



The amazing women of Ljubljana

Written by Nora Prekazi Hoti (Curator, Museum of Mitrovica). With special thanks to Jack Butcher (Kosovo 2.0) for copy-editing.

I have always been involved in art. Growing up I was a lonely and shy kid and so took up sewing and drawing. This was something I loved to do. I remember that I would draw for hours and that when I was in primary school my drawings were selected for exhibitions at the Meto Bajraktari school in Mitrovica.

I also remember a very specific Saturday morning. I was 13 years old, sitting on the floor of the living room and trying to copy a painting from my mother's collections; a landscape by the local artist Tefik Gashi. I will never forget the image of that painting: A sunset in the sea with dark rocks and a boat in the middle, a lovely mood with golden lights, reds and warm earthy tones.

While I was enjoying this mood I heard my mum trying to reach my father by phone. She was anxious and trying to reach him constantly. Not only him, but also my brother, and then her brothers and all close family members, but the phone was not working. We had heard that a bomb had just exploded in the city's market, and it was a market day.

Then the war happened. We lost all the paintings, all the books, all the photos and all that part of our memory of our lives, our souvenir collections, our family heirlooms, our daily routines — we lost our homes.

When the war ended our city became ethnically divided, with Albanians to the south of the Ibër river and Serbs to the north, and although the war had ended, our city was still engulfed for years in riots, division and restrictions.

It was at this time that I started high school, and soon enough I began drawing and painting again, even though school classes lasted 20 minutes and of course there were no ateliers, no canvases, no colours. Outdoors, most of the public space in the city center was placed under KFOR (UN peacekeepers) restricted zones. This was all a lot for a teenager to swallow, but there was so much to say and I kept trying to find a way, with every material I could find, because of a fire that was burning within me.

To find more forms of expression I also started writing, and as part of my high school thesis, at the Frank Bardhi gymnasium in Mitrovica, I looked at, and analysed, poems by Dritero Agolli. I illustrated the analyses with drawings.

This idea was given to me by my great mentor, Ms. Fatmire Berisha (who was also the daughter of Mr. Latif Berisha, the famous poet killed on the first day of the NATO bombing during the 1998-99 war in Kosovo).

I remember that she also told me about a new department at the University of Prishtina's Faculty of Philosophy. The Ethnology Department had recently opened and she thought that I would really fit in there, that it would fulfill my love of art and culture, while observing, researching, writing and analysing.

So I applied and went on to complete my BA studies in Ethnology at the University of Prishtina, before coming back to my hometown, a city that was by now largely abandoned by many of its active members, and most of the young people from my generation.

Loving Mitrovica

Coming back to a city so wounded you could still sense the smell of it in every stone, every face, every new wall recently made, and in most of the stories that were newly written about it and its infamous ethnic divisions. Coming back to my hometown, where it seemed I no longer knew barely anyone, because almost everyone had left. Coming back to a place with constant power cuts and lines of KFOR soldiers.

It was one of the hardest and most depressing times of my life.

That is, until I heard that there were some guys who had opened a café gallery in abandoned military houses, close to my neighbourhood.

The gallery was the 7arte NGO, and it was the first thread of a reconnection with my city. There were poetry nights, movie nights, gigs, exhibitions and cultural debates, connecting, dancing, learning and growing. Soon enough I became a member of the NGO and my experience with community work expanded. We founded a green music festival, craft fairs, an open air cinema, creative corner coffee library, and so on.

After three years of everyday involvement directly with 7arte I applied for a job at the Museum of Mitrovica to work as curator of ethnology.

The Museum of Mitrovica is a cultural heritage institution that dates back about 70 years; a museum that has been through multiple moves, many systems, and lots of losses and devastation, just like all of us from that region.

It is an institution that has a broad variety of collections, owing much to the love it received from its founder, then director, Mr. Sylejman Murati, an ethnologist and researcher from Mitrovica in the 1950s. Initially he was supposed to curate only one exhibition with a geological collection, since Mitrovica's heritage is tied to mining, but he got so involved with this

institution that he collected so much more to produce displays on history, archeology, ethnology, coins, documents and more besides.

When I was hired in 2012 I found the Museum of Mitrovica in a really bad place. It had been transferred to the city's Ex-Army House of Yugoslavia, with no budget, no proper space, no staff and no hope or vision. Most of the collections, such as the fossils, Neolithic era figurines, different types of costumes and wood carvings, had no displays — many were on the floor with no protection and no storage of any kind.

After me, two other colleagues were also hired, bringing the number of professional staff to three, and all together with the administrative and technical staff we were a team of 10.

Over the past eight years or so, we have worked on basic conservation, repairs, documenting, research, painting walls, recycling displays, guiding, curating and creating an education programme. We've opened up for the community and tried to build trust, so that our institution could grow, gain visibility and increase our interaction with other cultural education activities. And we've done this despite having no annual budget, no institutional freedom, no specific training courses organised by the state and with no specific law for museums in Kosovo, even today.

Over the years, we've still managed to curate five permanent exhibitions and have hosted a large number of social and cultural events.

Our museum has also embraced a new approach to multimedia. We've founded a new section, based on the existing "Mitro, I Love You" project, where we produced a community video on why Mitrovica's citizens love their city. It also became a platform to record and



Figure 1: 7arte coffee library, 2013. Mitrovica, Kosovo.

digitise the stories of active citizens, such as some of Mitrovica's artists. This has helped not only to enrich digital archives but also to bring together local memory, working alongside various social projects by active NGOs in Mitrovica.

Projects such as this would be well placed in a new contemporary art department in that they would give our museum a new way to talk about the multiple identities of Mitrovica and contribute towards developing the contemporary art scene in the city, something that has been lost during the past few decades.



Figure 2: Ex-Army House, now used by the Museum of Mitrovica, Kosovo.

The amazing women of Ljubljana's contemporary art scene

Getting the opportunity to undertake an art residency at the Moderna Galerija and the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (MSUM) in Ljubljana, Slovenia through the University of Prishtina's Changing the Story project came at just the right time. But of course these things don't happen by accident.

It was my first visit to Ljubljana. The city felt like a breath of fresh air — small, clean and calm.

I had my online map, so I decided to walk to the gallery. Along the way, I was delighted by the beauty of the Austro-Hungarian architecture on show through the buildings I passed. All preserved, all in very good condition.

Since it was a Monday morning the city seemed to be taking its time, as the many cyclists peddled by on their way to work, the shops and institutions gradually opened up, and my steps were accompanied by the sound of Jacob Ogawa on my headphones.

I arrived at the Moderna Galerija, and found out that I needed to go to the MSUM building because the curators' offices were there.



Figure 3: Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, Slovenia. January 2020.

It was here that I got to meet my mentor for this study visit in person, Moderna Galerija's curator, Mrs. Bojana Piškur. We had already spoken frequently online while I had been preparing my documents for my visa, and she had never hesitated to help me to collect all the information I needed from the gallery for my invitation and guarantee letter.

When I reached Mrs. Piškur's office on the third floor of the MSUM gallery, she warmly introduced me to her other colleagues. We then sat in her white office, full of light, to discuss our work and what I wanted to get out of my study visit, from potential meetings with curators from other galleries in the city to museums that I would like to visit. With her help and guidance, numerous meetings were booked for me for the upcoming week, and an agenda took shape.



Figure 4: Me and Bojana Piškur (curator at Moderna Galerija) in her office. January 2020.

In the following days I met lots of very interesting and successful women from Ljubljana's art scene.

Firstly, I spent some time with Moderna Galerija's curator of public programmes, Mrs. Adele Železnik. She has been part of the gallery for the past 27 years, and we spoke about how she actually started its education programme from scratch by creating contacts with schools and professors and making programmes and workshops for kids in the early '90s. Later on, the education programme was developed and was conceived by working and cooperating with NGOs, museums and so on. Throughout this time, they learned mostly through doing.

She showed me techniques for building audiences and bringing art closer to the public with different types of educational activities within different groups' communities. Moderna Galerija now has two public programme curators (one for the adult programme and one for the kids programme), and most of the gallery's educational programme is free of charge.

The rest of my day I spent in Galerija Moderna's Restoration Department, talking to restorer and conservator Mrs. Nina Dorič. A pregnant woman with twins, she had a glow to her face and was full of energy while reflecting on all the phases of her work in the laboratory. I had the chance to see all of the gallery's rooms and labs and to share a very intimate moment with a painting by Gabriell Stupica called "Miza z igračkami" that he painted in 1962 — I instantly fell in love with it.

The Restoration Department was conserving different materials, including papers, paintings, sculptures and other installations, often working in collaboration with restorers from other galleries in Ljubljana. Mrs. Dorič also showed me the documentation processes that they use in the course of various restoration and conservation work. Each document has two versions, a hard copy and a digital copy, whether it's for the paintings' passports, condition reports or the external special reports that are needed when a painting goes out of the museum.

I also had an hour of reflection with web editor Ida Hiršenfelder. She showed me Moderna Galerija's digital approach and the work cycle for publishing things online: It starts with the curators of the education programmes, gets approval from the director, then gets chosen to be published on the website.

She also showed me how the gallery digitises analogue documents and how they have a portfolio for every artist and exhibition, all stored on their two servers. She advised us, as a museum, to protect and digitise more of our analogue documents, by lobbying the Kosovar government for a specific online state storage for museum data.

Ms. Hiršenfelder also works very closely with the person doing Moderna Galerija's PR on various social media. This is an external partner, who works only two days a week for the gallery on promotion issues.

I was invited for lunch with some of the staff from the NGO Bunker, including their artistic director Nevenka Koprivšek and head of communications Tamara Bračič. The great women working there are aiming to refresh and invigorate the Slovene cultural space with innovative approaches.

After they cooked a fresh meal in their kitchen, we ate and spoke about what they had done during the past 20 years, and I reflected on the work of both 7arte and the Museum of Mitrovica. We discussed lots of ideas for further cooperation with Mitrovica's active cultural scene, and they added valuable insight with their expertise.

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Figure 5: Meeting the staff of Bunker, Ljubljana, Slovenia. January 2020.

the Slovene Ethnographic Museum (SEM) with Asta Vrečko from the Center For Contemporary Arts' (SCCA) school. This aims to provide diverse activities for artists, curators, theorists, experts, critics and the general public in the fields of visual and new media arts.

We spoke about the role of the school in the field of curating, how this school supports history of art students who are training to become curators and how important that experience is for the students' portfolios.

I also had the chance to look around the SEM, a long tour by myself, during which I reflected on this beautiful museum and its interesting approach to its permanent exhibition, with its narratives and style of interacting with visitors.

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Figure 6: Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

the beautiful city of Celje where I met three other amazing women curators: Andreja Hribernik from the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Koroška (KGLU), and Maja Hodošček and Maja Antončič from the Center for Contemporary Arts. We shared stories about our work in museums and galleries, the differences in our professional pathways as well as the commonalities that we share.

During this part of the study visit, we came up with the idea of cooperating on a project called “Solidarity Project,” the aim of increasing the capacity of contemporary art organisations (museums, associations and foundations) in the Western Balkans in the fields of preservation, restoration, developing art mediation and education, and reaching new and diverse audiences.

Back in Ljubljana, I spent almost a day by myself looking around Moderna Galerija’s exhibitions and taking in the art. It was a blast for me, and soaking in all that emotion inspired me to write a poem, “Crazy Nora”:

Crazy Nora*

Coursing through the art displayed on the walls

of the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana

pieces of open feelings

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and felt deep in the marrow

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Figure 8: Meeting curators in Celje, Slovenia. (Second left to right: Andreja Hribnik, Maja Hodošček, Maja Antončič.)

Experiences, expressed in different colors, pieces, and materials

Not everything visually beautiful

But everything seasoned by different stages of confrontation

Who am I in the middle of this emotional mini Universe?

A little girl?

A mother?

Crazy Nora?

Am I?

Of course I am!

Fighting with hyenas,

Facing tornadoes and unimaginable storms

Of course I am!

The mad woman, calm with her solitude

in a gallery of modern art

that echoes dreams, wounds, and enlightenment

of those with whom from a glass of rakia

would be cheered very pleasantly!

NPH (January 2020)

* Nora in Slovenian, meaning crazy.

In the afternoon I met a fellow Albanian painter, Mr. Gani Llaloshi, who has been living and creating in Slovenia for more than 30 years. We had a couple of hours in the city, walking around, checking out some private galleries, and talking about and reflecting upon the art scenes in Ljubljana and Kosovo.

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Figure 8: Me and Mr. Gani Llaloshi.

t Qëndresa Deda, who I knew from my time as a student in Prishtina but hadn't seen for years. She is now working as a student in the MSUM.

With Qëndresa the city became more familiar, more connected. We saw two exhibitions together in the Academy of Fine Arts and Design, then a performance of her own in another gallery. We walked a lot, talked a lot; she showed me interesting spots, cafés and

people, while reflecting on the art scenes in Ljubljana and Kosovo and all their differences.



Figure 9: Artist Qëndresa Deda doing a performance at Kapelica Galerija, Ljubljana, Slovenia. January 2020.

On Sunday I decided to use my multi-entry visa and took a bus to Zagreb, Croatia, where I also visited museums. In this beautiful city on a cold, dry January day, I checked out which museums were open and decided to visit two of them. The first, the Museum of Broken Relationships, had taken the world by surprise and had such an interesting approach to the narrative of its exhibition. The other was the Klovićevi Dvori Gallery and its Zemlja exhibition.

One of the things that struck me on this study trip was that in most of the institutions and galleries I visited it was mostly women working in the arts. There were women in receptions, women guides, women managing museum bars, women curators and women directors.

All these amazing, inspiring women were

shaping institutions and art in Slovenia's capital, which has such a rich contemporary arts scene full of education programmes and events.

Lots of women who had started some of their departments from scratch, women who pushed the world of modern art forward in this city, in this state that has a long and rich history in this field, a state that is lucky enough not to be missing many of its historical pieces.

The story of our museum's journey that I shared was not an easy thing to digest for most of them. A story in which we lost our data, lost parts of our collections, lost our key people — the most important pieces in our puzzles to connect in order to go further. But with every meeting I had with the professional staff in the various cultural institutions, as well as freelancers and artists in Ljubljana, we came to the same conclusion: that Mitrovica is a fascinating story and that my city deserves the attention of even more creative people.

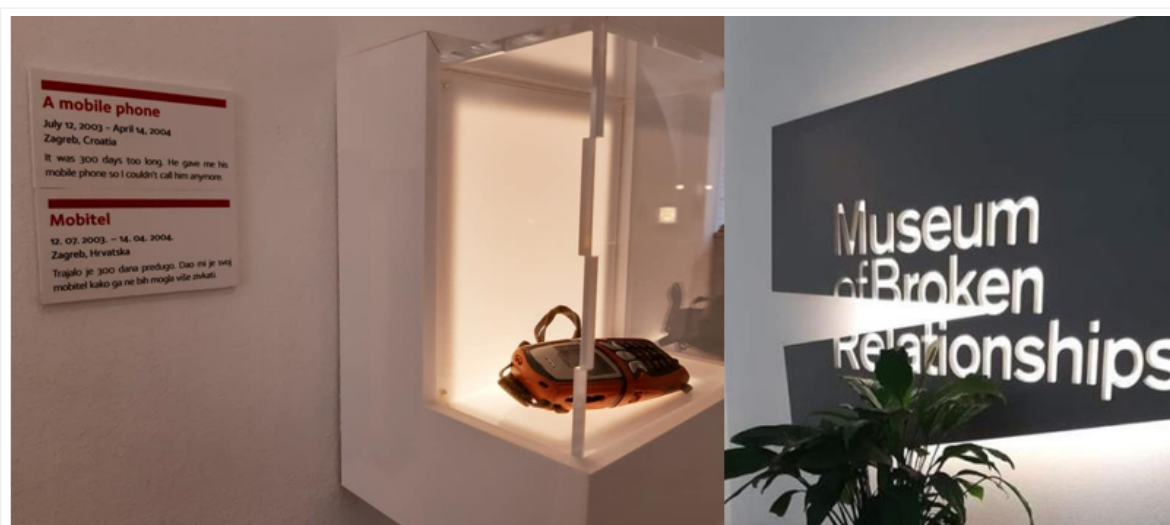


Figure 10: Museum of Broken Relationships, Zagreb, Croatia. January 2020.

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Figure 11: Klovičevi Dvori Gallery, Zagreb, Croatia. January 2020.

thin the European Commission’s “Cultural Cooperation Projects in the Western Balkans” call for proposals. Various museums and galleries — such as Moderna Galerija, KGLU, Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Museum of Contemporary Art – Skopje (North Macedonia), State of Concept Athens (Greece) and the Museum of Mitrovica — will present their own collections, while aiming to create proper conditions for the circulation of our artworks and collections and to develop art programmes, exhibitions and art mediation activities.

A bridge for new partners and colleagues, artists and art lovers, to come together, to reflect and sow seeds. Because art is something that saves us all, that connects us, that liberates us — from our fears, our shadows, our struggles. And it sets us free...

TAGS: ART CONTEMPORARY ART HERITAGE LJUBLJANA MEMORY MUSEUM POETRY TEAM POST WESTERN BALKANS

