

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH TOMISLAV TRIFIĆ

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Duration: 57 minutes

Present:

1. Tomislav Trifić (Speaker)
2. Erëmirë Krasniqi (Interviewer)
3. Donjetë Berisha (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 to introduce himself in front of the camera. The question was cut from the video—interview.]

Tomislav Trifić: I am Tomislav Trifić. I am a graphic artist, a professor at the Faculty of Arts, I lecture in the graphics class.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us when were you born, something about your childhood, whatever you remember? When were you born, your family, your parents?

Tomislav Trifić: I was born in 1949 in Lipjan. You must know where Lipjan is, a small place, usually I like saying that Pristina is located near Lipjan. In that year 1949 when I was born in Lipjan, it was the post—war period, and God knows that the conditions were not good. My parents... my father was a carpenter while my mother was a housewife, who unfortunately, my mother and my father both were part of the post—war actions in the Brčko—Banović railway in Sarajevo. She got sick and died in 1955. So, I grew up without a mother, but with my father who was a craftsman and so as a result, I managed to develop my own craft. Carpentry, which was not important, or necessary, however it helped me with graphic art, industrial design through designing interiors, which helped me with that.

During that time when we, we were growing up, it was a totally different time. A different time, capitalist for a while, then socialist, changes and so on. When I finished secondary school, secondary school...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you have brothers and sisters?

Tomislav Trifić: I have one sister, who unfortunately died three years ago in a car accident. She was a doctor.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was that time?

Tomislav Trifić: At that time...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Without a mother and without...

Tomislav Trifić: The way it is supposed to be. At the time when 80 percent of people lived the life of a worker, a productive life... if you studied enough, you were able to choose what you wanted to study in high school, then further on in the University and so on.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was the post-war school?

Tomislav Trifić: Yes, say, it wasn't right after the war, but this was, if you were born in '49, after seven years you finished secondary, I mean elementary school in Lipjan, and after that I enrolled in the Arts High School in Peja.¹ In my time, the Arts High School lasted five years. So, after my generation the school was reformed into a school specialized in artistic techniques, which lasted for four years.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Let's just stop here a little...

Tomislav Trifić: Yes, alright...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Let's include every aspect.

Tomislav Trifić: Yes, yes, I will... just let me know.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us more about the Arts High School in Peja, what did they teach you? How was it? What ideas of art did they teach you?

Tomislav Trifić: Yes, the Arts High School in which I wanted to enroll, I didn't know much at that time after finishing elementary school. In fact, my father wanted me to go to the military school and become an officer, because at that time they were paid best, they had insurance and so on. But I simply didn't want to do something like that, I don't like such things, I wanted to enroll in the Arts High School. I remember how I was two days late for the admission exam. Back then the admission exam lasted for seven days. There were many people, forty candidates for one spot.

So this was my fate and I enrolled in the Arts High School, which I guess, I can even confirm that it was way stronger than our academies. Why am I saying this? I am saying this because that School of Arts worked in two shifts. Every day we were offered two meals until... we learned all the crafts, figurative and all possible. You know, we learned, we were educated, we have learned the basis of figurative arts, and that is why it is so well known.

¹ *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit*, the Arts High School in Peja was built in 1926 and opened in 1949. The first generations of visual artists in Kosovo received their education in figurative and applicative arts from this institution. This education enabled the artists to continue higher education in arts. The historical building of the Art High School in Peja was destroyed in August, 2017.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Who supported you in your education, did you live there or did you travel?

Tomislav Trifić: Yes. Of course, my father, since I was an only child, he understood that that was what I wanted to study. Of course, he allowed me to enroll there. I enrolled in that school. I think my father supported me financially during the first and second year. I was living there, I had to live there... of course in a private house. There were no dormitories for high school students like nowadays. So, during the summer I worked in order to earn money so that I could go to the Arts High School in the autumn. After that, after the third, fourth, fifth year, I had already learned some crafts and I started earning money and living independently.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: During the time you were in Peja, were the professors from Belgrade?

Tomislav Trifić: At this Arts High School, the professors were from Peja, Peja in Kosovo and Metohija. There was the famous Vlada Radović,² an extraordinary painter. Maybe you don't know or haven't heard about him. He was a master of painting and aquarelle in Kosovo and Metohija. Also, wait let me remember, Zorka Mihajlović was there as well, a painter, the son of Veljko Radović. I don't remember well the professors who worked and lived there.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What about professors from Albania?

Tomislav Trifić: What?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you have professors from Albania?

Tomislav Trifić: At that time, no. There were no professors from Albania or Belgrade or Niš, because back then that was the only school in Yugoslavia, in its southern regions, which was so specific and important. There were professors who lectured... who later became great artists. I don't remember, because I wasn't prepared to give you this information. Because above everything, high quality students came out of the Arts High School, and the professors who lectured there were just as great.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you have exhibition spaces?

Tomislav Trifić: Yes, in that...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were there spaces at school?

Tomislav Trifić: The exams at that time consisted of, in the first semester all you had do in every course was hand over to the professor of the course the works and they assessed it with a grade. There was little space at the time at our school, so there were no exhibitions. There were exhibitions that

² Vladimir Vlada Radović (1901-1986) was born in Peja, Kosovo. He graduated from the School of Arts in Belgrade. He was one of the first educated painters in Kosovo and an organizer of cultural life in Peja, as well as a teacher at the Arts High School in Peja.

were part of various events where we represented our school, the Arts High School. That is where we exhibited paintings, sculptures, mosaics, graphics and every other applicative art, respectively, crafts.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you come in contact with art? You told me how you worked with your father. I am interested to know how did you come to the idea that art is a kind of a configuration of that?

Tomislav Trifić: I don't know. The dream of each person when they finish elementary school, they plan where they want to go, to which school. Somehow, everybody was choosing the gymnasium,³ economic school, agriculture and so on. I don't remember where the desire to enroll in the Arts High School came from.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When did you notice...

Tomislav Trifić: That is what I am talking about. I didn't notice anything special, but my art teacher got me interested in... yes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Where have you seen in your surrounding, where did you have the chance to see art?

Tomislav Trifić: Yes?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you translate it to yourself that what you wanted to do was art?

Tomislav Trifić: I can remember it better now. When I finished elementary school. My house was across from the paper factory which was called Lepenka. Since they processed paper, I would find various books in their trash, and one day, by accident, I found a book on art. And I would collect all those books without being aware of or knowing anyone at those early times, that period. Then I fell in love with art, I mean, as I was studying its visual forms. My art teacher, she had finished exactly at that Arts High School in Peja. And so, in conversations with her, she said, "You could go there. I see that you are talented." And so on.

I mean, this is literally what led me there. I wanted to become what I wanted to become, I wanted to learn how to work with colors. When my father was working in the region... I would take his colors, the furniture colors, the carpentry colors and so on, and I tried to paint with those oil colors. I am sure that had an influence too. And this was my desire behind which I stood stubbornly and I achieved my goal to enroll at the Arts High School. So, from my family, not anyone close or far, there was no one to advise me and say, "Ah, this is what you should study." And maybe it was better this way.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were there people engaged in arts, any artistic scene?

³ A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

Tomislav Trifić: What?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Artistic scene, did you...?

Tomislav Trifić: Scene? There wasn't one. Lipjan is small, a small town where the notion of a gallery, nobody knew what a gallery was, what an atelier was, I don't know what else. A small setting where people lived the way they did. Those small industrial factories, they were all here. Art was something strange. In fact, I met a sculptor back then, I don't remember his name, he was working on the memorial of the Aksić brothers in Lipjan, and I looked at how he worked on sculptures with clay or mud. And I was fascinated by how he worked. I looked at him all the time while he was working. So, I didn't have any other chance until I went to the Arts High School.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you go there more out of enthusiasm?

Tomislav Trifić: Yes that, but Lipjan is an agricultural place, just like every other flat place in Kosovo. However, the shops were there, then the paper factory, mining and the metal industry, the upper mine and so on. There's nothing special about the place. Pretty much an agrarian setting.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay. Can we go back and talk about the Arts High School in Peja?

Tomislav Trifić: Yes, in Peja, as with every new beginning that you have to get used to, you start from the alphabet, starting with most basic: the line. I mean we started drawing this, then nature and so on. We learned the techniques of aquarelle, then painting, sculpture, decoration and mosaic. Every discipline, connected not only to art but also to applied art. You know, all of these, namely figurative and applied, every technique was taught in that time.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And then you went to Pristina for the High Pedagogical School?⁴

Tomislav Trifić: Yes, yes. After I finished the Arts High School, I enrolled in the High Pedagogical School in Pristina. The Department of Art, this is how it was called, the Department of Art. There the students were prepared to work as teachers, as art teachers in elementary and secondary schools.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When were you prepared to work as a teacher?

Tomislav Trifić: No, I never thought of working as a teacher. In fact, I wanted to finish... to improve myself in my profession, to enter that magical craft, a magical word, art. So, the Academy was opened when I finished the High Pedagogical School. I mean, it was 1973, 1973 is a very significant year, not only for me but for art in Kosovo and Metohija in general. The Academy of Arts was opened in '73 in Pristina, and this is how it was called in the beginning, the Academy of Figurative Arts.

⁴ *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.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Who taught there?

Tomislav Trifić: Back then in the High Pedagogical School they lectured... I mean the school advanced from a High Pedagogical School to a Faculty. Back then there was Muslim Mulliqi,⁵ one of the masters and one of the greatest painters in my opinion. At that time, but also later. Now there was Svetozar Kamenović,⁶ back then there were, I don't know, [Shemsedin] Kasapoll⁷ lectured, Tahir Emra,⁸ Xhevdet Xhafa⁹ came later. These were young artists who grew up to be strong artists. Esad Valla, Rexhep Ferri¹⁰ earlier, since he had come as a painter, and others.

I can't count all of them but there was a constellation of strong artists who first of all came here from the academy in Belgrade and that in Zagreb. I don't know who came from the academy in Ljubljana.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Xhevdet Xhafa?

Tomislav Trifić: Xhevdet Xhafa came as a graphic artist. I mean, the skeleton was comprised of professors of the High Pedagogical School and professors of the Academy of Belgrade. I have to mention that at that time, I enrolled in the Department of Graphics with the famous professor, professor, professor (laughs)...my memory is failing me, I don't remember. Boško Karanović,¹¹ sorry, Boško Karanović. He was a master of graphic art in Yugoslavia, not only here. So...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Is he from Kosovo?

Tomislav Trifić: No, he is from Belgrade. In fact, he was the first one who opened a collective exhibition of graphics... and so on. Not to talk about those things now. But this is a generation that had a lot of good professors.

⁵ Muslim Mulliqi (1934-1998) was born in Gjakova, Kosovo. He 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.

⁶ Svetozar Kamenović (1921-1979) was born in Pirot, Serbia. He was a Kosovo Serb painter who finished his training at the Belgrade Academy of Fine Arts in 1953. After graduating, he began teaching at the Arts School in Peja, where he remained until his death in 1979. His paintings were widely exhibited in Kosovo, in particular in 1970s.

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⁸ Tahir Emra (1938) was born in Gjakova, Kosovo. He is an Albanian modernist painter. Emra is a member of the Academy of Sciences and Arts of Kosovo.

⁹ Xhevdet Xhafa (1934) was born in Peja, Kosovo. He did his graduate and post-graduate studies in Ljubljana under the mentorship of professor Gabriel Stupica. He worked as a professor at the Academy of Arts in Pristina until his retirement.

¹⁰ Rexhep Ferri (1937) was born in Kukës, Albania. He is a renowned Kosovo painter. Ferri attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade. In 1999 he was elected secretary of the Art Section of the Academy of Sciences and Arts of Kosovo and in the year 2000 he was elected as a regular member.

¹¹ Boško Karanović (1924-2009) was born in Bosanska Krupa, Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was a painter and graphic artist. He graduated in 1948 in the Academy of Fine Arts and specialized in Graphic Arts. He was the founder of Graphic Arts Collective in 1949 and Graphic Arts Appreciation Society called ARTA. He was one of the lead artists in modern graphic art.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In what language did they teach?

Tomislav Trifić: They taught in Serbian here. There were no divisions. It was the same in the Arts High School in Peja. Back then there was no interest in teaching in two languages parallelly. But some subjects, as the art history were later taught in... professors from Belgrade who visited, of course, they couldn't lecture in Albanian. But above all, people must know that art is a craft. Everything about a craft can be known. All languages are spoken. In this system of crafts, of the passing on the knowledge of crafts, how to say, learning crafts. Of course, and the poetics that developed later.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: To you, was Pristina a new city, or since you lived nearby it wasn't like that? How was it back then?

Tomislav Trifić: At that time, I came to Pristina from Peja. Pristina was however an administrative and cultural center. Pristina at that time was way stronger than Niš and Kragujevac and Kraljevo, or I can also say Skopje, the whole southern part gravitated toward Pristina. First of all, it was a university city with new spaces. The Academy opened in '73. For example, the academy in Novi Sad was opened in '74. So, it is a long tradition. So, students from Niš, Prokuplje, Vranja and others, Kraljevo, Kragujevac, they all came here to study. From Peja, Montenegro and so on. So, again, it was a kind of cultural and administrative center, a center of art above all.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Could you tell us more details about how it was back then?

Tomislav Trifić: At that time when the first generations of figurative artists started coming up, that was the time when the famous, so called Associations of Figurative Artists began to be founded. The first Association, as far as I remember was the Association *ULUS*,¹² The Association of Figurative Artists of Serbia with a branch here in Pristina. Those who were members of *ULUS* were already great artists. And it was difficult, difficult to be accepted into the Association. You had to be good and have quality work, to have amazing work in order to be considered by the commission that gathered annually and so on. And each year, they received requests from new members, they received requests for new exhibitions that were organized in Pristina as well as in other cities in Kosovo and Metohija.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you remember the first exhibitions held with the Association?

Tomislav Trifić: The first exhibitions were at Boro and Ramiz.¹³ You know Boro and Ramiz?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, yes.

Tomislav Trifić: Yes, that center. It was an...

¹² *ULUS - Udruženje Likovnih Umetnika Srbije*, The Association of Serbia's Figurative Artists.

¹³ *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: In the corridor?

Tomislav Trifić: Yes, in the corridor. That was in '76, '77, the end of these years. You know, in '73 I enrolled in the University, after four years.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Back then there was the Gallery?¹⁴

Tomislav Trifić: Yes, of course there was. How not?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Wasn't the Gallery opened in...

Tomislav Trifić: The Gallery, the Gallery was there.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: ... in '79?

Tomislav Trifić: I don't know when it was opened, but I know that there was a gallery... it wasn't a typical gallery but there was a lot of space. Yes, back then there were no shops there. The space in which the [exhibitions] were organized. It was a tradition in the Faculty, or in the back then the Academy, for the annual exhibition to be organized in Boro and Ramiz at the end of the school year. I mean, all the groups. We had painters, sculptors and graphic artists. Later the Department of Graphic Design was opened within the Academy of Arts. In the beginning there was the Department of Music with a focus on piano, violin and I don't know what else. And then there was the Department of Acting, the Department of Drama. Until then there was the Academy, which later expanded and it was called the Faculty of Arts, since two other departments were added to it, the Department of Music and Drama.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How would you define the style of your work?

Tomislav Trifić: Realism, Cubism, Marxism?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were you aware of what you were using in your work? Was it... how is it?

Tomislav Trifić: Speak in Albanian.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was it a conceptual determination?

Tomislav Trifić: Every academy or school of arts or high school had to teach their students realism. Realism is the basis of everything. This is like learning all the letters [of the alphabet], learning to write well and then to read well, so that later you can create your own texts. Whether you will write haikus

¹⁴ 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*.

or epic poems or novels, that depends on your poetics. So, the Faculty was the first year, second and third, it was focused on teaching the basic rules, crafts, techniques, ways and so on. There was no determination on realism at that time, hyperrealism, whether that was impressionism, cubism, abstraction and so on, it was all the same.

It depended on the determination of the students, on what they chose. We weren't all the same when we graduated from the University. Everybody had their poetics. We were all different from each other. There was no copying of professors, students who were like their professors, students who were similar to their professors. If anybody understood it that way, that is the greatest mistake. I mean, each one had to develop as an individual in their own direction and become notable in their own style...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What were the influences from, for example from... from the world [English] how do you call it?

Tomislav Trifić: From...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: From the world's art. Were you exposed to the art of the world?

Tomislav Trifić: Through... I will tell you now. From subjects such as art history, in which we had, we learned art history in the School of Arts and in gymnasium... the so-called poetics of the twentieth century, it was contemporary art history and we learned about it there. Of course, with time, with technological development, there were various opportunities, so that we had the chance to watch it through television, in various documentaries about certain exhibitions that were organized. We went with the Faculty from here to Belgrade for each big and important exhibition. I mean, to see what was happening up there in Belgrade, what was happening in the world, where they were coming from, what kind of works, new tendencies and so on.

Related to this, we... I will speak specifically about the field of graphics, each year we had the Yugoslav Biennale of Student Graphics. Each faculty in back—then Yugoslavia held a common exhibition in Belgrade, the so-called Student Graphics. I can tell you that one year, in the last year when we exhibited, I won the first prize of the Student Graphics, The Student Graphics of Yugoslavia. Back then the award was organizing a solo exhibition in the all—Yugoslav Exhibition of Student Graphics. This is how we got involved.

We literally competed with every other academy, the Academy in Ljubljana, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Novi Sad, sometimes Skopje, back then Skopje had no academy. These were the four academies with which we often competed, we followed who was working on what. So, this existed not only in the field of graphics. Of course, this also happened in the field of painting, as well as sculpture and the others.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: There was no Biennale of Graphics here in Pristina?

Tomislav Trifić: There was no Biennale of Graphics as far as I remember, because we were a developing country at the time, for that tradition is required. So, the first, second and fourth year weren't enough. But mainly, the big exhibitions would come here, so the students who weren't able to go there and see the exhibitions in Belgrade and so on, would have the chance to exhibit.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What centers of Yugoslavia did they come from?

Tomislav Trifić: Mainly from various centers. Even if it was a Yugoslav graphics exhibition, it would travel to cities where the students were coming from, from all around. I mean, Ljubljana, Zagreb, Novi Sad, Belgrade and Pristina. We were all equally strong, equally good.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can we return to '74, when the Academy of Arts was founded. How was the admission exam, how were you accepted?

Tomislav Trifić: After the High Pedagogical School, as I told you, the conditions were secured to open the Academy. The foundation was laid down by the professors who were there. While no academy in the world, not in Belgrade, Novi Sad or Zagreb could be founded without the help of one of the old academies. This is how the Academies of Belgrade and Sarajevo were founded. I remember Karamehmedović who would come from Belgrade to lecture in art history. People would come in the first and second year and so on until the staff was established.

The assistants who had finished their studies in Belgrade, they continued working at the Faculty, so we didn't feel the vacuum of qualified professors. So, simply, there were always good professors. So, having good professors and good students, it was always a difficult competition to enroll in the Academy. It was a privilege.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you decide to enroll in the Department of Graphics?

Tomislav Trifić: I simply decided to study graphic arts since graphic... I didn't know its techniques. I decided to study it out of curiosity. They told me that I was a good painter, that I painted really well, at that time in Peja I worked with spatulas, with Japanese metal spatulas and that is why they called me Toma, The Spatula. I enrolled in the field of graphic arts simply because it was unknown to me, and I wanted to research it, to find out what graphic arts are. Yes.

Part Two

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Let's talk about your exhibitions. When you had them, not only at the Faculty, some solo shows, when did you start having them?

Tomislav Trifić: They are all in the biography. I will remember them all in a row. Thank you for reminding me.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: The New Generation of Artists of Kosovo {reads from his biography}?

Tomislav Trifić: These are the first exhibitions, those in which the members participated. Now I will tell you how people participated in those exhibitions. The first exhibition that we organized as young students from the Faculty of Arts or in the back then Academy of Arts, we mainly organized the first one, in the beginning it was with the members of *ULUS*, which later became *ULUK*.¹⁵ These were the associations, I will tell you later about this. I mean, the first exhibition that we organized here as young artists. We were five, six, four, depending on which year we were.

Since we were members, we had the annual exhibitions of the associations. It was the spring and autumn exhibitions. The spring exhibition, autumn... these weren't exhibitions with reviews, in fact followed by a text, they were simply exhibitions without a selection. That's when the exhibition career began. Whoever was ready could organize solo shows, whoever was hardworking, but mainly young people exhibited through group, collective shows, those who were members of the Association of Artists.

I have to bring to your attention that in Kosovo and Metohija, especially here in Pristina there were more associations. There was the Association of the Figurative Artists of Kosovo, there was the Association of Figurative and Applied Artists of Kosovo, then the Association of Pristina, the Figurative Artists of Pristina, so there were many of them, many associations and each one of them had certain politics... the way it was back then, somehow everyone was organized. Well, with the aim for the youth to have spaces to exhibit, show their work, and what in fact they were working towards, and for them to get motivated to work more, more... all the time... in order for them at one point to have their works hung next to their professor's and so on. It means, this gave them courage and this is a good tradition of that time.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In which association were you?

Tomislav Trifić: I was part of all three of them. There was no association that I wasn't part of. Simply... now... I have to remember, you know it well that an association was opened here fifteen days ago, you know that soon.... I am a member of it as well, after many years, I am a member of our associations in Pristina.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us about the exhibitions you organized through the association?

Tomislav Trifić: In the beginning, I organized exhibitions through the association as I told you. Then I enrolled in post—graduate studies in Belgrade. I finished my master's studies with Professor Boško Karanović; a solo show had to be organized at the Faculty. This was as a graduation thesis that you selected for your own master's. Back then I already had a collection of forty of my graphics, I was in good shape, I was courageous, I had gained a kind of courage, I had gained it and I could have a solo show. And since '82, I began exhibiting in many places, cities, I would be part of many competitions

¹⁵ *Udruženje Likovnih Umetnika Kosova*, The Association of Kosovo Figurative Artists.

and so on. So, I would exhibit my works especially in '82 when I finished my master's studies, when I thought that I could show independently, do solo shows everywhere, of course, with my graphics.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was it, how to say, were graphic arts popular?

Tomislav Trifić: Graphic arts?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were they in good shape?

Tomislav Trifić: So, so.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us about that?

Tomislav Trifić: Graphic arts as techniques with other painting techniques, by graphic arts I mean also the drawings that were done earlier. Its roots are older. Let's not return... graphic arts were equally represented everywhere, also here, painting and sculpture as well. So, graphic arts are not something new, but they change all the time. The techniques have changed, they improve from woodcutting techniques, tinta graphic arts and other techniques that are used even nowadays. And it is a big field, a voluminous book that... it has to be considered for historiography, Xhevat Hoxha has written an extraordinary book on techniques of graphic arts, which includes the work and techniques from all the time periods to Japanese graphics.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you decide to go to Belgrade?

Tomislav Trifić: But I didn't go...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You didn't go?

Tomislav Trifić: Yes, I never left.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: A—ha. I see.

Tomislav Trifić: I only finished my post—graduate studies in Belgrade. I never... I returned.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: A—ha. I thought that you stayed there during your studies.

Tomislav Trifić: I travelled a lot. Before '95 they invited me to come to the Faculty from the University, I never wanted to become a professor. I dealt with projects, I was an interior designer for the developing company *Kosovodrvo* [Kosovo Wood] for a long time working in organizations making advertisements, propaganda and everything else, and so on. This is what I am attracted to, this was more interesting and because of that I travelled a lot.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did you do after your graduation?

Tomislav Trifić: After my graduation? I worked. I got my salary from the business sector, and I did graphic arts out of love, I was not only connected to figurative art, respectively to graphics, but I simply only lived from business work, and when this system failed and I don't know what else to do, then I moved on and they accepted me in '95 as an assistant professor at the Faculty of Arts. First, I was an assistant professor of the graphic arts course and so on. So, since 1995 as an assistant professor, I have been engaged in education.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did your works end up in Gallery's collection? What do you remember?

Tomislav Trifić: Every artist, I am talking about the older and more stoic ones, the best ones. The Gallery of Arts had money to buy works from the solo shows and collective ones. Some of the commissions looked at the works and said, "Eh, this is a good work. Let's buy two of them, two works for our collection." And this is how the Gallery of Arts formed its collection of graphics.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In which year did they buy yours?

Tomislav Trifić: I don't exactly remember the year, but they must have bought them from an exhibition organized by the association that was held in spring or autumn, or from my solo show, I really don't remember. But I know that back then, however, art was more valued and respected compared to nowadays. Nowadays, artists have to take care of everything on their own. Unfortunately, that's how it is.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What were your relationships with Albanians in those years? Were there inter—ethnic tensions?

Tomislav Trifić: At that time? Nobody could even dream of those tensions in that way. We were all the same. Even today when we meet as colleagues, we are friends. We have normal lives. We hang out, we hang out even today.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: No, I only asked. Do you still go to exhibitions?

Tomislav Trifić: Yes, now I am... I go to exhibitions. I follow the work of my colleagues in order to know how they work. Recently maybe they awakened a little. They managed to focus on themselves and work. Different from the bad days, and I have to mention this, people have started to understand that politics don't mean a thing... this is how it is understood and it leaves its marks on you. Maybe earlier exhibitions were from well—qualified artists... we have artists, an artist is an artist. But there are artists who followed the national line with some symbols that weren't necessary for painting.

They didn't do it until then, but they started flirting [with nationalism]... I believe that there is no flirting in art. You either are or you aren't. But I feel good that for what I've seen until today, I haven't noticed anyone who wants to push forward, who wants to become an artist in service of the state. There were artists in service of the state before, they were directors, painters, sculptors and so on. But

an artist is an artist. They should express their poetics, no matter the outside situation, circumstances. You are in your atelier, you simply work on what you want to transmit from yourself to the canvas or paper, or whatever.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was it when you started working here? How was the Gallery back then from 1995?

Tomislav Trifić: I am here... I don't know, I guess I have written the year from which I have been here. I've been here since '86, '87, I don't know, I've been part of this Gallery since Ljubiša Tanasković was a director. Hilmija Ćatović¹⁶ was the president of the council of the Gallery. I was a member. I spent so much time in this Gallery and here we had all the exhibitions that... {phone rings} Alright, I will turn it off now.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Hilmija Ćatović was also a member?

Tomislav Trifić: A member, a member of the Gallery. I don't remember the exact year when I first got involved to help with the work, the organizing of exhibitions and so on. But I know that it was after Ljubiša Tanasković became director of the Gallery. I believe that Blerim [Luzha] was director before him, I don't remember these details. But that moment, together with Hilmija Ćatović, I remember that time very often. Zoran Karalejić¹⁷ was here too. We were members of the council of the Gallery. And when I was involved, I wasn't only a member or an artist, but I also worked on the design of the catalogues of every exhibition that was organized here. And the last project that we worked on, which unfortunately couldn't get done, was the catalogue of the permanent exhibition, which was planned to be set up on the second floor. A special exhibition, a permanent exhibition.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: That didn't happen at all?

Tomislav Trifić: It was planned, everything was ready but then the famous '99 came, which destroyed everything, all the goals that we... I don't know now, if a permanent exhibition exists, a permanent one or if it is planned that way for Pristina to have a permanent exhibition, so that the expectation wouldn't be for temporary exhibitions... for the exhibition to be there, a permanent exhibition so that artists not only from Kosovo and Metohija could come, but also foreign artists, from Albania, I don't know, other countries from which the Gallery collected works. A collection of good works, like the one in the Museum of Belgrade.

¹⁶ Hilmija Ćatović (1933-2017) was born in Skopje, Macedonia. He studied painting at the Academy of Applied Arts in Belgrade in 1957 under the mentorship of Vinka Grdana, with whom he also did his Master's degree in 1980. He was the Dean of Faculty of Arts in Pristina, Kosovo and Faculty of Arts and Design in Niš and Novi Pazar, Serbia.

¹⁷ 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 Art 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.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes.

Tomislav Trifić: And yes, I don't know if the moment has come, if it will be done, what are the plans of the management of the Gallery, I don't know, but that's how it used to be back then.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us more about the '90s, because we had no access, we didn't have the chance since we had no access?

Tomislav Trifić: To see them?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Access. We didn't have access.

Tomislav Trifić: Do you have...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: We had no access there. Can you tell us what happened in the Gallery? Did it have a more nationalist character, could it be...

Tomislav Trifić: Felt, right?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, yes.

Tomislav Trifić: As far as exhibitions go, I remember that there were good exhibitions coming here. I remember that during, I don't remember the year, but also visual artists from Tirana, from Albania showed their work here. Back then, at that time, it was a pure realism, very pure. And a very quality approach to realism.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: At what time? In the '90s?

Tomislav Trifić: I think that yes, I don't remember what year it was, but it was before the war. There was a very quality exhibition where we had their artists as our guests. We had to return the visit, I am aware that I was part of a generation... there was Rexhep Ferri, I don't know, Muslim unfortunately was not among the living. We had to go to Tirana for a visit. We had very correct relationships, without political interventions. Without political influences, fortunately. Back then, art was simply...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: There were no politics in art?

Tomislav Trifić: No. Art has... I am talking about art, everything else is propaganda, design I guess, but I am saying that art is not. At least I didn't see that {something falls}. Here it is, here it is (laughs). I am saying that at least I didn't see something like that. Maybe there was someone, maybe someone saw something like that, but I didn't.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: The person you mentioned, Zoran Karale...!?

Tomislav Trifić: Karalejić.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, him. I remember that his style was modernist, but it changed entirely. During the '80s he was quite abstract, while in the '90s his style became more and more concrete, like the sculpture of Vuk Karadžić¹⁸ [formerly in front of the Faculty of Philology], actually quite nationalistic, which was very realist in style. For this reason I am just asking if the politics was felt in art?

Tomislav Trifić: I will tell you now. As far as calligraphy or sculpture goes, Zoran, you mentioned Zoran Karalejić, he had, his poetics were something different from abstract shapes... birds that in fact were very similar to the work of his professor Çavdarbasha,¹⁸ who worked on his sculptures in the same style. But Çavdarbasha and Zoran Karalejić worked on sculptures that were commissioned by others. They worked for the League of Prizren, or the memorial of Vuk Karadžić, Miloš Lazar and so on. I mean these were commissions that were done by the sculptor, while their poetics were something else, if you consider it that way. That was simply a commission.

Since he worked on the sculpture of Skanderbeg, he worked a very good monument, but he worked on something else as a vocation. Their poetics are something else. They cannot be felt in this sense, this was simply a commission.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, I decided to ask you since...

Tomislav Trifić: But no, no, to explain that this was present in other things as well. For example, we had it in applied arts, for example when they asked for plaques that fit certain congresses for certain goals and so on. This is different, but it is different when you work on something else.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes.

Tomislav Trifić: Shyqri Nimani¹⁹ for example, the first graphic artist who was the best at that time, he did many of those things, but I didn't notice nationalism in his works. But the banner of Hotel Kasta let's say, it was back then in its time, I remember some of the shows, he designed them based on the script, that part. I don't see nationalism there. It can be something poorly executed artistically, and it bothers you. But when it is artful, it cannot bother you. The birds, the birds... I don't know what else... the partisan star.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I saw this when I browsed a webpage. There is not enough access to their works, I am not only talking about Serbs, but that period is poorly documented.

¹⁸ Agim Çavdarbasha (1944-1999) was born in Pejë, Kosovo. He was a Kosovo Albanian sculptor who graduated from the Academy of Applied Arts of Belgrade and the Academy of Arts of Ljubljana. Çavdarbasha was a major influence on contemporary sculpture in Kosovo. He was a member of the Academy of Figurative of Arts of Kosovo and later of the Academy of Science and Arts.

¹⁹ Shyqri Nimani (1941) was born in Shkodër, Albania. He is a Kosovo-based graphic designer and professor who graduated from the Academy of Applied Arts in Belgrade. Nimani is known as one of the first professional Albanian graphic designers; he is also one of the founders of the Graphic Design department at the Faculty of Arts, University of Pristina and one of the first directors of the National Gallery of Kosovo.

Tomislav Trifić: It is true, it is true.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: At that time. I am not only talking about...

Tomislav Trifić: No, no, no...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: They are not documented. But I found a webpage where his work was exposed. His work was completely different in the '80s, and I am saying this since his art was exposed in public space.

Tomislav Trifić: Yes...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: There was a big difference between what he did in the '80s and in the '90s.... Was there any, did the quality decrease with the new regime? Did the approach change?

Tomislav Trifić: I say so, because for example if I take into account my artist colleagues who now work and live here, who are professors at universities, I follow [their work] as a colleague from the days of our studies up to now. I haven't noticed them flirting with politics and power. They simply did their art. Of course with time, their poetics have improved, they did not change but they have improved.

They come to a point of exhaustion and brings them to a more mature series of works. But people go from one cycle of works to another that is the same but not one hundred percent, simply a transitory phase. As if I don't want to drink clean water, now I want to add some wine, then I will drink one spritz, later I will exclude water and will only drink wine. But this only happens once to the troubled artists... and it's over.

Back then maybe we were more aware, simpler, but with stronger messages. This is the path which the artists should... I am talking about the ones I know. There are artists who were gone, overcome and wanted to become something in the kingdom as we say, let's flirt with the ruling power and I will become a patriot in my own way, but we shouldn't endorse that element. It interrupts, it interrupts art. This is how it is.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of generation are you, I am talking about the generation of artists?

Tomislav Trifić: My generation, very little, it could be that we had informal relations, but... for example here is Skënder Idrizi, he lives in Prizren, Agim Salihu, do you know him? Here is Shaip Çitaku, Kamuran Goranci, here is... I don't know, I don't remember more of the colleagues with whom we still meet and hang out and so on. This is the generation I am talking about. We were all one and the same, artists. We all traveled together, supplied with materials together. Back then there was no materials like nowadays. Talens [shop] is here, they also had a small shop back then but I see how it has expanded today into a big and good store.

Now it is much easier to supply [materials], it wasn't like this before. We would bring them from Poland and Bulgaria. It was terrible, getting supplies, canvas, specific materials and glues and so on, and so on. I mean, the first generation was strongly connected. We are all connected to each other. There was no envying. We simply... those who looked at our work and then those who had taught us. This is literally how it was. We wanted to become what we wanted. I believe that we have become someone and achieved something in our lives.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you have an art scene...?

Tomislav Trifić: Say it.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Is there an art scene in the Serbian community that is important for the artists?

Tomislav Trifić: Yes, fortunately there are many artists. Thank God there is a high number of artists. There is a high number of artists. There are more associations as well, even though nowadays associations aren't that popular. People depend more on themselves. They come and go, where do they go? And what is interesting, unfortunately, nowadays you can buy high quality works for very cheap. This is the Mecca for the collectors, they can buy with little money. One cannot make a living from art. Back then we could make a living from art.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How is it at the [art] school in Zvečan?

Tomislav Trifić: Yes...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What can you offer them?

Tomislav Trifić: Like this. Look, after '99 when the faculties were moved from Pristina, I mean the University of Pristina moved, every faculty moved. The Faculty of Arts was in Varvarina, a place near Kruševac, and then it returned to Zvečan in 2001. Zvečan is a place near Mitrovica, if you know, that is the miner's neighborhood. This is where politics sent us, to Varvarina, and politics returned us to Zvečan. We have already started working. It was very difficult in the first and second year, when I was elected as its dean in 2001. We had big problems with art supplies, with the space.

It was easy holding a lecture in the auditorium, but it wasn't easy to build an atelier for the students, where the students would go to learn painting, sculpture, graphic arts, graphic design? The first two—three years were terrible, even though the situation got better with time, but never good enough. Art was never a priority, culture in general. So, students managed independently, they took care of different art supplies. It was very difficult.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Where do they find the motivation to work and study?

Tomislav Trifić: Students as students. They want to study, to enroll in the Faculty of Arts, in these four departments, five or more, not to count the departments now but they want to enroll in the School of Arts. Just as I did because I wanted to have this wish come true and I wanted to challenge myself in art. Art is a privilege, a human privilege. When you say that you are an artist, it isn't easy when they look at you and say, "For God's sake, he is an artist." You know what I am saying? However, this is in the hands of God, God gives you the talent, but you have to confirm it with work.

Students who come there are from all around. Students at the School of Arts in Peja were from all around as well, from Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia. It means that this was, there were movements from all around. Just like it is nowadays in the Faculty in Mitrovica, same in Zvečan, students come from all around, from Vranje, Niš, there exists a kind of movement. People can travel wherever they want, however they want.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you exhibit in any place after 2001?

Tomislav Trifić: I didn't exhibit much after 2001, because it is not easy to create a workshop for graphic arts. One can work on paintings, canvas, palettes and colors, but doing graphic arts is more complicated. I started returning to it in 2002 and 2003 and started working in graphic arts, digital graphic arts. Since 2001, 2002 I exclusively work in digital printing, digital graphic arts. Of course, the poetics is the same as it used to be, but the technique, respectively, the method is different. The presentation is very different compared to graphic plaques. So, in the last fifteen years, maybe less, for fifteen years I've been exclusively doing digital graphic arts.

I believe that this, I want, I will talk with the director here to organize a solo show of graphic arts. I am ready to do it, I want to show people what I am working on.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Would you like to tell us how your life is, how has it changed because of the...

Tomislav Trifić: Situation that used to be?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: ... the situation? If you want?

Tomislav Trifić: No, no, until... every change, the changing of the place, the way of living, it is not easy to adapt and come to terms with a new space. Just imagine moving from an apartment to another how hard it is to adapt. The artist, especially I as a graphic artist at that time, couldn't carry everything with myself, multilith, acid, other materials. Simply, we hardly managed, so it was easier for me to start working on a computer. And this made me think that I had everything. So, it was difficult, very difficult, but an artist must never try to find excuses for not working, in a situation of the absence of proper work conditions. We should create the conditions ourselves. The way they are, if you must draw and paint on your knees, do so. Of course, we felt it, but we managed.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you travel from Lipjan to Zvečan for work?

Tomislav Trifić: By car. I have a car for here, for Kosovo, and another for Serbia. So I simply live here in Lipjan with everything, all the rights as a citizen of Kosovo and Metohija, there as a citizen of Serbia. So, I travel without any problem, here and there and I don't... of course it wasn't like this in the beginning, until things stabilized, until the transportation... it was difficult. Life was intolerable in the first four—five years.

I wouldn't wish this on anyone else, if somebody went through this, through something similar. We all experienced it differently. We all experience this differently, completely differently, I believe that we all lost those ten—twelve years, people as well as artists lost time. Now we have to compensate, the sooner the better, to really understand each other.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you have a family?

Tomislav Trifić: My wife died three years ago. I have a daughter in Belgrade, she works there. I only have a daughter and I am alone. So, my relations, when they ask me, "Where do you live?" I say, "I don't know where I live anymore. Lipjan, Zvečan, Belgrade." My atelier is in Zvečan and I am there most of the time. There I have my friends, colleagues who come there, we meet each other. So, we change our meeting places, friends and so on. These are my relations, as much as I will be able...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you have anything to add?

Tomislav Trifić: I don't know what I can add. I am glad that you are interested in a way to understand those days because you are the one who will transmit this situation to the others. Many of them don't know about it, especially the young generation. They really don't know. They have turned 18 now, they are more mature, but it was very difficult at that time and you didn't know. You are on the right path to somehow sublimate this and tell how it was, that art has no borders, they tried to limit it, but nobody can put borders on art. It has no borders. It is eternal. One lives for it.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Thank you very much!

Tomislav Trifić: Please.