened to the operas a lot and I knew that the event was taking place in Spain.

Then when we read a poet, later on I got to illustrate for all the poets of Kosovo, I read all of them, I also illustrated other international poets whom I liked. So, you know, in my mind I knew I had to enrich myself as much as possible, because the more we read, the more we get to see, we will be more able to express ourselves with better quality.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: For how long did you stay in Belgrade?

Shyqri Nimani: The Academy in Belgrade lasted for five years then I applied and was the only one to get accepted for two more years for a Master's degree, that was a very good time, extraordinarily good. Because my Master's was very good compared to nowadays Master's with the Bologna formula which has the same subjects as the first, second and third year of Bachelor's. So students tend not to have a commitment, we only had one subject. For two years I only dealt with my subject and this was something... because five years of faculty, then two other years.

And I also told you earlier that I continued in Japan for two years and that was an extraordinary time

where I gained experience in creativity as well as in knowledge about art history, because in Japan I would only research. I was interested in Japanese *Haiku* poetry, which is written in three lines with seventeen vowels and starts from the sixteenth—seventeenth century, then I went to meet the best Japanese graphic artists who worked in the *Ukiyoe* graphic style. I mean, the genres, the everyday Japanese life genres where there are Hokusai, Hiroshige, Utamaro, these are three extraordinary painters who have worked... graphics with twelve plaques, I mean out of cherry trees, they are extraordinary.

Then I also visited the greatest contemporary painting exhibitions in Japan. Nihonga, this is how they call it, Nihonga. The Japanese—style paintings, they still continue to do them, maybe 80—90 percent of them work in the Japanese style while only a small number of them deal with contemporary art. But also the posters, artistic photography is well developed there, I have seen many friends there, I have met for example the best Japanese designer who is called Tadhana Orioko and the photographer Kishin Shinoyama, these two artists are both number one in Japan. One of them works in poster design while the other in artistic photography, so while in Japan, I expanded and developed my horizons in every possible way.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was the visual language very different, was it easy for you to communicate with those design principles?

Shyqri Nimani: Yes, I forgot to mention that during those two years, first I went to Osaka for six months for an intensive Japanese language course. So, I had to learn Japanese for almost, almost eight hours a day and it was something very difficult to do. And I, Erëmira [addresses the interviewer], to tell you the truth, in the beginning I had a friend from Croatia and two girls from Yugoslavia, Amelita and Tamara, who were studying architecture there. As soon as I arrived there I started, I said let's go with the Dalmatian, his name was Ivan, and I said let's go and do some adventures in Kyoto, the capital of Japan, let's go to Nara then to Karazu Island, in southern Japan.

Japan has four big islands, there is Hokkaido, Honshu, Kyushu and Shikoku, all these four islands and 4000 small, uninhabited islands, and we went there on adventures with friends. And when we returned after some time, they told us, "If you don't... you will have to pass the exam for Japanese Language and Literature, if you are not able to pass that exam, you will either take another six months course or we will return you to your homeland." So, Ivan didn't return again because he went back after vacation, it was difficult for him, it was too difficult for him, he didn't like the food and didn't speak English, because we used to learn English and Japanese.

Part Two

Shyqri Nimani: Since I really used the opportunity see as much as possible, to learn as much as possible and create as much as possible while in Japan, at the end of my stay in Japan, I decided to open an exhibition. When I finished the six months course, six—month, I passed the exam and took the diploma and we moved to Tokyo from Osaka, and in Tokyo I had opportunities, there was a hotel for foreigners. And there we had many opportunities, then the Japanese were always ready to help in

case I wanted to do a project to wander around Japan for twenty or ten days, they would pay for it, the Japanese government, I mean *monbusho* [Ministry of Culture], so they supported me in doing my research, I started to do research in all of Japan and managed to learn about all the things that I was interested in.

Japan has so many things, has so much culture that even forty years of staying there wouldn't be enough to get to know such a great culture. And then I created a cycle with the works that were handmade, forty works which I called *Utsukushī Nihon to watashi*, it means *Japonia e Bukur dhe Unë* [The Beautiful Japan and I], that was the slogan, and when I met a famous Japanese artist who had his own very good gallery, he gave us money because it was very expensive, you had to give 20.000 dollars in order to keep your exhibition open there for one month. While this man, Takashi Kono, is a very great designer and he designed, if you remember, the Olympic Games in Tokyo, he was the one who designed all the posters and logos. And he was a very good person so I opened the exhibition, which turned out to be very successful and I have these. There is a tradition... in the opening day they usually leave a notebook, how to say a big writing block where people who come to visit register and write their impressions. And that was, I have kept them and brought them here, the exhibition was really successful.

The topics that I focused on had to do with the fight against pollution, because Japan was being enormously developed, it had a big industrial development. And one day while travelling with a friend of mine, a very good Japanese painter, Yoshi Dasan, he would always come and call me and with his car we would go to Japanese restaurants to eat seafood. And one day I was travelling with *shinkansen*, *shinkansen* was the fastest train in Japan at that time, it went 280 kilometers per hour, and from the train I saw mountain Fujiyama. Fuji is the highest mountain in Japan, they call it the holy mountain, and has an altitude of four thousands meters.

And I noticed that because of the factories and their chimneys, you know, that the whole sky was covered in smoke, and so I got inspired and painted it, you know in the long elegant formal style {explains with hands}, just like the Japanese paper scrolls. Which when Japanese painted {explains with hands} had the canvas which they rounded and then opened it and wrote poems on, they wrote descriptions and painted. And I wanted to do it that way, the Japanese liked that I had written, *Quo Vadis Japan?* [Japan, where are you going?] I mean, *Kireina Nihon* which means, Clean Japan, and the Japanese were very impressed by it.

Then I dealt with the lives of geishas, because there are many of them in Japan and in Japan people think that these women are very beautiful, I say that in one hundred girls, one is extraordinary, because they are usually not that beautiful. But the geishas were women that in the sixteenth, seventeenth century served in public houses. Today in Japan they are called *toruko*, because of Turkish bathrooms, and there exist these geisha that are dressed in shirts without sleeves, they play the *shamisen* instrument, which is an instrument almost like our *sharki*.¹⁶ Then they interpret beautiful Japanese poems, do massages and many other things.

¹⁶ Albanian: *Çallgi, Sharki*, is a plucked, fretted, long-necked chordophone used in the folk music of various Balkan countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Albania, Kosovo and Serbia.

So, I treated and painted all these interesting topics from Japanese life in my forty works and I mainly painted, I translated the verbs from the texts of poets such as Basho, Buson, Issa and many others and turned them into paintings. But, I haven't sold any of my original works because, I just can't do it, and I never wanted to sell them. And I also wanted to bring them to Kosovo and one day to leave them to my family, but they also have to go to the National Gallery of Kosovo, when the time comes, it was very difficult for me to bring them here, right? To carry them in airplanes, without registering them somehow. How I brought them here is a story in itself, so when I left Japan I think that I had achieved all that I wanted to achieve. I learned a lot, I created a lot and the opening of the exhibition was the crowning achievement. And this is recorded in many films as videos as well as as photographs. Since photography is very developed in Japan, their companies and cameras are known, Nikon, Minolta and so on.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you return to Belgrade?

Shyqri Nimani: No.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When did you return from there?

Shyqri Nimani: When I returned, when I returned, to be honest when I graduated from my Master's in Belgrade, my professor told me. Good that you mentioned this because it is very important, it was an extraordinary experience. My professor told me, "Nimani," because they call you by your last name there, he said, "Don't go there, not that I want to undervalue Kosovo," but he said, "sooner or later," he said, "the province will step on you." Meaning that Kosovo is a province. But it doesn't matter that you will go and give your contribution, it will remain a province and it is difficult because it will step on you. I told him, I hadn't thought about that at all, I said, "I will return to Kosovo because Kosovo gave me the scholarship to study." Because *Rilindja*¹⁷ gave me the scholarship for five years, then for the Master's I got the scholarship from *Këshilli Krahinor* [Province Council], I mean the Government of Kosovo at that time.

The scholarships were extraordinary, we were the first generation to register for post-graduate studies and they were, in order to understand how different that scholarship was, in the fifth year of the Academy I had five thousands dinars. While in the first year, when I started in October, Master's Degree, I had 110 thousand dinars.¹⁸

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What value did that money have?

Shyqri Nimani: It's something big, but we can make a comparison between five thousand with 110 thousand. It's like five thousands euros with 110 thousand euros, it is the same, isn't it? I don't know now, I have to check the currency value. But in order to understand, let me tell you that one hotel, for example I went to a hotel, not to a dormitory with five people (all laugh). I decided to go to the General Tourist hotel in Belgrade, the hotel was new. And I asked, "How much does it cost for one month?" They said, "Thirty thousand dinar," thirty thousand dinar, one thousand dinar for each day, I

¹⁷ *Rilindja*, the first newspaper in Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.

¹⁸ *Dinar* was the Yugoslav currency. Now it is the basic monetary unit of Serbia.

said, “Okay, I’ll take it,” “But how do you have money, what are you?”, they said, and I said, “I am a Master’s degree student.” “But how do you have the money, the money, which is a big enough amount for three, four salaries.” “I have,” I said, and showed the certificate and back then the leader here was, it is very interesting, when I saw my document, Ukshin Hoti,¹⁹ the deceased man who was executed by Serbs. I mean, Ukshin Hoti was the one, of the young generation of ours, who helped the development of Kosovo very much.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What plan were those scholarships for Kosovo development part of?

Shyqri Nimani: Yes, for the development of Kosovo, the scholarships were given for various fields, I don’t know how many of them were there, but I know that also Zeqirja Ballata took one for the Music Department, he went to the Academy then to Ljubljana, and some others. I don’t know numbers, but this was something very extraordinary, really extraordinary. Because for example, you had to pay thirty thousand for the hotel, for example today a hotel can approximately cost hundred euros, right? I mean, three, you had to pay three thousand euros, then I also gave thirty thousand dinar for the food and that became sixty thousand. Then I went to buy the tickets for the trains and tramways. Then I bought colors for twenty thousand dinars and so on, then books or something, so, but I never forgot, I said, “Kosovo gave me these,” and I returned to Kosovo.

Sometimes I think how messed up we are in this very moment we spoke of, was the professor right when he said that, could he be right? But again I say that he wasn’t right and I will say it one thousand times that even if I was there a thousand times more, I would still decide to return to Kosovo. Because I had the chance to go to many places in the world, I travelled a lot and had the chance to live there, and live well. But even though they offered me an apartment and a job as well as a studio in Belgrade, I didn’t take any of them and returned to Pristina.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: There were ten years of difference between the moment you went and the one in which you returned to Kosovo. What did you find, how did you find the country and what were the novelties of that time since Kosovo now had an educated generation?

Shyqri Nimani: There was, (coughs), the difference was very big, the difference was even bigger than when I left Kosovo. Because at the time when I went to Belgrade, it was the ‘60s, just when Yugoslavia became among the leaders because the president of Yugoslavia, Tito at that time, Nasser and Nehru from India became leaders of the third world. I mean, the nonaligned countries and Yugoslavia benefited a lot at that time, Belgrade was developing enormously, everything happened in Belgrade, the meetings of the Yugoslav Federation, Belgrade benefited a lot, tremendously and it developed enormously.

So, when I returned to Pristina, Pristina had no University but a *Shkolla e Lartë Pedagogjike*, it wasn’t developed, it had maybe 400 thousand inhabitants, it had very few. I was the first one with a Master’s degree there, in Yugoslavia, not to mention that here, here there were none, and so, I went to the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* that I mentioned and we founded the University in 1970, that was an

¹⁹ Ukshin Hoti (1943—...) was a philosopher and politician who was sentenced to five years in prison in 1994. He disappeared at the time of his release and his whereabouts are still unknown.

extraordinary event. Then three—four years after that we established the Faculty of Arts, which was called the Arts Academy, and started with the department of painting, graphics and graphic design. I led the department of graphic design and then a very good development started... in Kosovo, the generations in which Kosovo had invested, returned, my generations and a generation older than me started returning to Kosovo which was extraordinary, that was a very good thing.

And then the first Kosovo institutions started being established. You know which ones? The theatre... even though there had been some of that before, but it started to get a strong character and get better established, the *Kosova Filmi* [Kosovo Cinematographic Center] started being constructed, then the Gallery of Arts, then *Shota* [Folk Dance Ensemble] and so on. I mean, Kosovo started taking the shape of a state, I mean which had to be so, be it by peace or by war even though the latter happened. Since they did not understand, Serbia wouldn't understand that with the ending of the twentieth century, there was no more space in Balkans, not to talk about Europe, for a country to rule another one, and then we know the rest. Albanians couldn't stand it anymore even though we stood for ten years with a peaceful movement and big losses and suffering, we kept the university, I mean without money and people gave their own houses.²⁰

So, everybody in Kosovo, I mean from the most simple people to the most important intellectuals, everybody gave their own contribution. And nobody has the right to ever say that, "I did it, I did it," but we will always say, "We did it." Because without that harmony, without that unity that was shown by the people of Kosovo, they all became one, that is why Kosovo won. That is why it was valued by the world, I mean, that extraordinary willing, that willing of a freedom—loving nation that never in its history had stepped on other nations. Never, ever! As far as my knowledge of history goes, never. It only fought for its freedom, and the fight for freedom is not... I mean, it is not a crime or a means of stepping on another nation.

So, that is when, when Kosovo really started to take.... The awareness was awakened, raised. And all those goals of our nation for... I can say that we were under the Yugoslav occupation for one hundred years, practically ninety years, and that is the only time when what should have been achieved was achieved. So, Kosovo was liberated and today we fight to turn this liberation into prosperity. Because we call it democracy... because sometimes democracy seems like anarchy. But to create prosperity in which at least most of our people have a dignified life. And to not have a country in which someone has too much, someone earns illegally and someone else suffers. And this, this hurts us all when we say that in Kosovo a poor person spends one dollar and something daily. This is very painful. Each one of us in Kosovo, when we go to sleep, when we are quiet, should think why is it like this and what can we do to make a change?

With all the progress and positive initiatives from which only a percentage of what was dreamt to be done was done, but it was still too far from what is normal. Because we had no space to create, I

²⁰ By 1991, after Slobodan Milošević's legislation that made Serbian the official language of Kosovo and the removal of all Albanians from public service, Albanians were excluded from schools as well. The Albanian reaction was to create a parallel system of education hosted mostly by private homes, basements included were used as classrooms.

mean, we didn't have our government proper, to create the cultural and educational institutions which are fundamental and think about making projects about how a proper democratic state should be. That was very difficult, but it is important that we were motivated by something internal, something had started.

I remember when the ambassadors who were accredited in Belgrade would come, and each time they would come, I had the chance to hear them say, "We always see something new with you. It is being built. Everything is being developed. Something is happening." And this, this was obvious because there was a big willingness not only from institutions because we had our leaders, who in the government of Kosovo, who, especially in the educational, cultural and scientific institutions, who were well educated people who were Ph.D. holders in their own fields, they were had their doctorate degree. So, they were true patriots who have created extraordinary values and with their great will, but that era is gone.

And with this great willingness we established the University, then the Gallery of Arts, I was, destiny was such that I was the first director of that institution, I led it for ten years... and we had our own plans. And taking into consideration the Executive Council, for example, and the Ministry of Culture, there were our [Albanian] people employed, and all our institutional cultural projects were supported, the financial means were granted. I mean, the institutions had the possibility to share the financial means, you know, for the next year with their councils and decide on the projects and they pleasantly and successfully did it. Without any problem.

And today it is paradoxical, I see that many institutions receive their money in quarters [three months], or with delays, that is not enough. And so the institutions face obstacles, many obstacles. And this depends on us, it doesn't depend anymore... we do not have the excuse anymore that our enemy is interrupting us... we have no excuse now. The merit belongs to us for everything that's good as well as for everything that's bad. And what I want to say is that there were created, we started... we had no gallery. We made one gallery, one, two, three galleries. Then, other cities started with cultural centres, they also had galleries. So, the figurative art started being developed. Then, the University started... the Faculty of Art, the department of Figurative Arts.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you have many...

Shyqri Nimani: Sorry?

Erëmirë Krasniqi:... students?

Shyqri Nimani: What?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you have many students?

Shyqri Nimani: Yes. We didn't have many students at that time. I mean, we accepted around thirty—five students in the department of figurative arts, four or five of which we would move to the

department of design, around ten of them to the department of painting, around two—three of them to the department of sculpture and two or three to graphics. But, they were educated extraordinarily well because we had time to work with those students. Today for example, we have, even the private universities accept one hundred or hundred and fifty students for example. It is extraordinary, it is too much, isn't it? And what are they going to do once they finish university? They will get engaged in something else, of course not in their own field. Because it is impossible to teach one student... for example in one class with forty other students... if we separate into two classes with forty students, even then, if you have two hours time you will have to only dedicate two minutes to each, which is very little.

But, then we started being interested in art history books. And then we applied, the gallery, in the Ministry of Culture, they gave us the funds to for the first time to publish the Monograph of Kosovo's Contemporary Art.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes.

Shyqri Nimani: And then we engaged, I mean a very good art historian, Vlado Bužančić from Croatia, who came here, studied our artists, but even earlier.... We hired four of our artists to write texts about graphic arts, applicative arts, painting, sculpture... our best photographers... and we published the monograph in three languages: Albanian, Serbian—Croatian and English. So a monograph was published which even today I can consider a bible because everyone dealing with art in Kosovo will, will refer to it... because we worked on it with great love.

So, then we started publishing. *Rilindja* started... in Yugoslavia an initiative was taken to publish book editions on World Museums, and so we joined in with the Albanian language. We published around six to seven [books]. *Rilindja* published them. They are very good, they were published in Albanian. And then we started our issue, of painters... because we had one or two art historians... but, the painters, some painters, I mean our artists who wrote books... I wrote some... I wrote some for example about the Albanian medieval painter *Onufri dhe Piktorët e Tjerë Mesjetarë* [Onuphrius and Other Medieval Painters], then I worked on that Monograph of Contemporary Arts and many other books... also my colleagues....So, we started enriching the library of figurative arts, not only with international literature, but we also emphasized our local arts. And so, so I think we managed. But, now it's the Gallery's duty to push it forward.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of arts system was installed in Yugoslavia? A system in the sense of how did it promote the artists of the province?

Shyqri Nimani: Yes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How were certain arts ideas in art distributed?

Shyqri Nimani: Yes. At that time, at that time, just like in other fields, I am talking about the field which I know and which is the visual arts... they existed, you know, galleries existed. Each capital...

because they have... the Yugoslav system was, the Yugoslav Federation had six republics and two provinces. And however, these two autonomous provinces, Kosovo and Vojvodina, became kind of republics after '74, they were like, like equal units of the Federation.

So, we had our meetings. We had one representative in the Yugoslav Federation and we would agree with everything that came to Yugoslavia and went out of Yugoslavia. There we would decide for example when an exhibition wanted to come. For example, I was a member of that Council there and I wanted, I brought the Japanese exhibition here for the first time, one from Dagestan and many others. And they would agree there, "An American exhibition will come. It will travel to five to six cities." Each one would accept to welcome it and participated in the funds for the catalogue which was published in each language. There was equality, to be honest, for real.

Also associations of visual arts artists and applicative arts existed back then. Each one, I mean each province had them. Here in Kosovo we had three associations. The first one that was founded was *Shoqata e Artistëve Figurativ* [The Visual Artists Association] with Muslim Mulliqi as the leader. Then, the *Shoqata e Artistëve Aplikativë të Kosovës* [The Kosovo Applicative Artists Association] was founded, and I was selected as its leader by my colleagues. And then we also founded the *Shoqata e Artistëve Figurativë të Prishtinës* [The Pristina Visual Artists Association]. This worked as well and the deceased Kadrush Rama was its leader.

And this way we won, we won a lot. The visual arts were imposed, they were imposed. I remember once when academic Ali Hadri came to our office... would come to our office because the Gallery was in the *Pallati i Rinisë* [Youth Palace], which back then was called *Boro dhe Ramizi*²¹ and we had extraordinary visits there because we were right in the center. And... we had the most visits to the visual arts exhibition from Albania, which was registered in UNESCO, 40.000 visitors in twenty days. The queue was long. Schools would come... it was a realistic exhibition. Socio—Realism, but it didn't have many socio—realistic characteristics because it was figurative. It had figures from the history of the Albanian nation and so on.

That is how the figurative art took its first steps... I was telling you when Ali Hadri came and told me, "Shyqri, you, the Gallery, have become more famous than the Academy of Sciences!" Because exhibitions would be open there and for example the Television of Pristina would come, the one that is now called RTK [Radio Television Kosovo], the back—then RTP [Radio Television Pristina] was there... they would come and record in Albanian, the other ones in Serbian—Croatian, some others in Roma, some others in Turkish... so, we everyday had television stations visiting the exhibitions that were opened in the Gallery. It was famous.

But today, what's the matter today? The associations don't exist today, the one of Visual Artists, the Applicative Artists Association, the Association of Pristina, then the people...

²¹ *Boro dhe Ramizi* refers to two friends, Boro Vukmirović and Ramiz Sadiku, who were executed during the Second World War. They became the symbol of the Brotherhood and Unity of the Serbian and Albanian people. In Yugoslav times it was common to name institutions after the heroes of the anti—fascist war.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of function did the associations have, I mean what did they do?

Shyqri Nimani: Yes...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did they promote artists or did they defend the copyrights, the author's rights?

Shyqri Nimani: ... yes, yes. The associations had one thing. They organized, I mean they had the membership, they organized the annual exhibition. And in the Gallery, we allowed each association one annual exhibition, I mean the three of them were guaranteed this. We helped them not to deal... they brought their works here. They established their own juries, the selecting juries, but we accepted their works here. When the exhibitions were done, they would come and take them back. So... then the Gallery started buying. At that time, we bought five hundred works in ten years. The Collection of the Gallery started getting very rich. And this is how the visual art progressed.

Then what else did the associations do? They would organize various workshops, one thing that was very good was that they organized the what is called....Once a year they would organize an artistic colony, which was very beautiful. We would either go to Deçan or Rugova or any other region. The painters would take their canvas, colors, pens, papers and live for seven to ten days... they were provided food and accommodation. They were in charge of creating paintings which would remain under the ownership of the Gallery.

I mean it was a beautiful environment... they had their own offices. While today, it is miserable. Offices were robbed after, someone occupied them by force after the '99, after the war. I mean, the associations were demolished thanks to the leaders who were, you know, irresponsible. Unfortunately the three associations were demolished, they don't exist anymore. And, the artists are not organized, not organized. Or they organize in groups of three—four, five or ten people gather privately and ask the Ministry of Culture for, for example, a, a, a small budget in order to afford a catalogue and send an exhibition to another place.

But we are left with, you know, the mess. Unfortunately even the Gallery, now the Gallery finally has to organize a great international exhibition of Kosovo Visual Art. Followed by a great monograph in several languages. It has to collect artworks. You know that no artwork was bought for 20 and something... or to say that in the last 17 years [after the war], but even before and imagine the harm that was done to Kosovo. I mean, the young painters, the new generations could sell their paintings here and there, but with very little money, but those paintings are valuable.

But now, a big gap has been created and it's our fault. So, it's the fault of those who, let's say, they are the leaders, but it is also our fault because we don't raise our voices. Especially the young generations. The young generations should not expect the old ones to raise their voices for them today as well, because they should be taught to raise their voices for their own rights.

So, the collection has to be created, to create the collection of the Gallery of Art new works by our artists have to be bought. Because nowadays we have many good artists, really, really good ones.

Because many years have passed and many more good artists are coming, you know, the quality is better and better. We also worked and took some ateliers. Those ateliers were small. But nowadays we have to look for ateliers again.

Let's return to the case of the village of Bardhosh. In Bardhosh for example, it's been ten years since we got the land from the Municipality of Pristina. We got the land. Then, 600.000, 80.000 euros were given, big amounts of money were given and now we are reading that it's over. Now we have to return the land or ask for it again. We have lost the right, you know, we were negligent. You know, we didn't manage to finish it in ten years. And it's, it's... the land contract is about to expire. But it is unfortunate that it was not done to the end, because as the saying goes *Finis Coronat Opus* [It is the Ending that Decorated the Work]. Here the ending destroyed the work. You know, we went there some days ago, I did not manage to meet my fellow colleagues there. You know, now it is a contest, according to the law, Pristina, the Municipality of Pristina has the right to ask for it from you, or we have to apply once again for the land and then ask for other funds to finish it. Something has remained. And some part should also be paid by the author, I think it's thirty to sixty.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: That was the land destined for?

Shyqri Nimani: Yes, yes, for ateliers....

Erëmirë Krasniqi: ... ateliers?

Shyqri Nimani: Yes, yes. We took it long ago. It's been ten years now, and you cannot imagine how fast time has flown.

Part Three

Shyqri Nimani: And now it has remained, unfortunately we didn't work after the war to build a modern gallery, a gallery of contemporary art, because I didn't want to use the word modern so that we didn't relate to old buildings. Because in Pristina we don't have any old buildings for example to take; each time I go to big cities in Europe, for example in Italy, I say if only we could take one building to Pristina we would brag about what we own. But we don't have, we have to build a museum of contemporary art, the call was opened but the project is still stuck, it is always a discussion whether it should be done by the municipality, the Gallery or the Ministry of Culture, but it is not known where the place, the land is, this is all simple.

I also told Arta [Bunjaku], the current director, that her priority during her four-year mandate should be the beginning of work to build the Museum of Contemporary Art, the demolishing of this building here and the constructing of a new one, or to find a place where a whole new one will be constructed, but they are still thinking about it. The call was opened and it was won by the architect, the project exists, someone says, "Let's take the building right there in the center," the one that is located close to the Skanderbeg statue.... That used to be a shopping mall, someone else says, "No, let's demolish the existing one, not that one but the other." You know, I told them, "If we are united, those of us who

work in the arts, not the ones who don't know, seek the council of those in the visual arts". I mean a council should be established to talk about what they want to do...

It's the last chance for visual art, which used to be the most advanced, with the greatest values and with more educated people from this field than all the other arts here, today it is at last, very little is spoken about it. Kudos to them, to people from music, especially the ones from the field of who recently have built with, with project are competing and starting festivals of classical music, which have become very important here. Also those from drama and film, they are trying and creating while ours [visual artists], looks like the young generations don't get along with each other very well, we haven't taught them like this. We tried to have harmony, we held the Academy very well, with harmony, we had no problems. But the young generations should be careful, if they don't value each other, nobody is going to value them. And this is the first step, if we value ourselves, the others will value us as well while if we don't value each other and our art, because as many good artists as we have, the art from Kosovo will progress more and everybody should think in this direction and not in destruction.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us the history of Pristina Gallery which later on turned into the National Gallery, since you were the director of the Gallery?

Shyqri Nimani: What, say that again because I couldn't...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: The history of the Gallery?

Shyqri Nimani: Yes. Back then when I... when I returned it was the year of 1979 if I am not mistaken, I believe I am not mistaken, and that is when the call was opened for the position of the director of the Gallery. Quite a few of us applied and I was elected the director of the Gallery even though I had this, I taught at the Faculty of Arts, I was the head of the design department and I told mister Pajazit Nushi that, since he was the main official in the Executive Council, I said that, "I couldn't leave" I said, "the academy, the faculty". "No, no." He said, "You will keep both." So for ten years I held both job positions, I taught there and here I had one third of my salary from the Gallery. But at that time there were some personalities, Ali Hadri was a professor in the faculty and the director of the Institute, because there were not many qualified people but I still think that it was possible to elect somebody else. You know, for a director of the Gallery, but maybe they thought I was the right person and I led the Gallery for ten years.

Then we decided to use the Culture Palace which at that time was called *Boro dhe Ramizi* and began from zero, we did not... I mean we had nothing, but the support of the government of Kosovo was extraordinary. And then I, I had to create those three offices, to ensure the exhibition space has the basic conditions, as much as it was possible at the time, such as light, air condition, warehouse to keep the artworks. I asked for funds in order to buy artworks every year, every artist that had their exhibition in the Gallery were published in a catalogue by me, not by me but by us because it is never nice to say I, but in this case as the director I did it with the Artistic Council. We would buy two artworks, two works from each artist, it never happened that we didn't buy somebody's work, and we bought it and according to the Yugoslav standards it was good funding.

Then we would publish their catalogue in three languages and a poster in colors, then I would invite, I had also added to the program the Kosovar artists that lived abroad and I invited all of them, Gjelosh, Karmon Fan Ferri²² and Bahri Drançolli²³ and some others who lived abroad. We covered their travel expenses as well as the accommodation for seven days with food included, we would buy two works and this was one of our initiatives and ideas which was never refused by the government. That is why I am surprised that it doesn't continue now, why do they not invite our diaspora artists, why don't they create a fund to buy artworks? Why don't they provide funding to create ateliers? Because I have it here, we had written the project and paid the architects from *Kosova Filmi*, the building where KFOR is currently located, that's the building of *Kosova Filmi*.

I had agreed with the deceased Azem Shkreli, who was the director of *Kosova Filmi*, to build another ten ateliers there, and we built the first four ones, they all were supposed to be built according to... for example one for painting, one for sculpture, another one for graphic arts and the other for design. And they were around 50—60 meters wide, with central heating. I mean the projects are here, there was an architect... one... I forgot his name, his last name was Spahiu and we also paid him. I mean, we had given him some money in advance, all the projects exist and that's it. You can go and see them, they are all done in detail {explains with hands}, water, heat and everything but we remained unorganized after the war, but again, this Arta should... when this building is freed, the place is there as well as the permission, we can create around ten very good ateliers.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you use your position as the director of the gallery at that time to promote the Kosovar artists all around Yugoslavia?

Shyqri Nimani: Yes, and this is a very good question.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was the communication with other parts?

Shyqri Nimani: Eh, while I was a director we also worked with the associations, we would send the exhibitions with the help of other associations, we would send them to Skopje, they would bring them to Skopje and they would give us the Museum of Contemporary Art, do you know how Skopje's museum is, the new one? Then we would send them to Zagreb, Belgrade, I also had a reciprocal agreement in order to exchange exhibitions, I would take one, they would take one, and not the arrangement of I take one and you take none, I mean we were equals. Whoever wanted to collaborate with me from Yugoslavia did so, so we collaborated with Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Skopje, Sarajevo, Novi Sad and so we had great activity. You can also take it, Erëmira [addresses the interviewer], there are three information books, I have three information books where you can find the data for ten years, all the exhibitions we had, the dates, how many visitors visited them, their titles, how many works we bought and so on because I was very transparent with the journalists, they could take it whenever they want to. Today for example we don't know, not only here, but you've seen it on television....

[The interviewer asks the speaker to talk about their beginnings in art writing, and how was the Albanian

²² Karmon Fan Ferri (1946—1991) was born in Peja, Kosovo. He was a Kosovo Albanian graphic designer.

²³ Bahri Drançolli (1940) is an Albanian painter and graphic designer.

language shaped accordingly. The question was cut from the video interview]

Erëmira [addresses the interviewer], the questions, these are really great questions because these are events that happened in an environment in which Kosovo was very behind and I mean especially in these elite fields concerning the spiritual goods of humanity. I mean, we didn't have, when we started our studies we had to go to places outside Kosovo, for example Belgrade, Zagreb, Sarajevo, Ljubljana, back then a good part of us started writing. We started writing, writing about those exhibitions that happened in those cities, I myself started writing in the second year of my studies, because there were many exhibitions in Belgrade. I told you earlier that 20–30 exhibitions would open in one day, and I wrote for *Rilindja*.

Rilindja was our newspaper, in the beginning it was only published once a week, then once, then twice, then it then it became daily newspaper and then it was the Saturdays' issue. Then they would have a cultural addition just like *Koha Ditore* [The Daily Time] and *Zëri* [The Voice] do nowadays. It published articles on figurative art, film, music, drama, literature. *Rilindja* even published short stories twice a week which they unfortunately don't do nowadays, one day an original short story of an Albanian author was published, and on the other day a story from world literature was translated. And so I had started writing and I also would record with Television of Pristina, which had its representatives in Belgrade, we had a TV show once a month, it lasted half an hour and later on it started being broadcasted once a week, so once a week I would take their cameras to record and broadcast on television besides the fact that I also wrote for *Rilindja*. There was *Rilindja* only. Then there were other magazines, there was the *Fjala* [The Word] magazine, which was a literary one, it was a big platform and *Fjala* [The Word] achieved a high level of success because it was led by professionals in literature. Poetry, thorough analysis of poetry and novel were published as well as portraits of various writers and essays on literature, and we would write essays on figurative arts.

So I mean, it began here, this was it, these were the first steps that some of us took... since some of us had studied art history and had knowledge. Five years in the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* in Peja, and five years in Belgrade we had visited all the cultural monuments, be it Orthodox, Muslim or Catholic, mosques, churches, monasteries in Serbia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, Greece and we would also read books of great writers, Lazarev and others, who had written in German, French, Italian or even Russian. Because we had a big library in our faculty, the library of the Belgrade Academy of Arts gave us many books on art history in foreign languages so our library was very rich. We had Alltëne Taipi, who was an art historian, she was responsible for the library, she was a very, very polite girl, she was hardworking and also wrote. So, this is how it began, I think in the best way possible, from the easiest to the most difficult, first small sketches for a newspaper to a book on art history.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was it difficult to translate specific terms of the field? The specific terms of the field which of course you read in Serbian, was it problem to translate them because I think that somehow it also required some intellectual courage from you to decide what something is going to be called?

Shyqri Nimani: Yes, I am talking about myself but when I talk about myself I don't think I am a specific case because there were such people everywhere, everywhere you have people like that, someone just had the opportunities. I myself did not have those difficulties because we never had a book in

Albanian in the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* in Peja nor in the academy in Belgrade, we only had them once we returned to Pristina, that I told you about earlier. I started publishing the books *Rilindja in World Museums*, which were published and translated in many European languages. I mentioned it earlier as well that in the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* we only had Serbian as a language, most of us in the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* in Peja spoke it as if it was our mother tongue. In fifth grade in *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit*, I even had a five²⁴ in Serbian, I mean, I knew that language, I started speaking it since I was seven in Prizren, we spoke Albanian, Serbian and even Turkish, we even spoke Turkish, didn't we?

Then we started learning English and French, and as for the literature in Serbian, Croatian, that was like Albanian to me, I absolutely had no problems because I speak that language very well and I even translated books. I translated books from Serbian—Croatian and English, my books were translated in six—seven international languages as well, even in Arabic. And it was not difficult at all to translate them or research and even take information, then also Italian, no problem at all. I learned Italian because I use Latin for my scientific work, also French, while Serbian, English, they are like languages... I have studied Japanese in order to know its structure, I have also been to Greece for a one—month course in order to know Greek. Ancient Greek especially, because I wanted to read the old texts on Albanian painters and I had no problem with it either.

So I had no difficulties and I still don't have difficulties to use these languages. I have around twenty dictionaries of all these languages at home and today we have it very easy, because you know, we can find everything on Google through the internet, you can search words and compare them, I also have Oxford dictionaries as well as dictionaries for Latin, Greek, Japanese, French, Slavic, Russian, Spanish, I use all of them. Because the foundation of these latin anglophonic languages, they go... if you know one of them, there will be no problem to know another; because their foundation is the same there are no difficulties, speaking is something else, one cannot speak all those languages.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You mentioned a little the collection of the Gallery, I would like you to tell us how you always kept two artworks from every exhibition and you also had a budget for the creation of the collection. Can you tell us how you decided what had value and what didn't, how did you establish that criteria?

Shyqri Nimani: Hmm....?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you decide what was of value, a valuable work of art and what, not also, what deserved to be exhibited and what did not? Can you somehow talk to us a little about the logic behind the collection?

Shyqri Nimani: Erëmirë [addresses the interviewer], I have to tell you once again that your questions are extraordinary. This is something very crucial, why is it, why did I decide? It really is a very crucial question. First it was crucial to me to be honest, it was my duty, for example I read a very beautiful story of Cervantes and loved it so much and then I thought why is it not translated into Albanian, why not translate and send it to *Rilindja* so that my fellow locals can enjoy it as well. For example I read

²⁴ Grade A on an A—F scale (Five—0).

stories that had to do... of great writers that talked about Albanians as well.

Once for example I chanced upon, I was reading that Hemingway, everybody knows that he wrote novels but nobody knows he also wrote poetry, and when he was young, during his studies he had written poetry and a book of his with 88 poems was published. I was given the news and told the American director of the American Center in Belgrade, because I had a connection with him, they always came here, I told him, "When you go to America, find me this book," so he found and brought it to me, I opened to read it, I was interested in how Hemingway had written his poems, it is something extraordinary, this is not the right place... we can talk in person some other time... and then I saw The Copenhagen Battle which is a long poem, and it talks about... that battle is historical and it is known for the participation of many nations and there is one line where it talks about the land of Albanians and this was something extraordinary, I said, I have to translate this, let Albanians read that Hemingway is mentioning us, the Albanians who fought in Copenhagen, Denmark. And so on and so on.

For example Peter Ustinov says, "The stranger in Spain", he tells that in the time... how he went out of a Spanish ship, from a ship from Albania, from a submarine he went to the Spanish coast, they found him and asked, "Who are you?" "Albanian. *Albanese*." He said all he knew, he didn't know anything else and they thought that Russia wanted to spy there, you know with those unique submarines they wanted to spy. But the long story is quite humorous and very good so I always wanted to... but I think that I realized that we had no books in art history, we had no books in Albanian language and that is when I decided to do them, nobody else was doing it, not even in Albania, they haven't translated books from foreign languages, they have written some books on Albanian Byzantine art, I have all of them and there were only few of them, nothing, zero compared to other Balkan nations.

And so I slowly started doing them in a very sophisticated way, I didn't want to do them just for the sake of it, I wanted to do them very very well and equal to the ones that are published in Europe. So when I worked on the book *Onufri²⁵ dhe piktorët e tjerë mesjetarë shqiptarë* [Onuphrius and other medieval Albanian painters], there are five copies here, you can look at them in the library, and 2000 copies were sold. It was very well received in Albania because they had one book that was written by Theofan Popa, a great Albanian byzantologist, but he didn't know about aesthetics, he knew hagiography, customs and traditions, a small book.

And those from *Rilindja* gave me the book printed in black and white, "Will you read it? Let us know whether it is good to publish it, and if yes, write the prologue." I wrote the prologue but I said that this book has low resolution, black, a too many copies and bad cliches... "Alright," they said, "what do you propose?" I said, "Let's make a new one with colors, but the colors," I said, "we have to get them in Albania. Paintings with colors, slides." Back then Dhorka Dhamo was coming and I said, "Dhorka, will you write?" She is a byzantologist, "No," she said, "you write it." When she insisted, that is when they sent the beautiful slides from Pristina which I took and sent to printing house in Zagreb, not in Pristina. There was a private printing house in Zagreb and Kresimir gave the slides to Slovenian nuns,

²⁵ Onufri or Onouphrios of Neokastro was an Orthodox icon painter and Archpriest of Elbasan, active in the 16th century in southern Albania and south-western Macedonia. His works are characterized by post-Byzantine and Venetian influences.

the slides that I wanted to print in Slovenia. They separated the colors the way I wanted to emphasize some elements where I did a homage to Onuphrius, they worked on them.

Then Agron, the director of *Rilindja*, came to the fair in Zagreb and said, "Please Shyqri bring them" because I bought the papers and everything there, I was a doer, nobody could stop me in my positive initiatives. They supported us here. She [Arta] told me that here they don't understand the role of the Council, how can the Council not give permission to the director? They don't allow her to do anything here, she told me these days. It has been two months since she is here and they put obstacles. I listened to their council but the Council cannot be over the director, it has to meet once and report but that's it. Have a good day! The director will implement everything, the director will be there during the good and bad.

And he told me, I brought *Rilindja* here and bought the paper in Vebedo, I also bought mat paper in order to work on them, look what I did in order to make the book? When the book was published in Albania they took and valued it very much because 2000 copies were sold here already and I don't even have one for myself, I guess there are three or five copies here that I gave to them and I cannot take back anymore. But I will republish it, next year I will design it in this form, a monograph, and send it to Albania because they don't have it. And now, when we decided to publish that and Kadare in the *di Lettere Albane, Albanian Literature* then we translated twenty pages in French about Onuphrius. I mean they really, they were impressed by the book and then I continued, I already have 20 monographs that were done by me, each one took three, four or five years to be done, and this is how I started.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us more about how all the political changes affected the arts scene?

Shyqri Nimani: Now, I mean after the death of the president of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, no matter whether he was good or bad, he did good things and bad things because when one is in power for a long time, of course they will do good things as well as bad ones. However, this is another topic. Then Serbs came to power, I mean they were waiting for the death of Josip Broz Tito in order for them to be able to rule Yugoslavia and this was the greatest mistake of theirs because for the last one hundred years they have grown out of the Belgrade Bashaws, Serbia was a very small place without Vojvodina and Kosovo. It expanded and became so big that they led 70 percent of the Yugoslav Federate with officers, generals and so on...

I mean it was very developed, why, they were bothered by it? Now... and wanted to take everything from Albanians. Because no matter if they are good or bad, Albanians had to arrive where they are today, if Serbia allowed us to develop, you have to know that Albanians will develop so much that one day they will be independent, isn't that right? He said, "We will use it, we have the army, we will use our military forces, we have to seize this moment in history and we have to oppress them violently." And they took over. When the meeting took place, everyone knows, they said, "No, we don't want the '74 constitution." They said, "No." You know, they said, "We want to merge with Serbia, there's no need for [autonomous] Kosovo, we are part of Serbia." And they violently took over the executive power that Kosovo had until then.

Then they started to stop us from going to the University, they chased us from the University, then

they only started allowing elementary schools. So, that is when the moment came that Albanians had their backs to the wall. And the first thing was to organize an active peaceful movement with the *Lidhja Demokratike*,²⁶ that was the time when *Lidhja Demokratike* was founded, which is the first Albanian political party. And it was the first time an Albanian party was legally registered, because up to that point they were illegal, Serbia, Yugoslavia, destroyed, imprisoned the activists with the excuse that they wanted to destroy the country as well as other republics, they were destroying the country, “Kill them, imprison them!” And that is when *Lidhja Demokratike* was founded, this was a big movement and a very good step. Led by Ibrahim Rugova, and that was a great thing because back then they could ask for their rights in a democratic way, now Serbia couldn’t by force... because they started violently taking things from us, they chased us from the University, they also took our achievements and then...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How...

Shyqri Nimani: Sorry?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was there any decision or how they did it...

Shyqri Nimani: What?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did they chase you from the Gallery and University, can you tell us?

Shyqri Nimani: They easily took the Gallery, but the University... Now they said that according to their rules, nowhere in the world did minorities have universities and so on, “This is too much for you and we should take them from you.” But of course Albanians didn’t accept this because we weren’t a minority, we had our land, on the contrary, there is no richer land than Kosovo, I mean 92 percent are Albanians. There is 95 percent in Albania, these are two countries, I mean two countries that even UNMIK²⁷ is calling multi—national, multi—ethnic countries. Serbia is not, there only 40 percent are Serbs and they don’t care about the others, they have the flag, the emblem and the hymn only about Serbs and they don’t sing about the others. But the world is unfair, if you don’t liberate yourself, you should not expect this from others.

And so they came, and you know what they told us? It was summer, they chased us from the Faculty of Arts, it was summer, you will have my monograph, I will give it to you in ten days and you will read it, I have explained all of these events there, you will read many things in my monograph, yes... Now it was summer, during summer vacation, and they brought violent measures, this is how they called them, violent measures according to which all Albanians were fired, deans, deputy deans, rector, and were replaced by Serbians. No, Muslim Mulliqi, the deceased and I, the Academy of Arts in Albania invited us to go, and we wanted to see who we wanted to elect as our dean, we elected Zoran

²⁶ *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* — Democratic League of Kosovo. First political party of Kosovo, founded in 1989, when the autonomy of Kosovo was revoked, by a group of journalists and intellectuals. The *LDK* quickly became a party—state, gathering all Albanians, and remained the only party until 1999.

²⁷ The United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo. UNMIK was established by the Security Council Resolution 1244, which was passed on 10 June 1999. In that Resolution, the UN decided to deploy in Kosovo, under United Nations auspices, an international civil and security presence.

Karalejić,²⁸ he was nobody, we raised him, we educated him, we made him a Master's degree holder in sculpture as well as our dean.

And so he called Muslim and I, we went there when we returned from Albania, he gave us the papers to go to SUP [*Sekretariat Unutrašnjih Posla*], the Secretariat of Internal Affairs, they had called us in order to get permission because they said, "A visa is needed to go to Albania," and we... he asked us, "Do you have a visa for Albanian?" Because they had brought the director of the police from Belgrade, "No," I said, "we are invited to Albania, we don't need any visa to go." "Then," he said, "you have to take the visa." "Where?" "In Belgrade." "In Belgrade? But we have to be in Tirana in two days." And then he said, "This is how it is." I didn't say anything, "Have a good day." I went downstairs and took that paper, Muslim and I left by car and took the road through Macedonia, we went to Greece with my car because Muslim told me, "They are going to break your car," and they really broke my car in Albania because they would steal the mirrors for brides, because they didn't have... and Muslim and I went there.

And when we returned they fired us both, because they said, "You went without a permission", and they also arrested, first they fired me as the director of the Department of Design, then Muslim from the Department of Painting, Agim [Çavdarbasha] from the Department of Sculpture, the other one and the secretary. They fired seven of us from the Faculty, then they started with the others until they fired everyone. And so Muslim and I decided to sue them, I mean to sue the Academy, and we hired an attorney, he hired an attorney, I didn't, I said, "I would defend myself". And we started, in the meantime Muslim died and I continued alone, and I defeated the judge from Belgrade, and you know what she did, she brought the decision and suspended the trial for an uncertain amount of time, imagine how cruel she was, and then she told me, "Are you pleased?" After she brought the decision, because when the process started she asked me whether I wanted to have translation from Albanian to Serbian, I said, "No", I said, "I want everyone here to be Albanian, I know Serbian just like you, but there should be Albanians, you are all Serbs and this is unfair." I said in Serbian.

So they were really cruel but I was brave, you know, when I told her that, in the end she said, "Are you pleased?" "No," I said. She said to me, "I have decided, you know, for them not to accept you." I said, "You did it, if you only could not accept me and ignore my complaint, that is when you would do it, but when you saw it, because you are honest, I believe I had all the papers, I showed them to you that during the summer we didn't take..." we don't have classes for three months in the Faculty, it's not the same as in other jobs where you take 20 days of vacation, and I sent her the document because they had hidden the document that we were issued by the dean who allowed us, then she said, "No, I wanted it to be like this." "No," now, "You couldn't break me there because I wouldn't allow myself to be the only one among my friends to go to that academy even if you gave me millions, but I just wanted to show you what a great, unfair and never—seen episode in human history looks like."

²⁸ Zoran Karalejić (1937) was born in Prizren, Kosovo. He studied sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Pristina and Belgrade. He worked at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Pristina until 1999. During the Milosević regime, his artistic practice was politicized. Though he was primarily a modernist sculptor, in the '90s he was commissioned to do many realist statues of Serbian national heroes and intellectuals, such as the Vuk Karadžić statue placed in front of the Faculty of Philology in Pristina.

And this is when we separated, when they fired all of us, then people started giving their own spaces, but after ten years in the Gallery, I was almost finished with two and a half terms, I went and told Pajazit, “I want to resign because it takes me a lot of time, I am very busy.” And then we opened a call and Nebih [Muriqi]²⁹ was accepted, but he resigned right after two—three months, I don’t know, he wasn’t able to do it, even though he was the one who fulfilled the conditions in the best way.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What year was it?

Shyqri Nimani: This was in, ‘79, ‘89, ‘90... around the ‘90s. And then Xhevdet Xhafa³⁰ came to my house and said, “Friend tell me,” he said, “have they elected you as the dean of the Faculty?” I said, “But I just resigned from the Gallery.” And I accepted to become the dean of the Faculty, then we continued for three more years and it kept getting more difficult until there was a need for UÇK³¹ to appear and then the rest you know...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you have a gallery at that time?

Shyqri Nimani: Yes, the Gallery kept working, the Gallery was working and Tanasković Ljubiša³² was its director at that time, he was not a bad guy. I came here with six of my friends right after the war and we opened it, we found him here, I did an assessment of the space and looked if everything was here, and everything, everything, everything was here, they hadn’t touched anything.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In *Boro dhe Ramizi*?

Shyqri Nimani: What?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In *Boro dhe Ramizi*?

Shyqri Nimani: No, here, here [where the National Gallery currently is].

Erëmirë Krasniqi: They had already moved here?

Shyqri Nimani: Yes, because look, they, I mean, the Gallery... you are right, I came in ‘99, you know we came here not there, but when did they moved it here? They moved... I don’t remember it now, a lot of time has passed. After the war we came here, but Tanasković was here before the war, I mean

²⁹ Nebih Muriqi (1943) was born in Novoselo, Peja. He graduated in 1971 from the Academy of Applied Arts in Belgrade under the mentorship of Rajko Nikolić. In 1980s he became a professor at the Academy of Arts in Pristina and worked there up to his retirement.

³⁰Xhevdet Xhafa (1934) was born in Peja, Kosovo. He did his graduate and post—graduate studies in Ljubljana under the mentorship of prof. Gabriel Stupica. He worked as a professor at the Academy of Arts in Pristina up to his retirement.

³¹ The acronym UÇK stands for *Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës*, the Kosovo Liberation Army. UÇK first came out in an open conflict against Serbian security forces in March 1998, in the rural region of Drenica, 35 kilometers north of the capital city of Kosovo, Pristina.

³² Ljubiša Tanasković (1942—2017) was born in Sredska, near Prizren, Kosovo. A painter by training, Mr. Tanasković was the Director of the Pristina Gallery of Arts during the 1990s. He graduated from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux—Arts in Lyon, France in 1974, and received his master's degree from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Pristina in 1994.

they might have moved during that time. So after the war we came here in '99, we came inside and asked Tanasković, the director, he was upstairs, we looked at everything and asked, "Where is the car?" He said, "We have sent the car to Niš for service." I said, "You have to bring the car back." They never brought the [Gallery's] car again. Then he left.

But everything else was here, we created a document enlisting all the things, I have added everything to my monograph, everything we did, even the papers, I also spoke about how it was decided among the seven of us for me to lead the Gallery, and open the call for the director after some time and that's how it happened... here was Liria [Gallery's employee], I mean I didn't take over, we only did it formally in order for the Gallery to have continuity and then we opened the call. Luan Mulliqi³³ came to my home and asked me to recommend him and he was selected. He had done good things and some really bad things, as I told you, they should've built the Gallery, they should've asked for the funds.

³³ Luan Mulliqi (1953) born in Gjakova, Kosovo, graduated from the Academy of Figurative Arts, the department of Sculpture in Pristina in 1977. He received master degree in Belgrade in 1979. He was the first after-war director of the Pristina Gallery of Arts, now the National Gallery of Arts.