

TRACES OF PAIN: A CRITICAL REEVALUATION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND LABOUR IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE KOSOVO WAR

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Introduction

In April 2024 the Lisbon Consortium invited a selected group of students of the Master's program in Culture Studies: Management of the Arts and Culture to visit the 60th edition of the Venice Biennale. Part of the visit was a guided tour of the National Pavilion of the Republic of Kosovo, commissioned by the National Gallery of Kosovo (NGK). In an interview, Renea Behluli, student of the Lisbon Consortium and Head of the Steering Committee at the NGK, speaks about the meaning of national representation for Kosovo, what it means to be a young woman in a country shaped by structural inequality, and the meaning of the different sculptures shown at the pavilion: a visualization of suffering and resilience.

In the exhibition *The Echoing Silences of Metal and Skin*, artist Doruntina Kastrati tells the encrypted story of hard work and deterioration: the story of the feminization of labor in Kosovo's light industry. The project presented by the

National Pavilion of the Republic of Kosovo showcases the lived-in experiences of twelve female workers at a Turkish delight factory in Prizren, Kosovo, after the end of the Kosovo War (1998-1999).

Enduring long working-hours for low pay while being in a standing position has caused severe orthopedic problems in a whole generation of factory workers: three out of twelve women working in production roles in factories undergo knee replacement surgery. The big sculptural installation embodies the fate of these women. The bronze, silver and gold-coloured sculptures were inspired by the shells of nuts and prosthetic knees and are accompanied by a sound project. In conjunction with the exhibition, a publication further addresses the different forms of exploitation and struggles in the workplace. Featuring the oral history interviews of these female workers, encapsulating their experiences, points out how women are often forced to take on a variety of roles simultaneously: wife, mother, provider of the family - emotionally and economically. The installation is powerful commentary on power, hierarchies and consent in contemporary societies and explores how women are pushed towards political marginality and economic vulnerability.

Renea Behluli was interviewed by Dela Christin Mießen, MA student in Culture Studies.

DCM: The term “feminized labor” is used prominently in the conceptualization of the exhibition and its accompanying publication. Could you explain what this term refers to, especially in the context of the aftermath of the Kosovo War and the exhibition?

RB: The Kosovo War of 1999 undoubtedly had significant implications for feminism and the socio-political position of women in the region. During the war, women in Kosovo took on multifaceted roles, ranging from active participation in armed resistance to assuming responsibility for the survival and well-being of their families in the face of violence and displacement. These experiences challenged traditional gender norms, prompting a reevaluation of women's contributions and agency within the context of conflict and post-war reconstruction.

The aftermath of the war presented both economic challenges and opportunities. While the conflict caused widespread destruction and devastation, it

also paved the way for new opportunities for women to engage in economic activities outside their home. Women became increasingly involved in entrepreneurship, microfinance initiatives, and small-scale businesses, contributing to the revitalization of Kosovo's economy. Consequently, there has been a growing recognition of the vital role that women play in peacebuilding, reconciliation, and community development efforts. Organizations and initiatives focusing on women's rights, gender equality, and empowerment have emerged, advocating for the greater inclusion of women in decision-making processes and the protection of their rights.

Despite these shifts, however, a tension between challenged gender norms on the one hand and a continuing gendering of work has persisted. Women have mostly been engaged in sectors traditionally and stereotypically connected with femininity, like the food industry. Also, working conditions for women have mostly been worse compared to those that have been granted to men. Following the conflict, many men were killed, injured, or displaced, leaving women to take on new roles and responsibilities to support their families and communities, not only outside, but also inside their homes. Hence, the workload increased drastically for women in varied areas and sectors, such as caregiving, domestic work, informal employment, and community organizing. "Feminized labor" highlights the gendered nature of these roles and the disproportionate burden placed on women, often without adequate recognition, compensation, or support. Women frequently alternate between unpaid domestic labor to waged work and they are often given only a temporary working contract which offers less benefits or opportunities: even though all of the women interviewed for the exhibition were employed by the factory for over ten years, each one of them had a temporary working contract, working shifts that could last up to twelve or fifteen hours. So, despite the vital role played by women in post-conflict reconstruction and recovery efforts, their contributions to the labour force are often undervalued and marginalized. The artist's mother, for example, reflecting on her experience working in light industry, recalls the experience as bittersweet: bitter, due to the serious health issues she and her co-workers endured, yet sweet because it created a sense of community among women in a similar position, creating solidarity around their shared burdens.

DCM: Could you give some background information about the symbolic content of the different sculptures: The walnut, the walnut shell and the knee implant. Why did the artist choose these objects?

RB: The way I see Doruntina's art, the sculptures of the walnut, the walnut shell, and the knee implant carry powerful meanings that speak to the struggles and strength of workers, especially her own mother. The walnut, a key ingredient in making Lokums, also known as Turkish Delights, represents the hard work and effort put in by laborers, like her mom, in tough places like the Lokum Factory. It's a symbol of the grind and determination needed to make a living and support a family. Then there's the walnut shell, which I feel stands for the resilience and toughness women workers develop to cope with difficult conditions. It shows how they protect themselves from the hardships they face, kind of like an armor they build around themselves. And that is the feeling the shell gives when you sit inside it. And finally, the knee implant is a reminder of the sacrifices workers make. For Kastrati's mom, it represents the toll her job took on her body, like the knee injury she got from standing for hours on end at the factory.

So, these sculptures aren't just about objects—they're about the lives of these women workers, the challenges they deal with, and the strength they show in the face of adversity.

DCM: How does the sound and the overall somatic experience interplay with the artworks?

RB: Stepping into the Kosovo pavilion, Doruntina's work suddenly surrounds the visitor with the haunting echoes of factory machinery and the rhythmic pulse of footsteps on the wooden palette floor, alluding to the wooden palettes that were used in the factory. That's the emotional journey created by Doruntina's work, where sound isn't just background noise—it's a vital part of the experience. Composed by Paul Hauptmeier and Martin Recker, these sounds capture the repetitive, industrial atmosphere of factories, turning the exhibition into an immersive experience. Layered in three levels, they offer a holistic somatic experience, triggering not just your ears but your entire body. Physically, sound

emanates from above, below and the sides. This specific sound-system installation contributes to the three leveled sensory experience: auditory (hearing), visual (seeing), and somatosensory. It is not just about what you hear; it's about how the artworks feel when listening - like the bronze shell that gets activated by sound waves that you can listen to only when you hide inside it. By engaging your senses of hearing and touch, Doruntina invites you to step into her world, to feel the weight of her stories and connect with them on a deeper, more emotional level.

DCM: What is your comment on the Biennale's theme: 'Foreigners Everywhere' and how do you think the Kosovo Pavilion relates to it?

RB: The theme of the 60th International Art Exhibition, "Foreigners Everywhere", offers an exploration of identity and belonging in an increasingly globalized world. I think it asks viewers to reflect on the concept of "foreignness" and its implications for individuals and communities worldwide. Within this context the Kosovo Pavilion, represented by Doruntina Kastrati's work, contributes to the conversation by shining a light on the hidden narratives of our country. Kastrati delves into themes of feminized labor, industrialization, and the impact of societal structures on individual lives. In my opinion, by amplifying these voices, the Kosovo Pavilion offers a powerful reflection on the complexities of identity and the universal experiences of displacement and resilience. In doing so, I think it aligns with the broader theme of the Biennale, inviting viewers to consider the interconnectedness of human experiences across cultures and borders - especially the ones of the marginalized.

DCM: Being a young woman from Kosovo yourself, could you offer a reflection on how your own positionality connects to the issues addressed in the exhibition?

RB: I believe that the acknowledgment of these stories of women engaged in feminized labor within unregulated economies, as showcased at the Venice Biennale, was long overdue. Growing up in Kosovo, where patriarchal norms are deeply ingrained, I have faced the pressures and constraints imposed on women by society. Doruntina's exploration of these themes in her exhibition deeply resonates

with me. Through her work, I feel a sense of validation and empowerment, as it brings to light the hardships and constant ambiguity faced by women in Kosovo. It's a powerful reminder of the importance of addressing the intersections of gender, class, and identity in our society. The Kosovo War and its aftermath also had profound implications for women artists. Prior to the conflict, women artists in Kosovo faced significant challenges in gaining recognition and representation within the male-dominated art scene. However, the war served as a catalyst for artistic expression, as women found creative ways to document their experiences, challenge dominant narratives, and advocate for peace and social justice through various artistic mediums. Post-war, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of women's voices in shaping the cultural landscape of Kosovo. Despite these contributions, women in the arts continue to face obstacles to accessing resources, exhibiting their work, and gaining professional recognition. This makes seeing a female representation of Kosovo in Venice even more special.

DCM: Thank you so much for all your insights. Now, I am curious to know: What was your experience while representing your country in one of the most renowned international art exhibitions?

RB: Representing Kosovo at the Venice Biennale was an incredible experience for me. While the concept of national representation at such events may seem outdated in today's globalized world, for Kosovo, a relatively new country, it holds significant importance in building and affirming our national identity. Since Kosovo began participating in the Biennale in 2013, it has been crucial for us to choose artists and artworks that authentically represent our cultural heritage on the international stage. Being able to contribute to this effort by showcasing a piece of art that highlights the hidden narratives of our country's story was extremely rewarding. As a young woman from Kosovo, it was particularly inspiring to be behind a team of young women leading and succeeding with such a project. Winning the Special Mention award filled me with an even deeper sense of pride and connection to this work. It's clear that how we present our art on these international platforms can make a significant difference in our progress and enlightenment as a nation. Through events like the Venice Biennale, Kosovo has

the opportunity to showcase marginalized voices and demonstrate our progress in amplifying diverse narratives on a global stage.

Doruntina Kastrati, born in 1991 in Kosovo, currently resides and works in Prishtina. Her artistic journey has garnered significant recognition. She received the Young Visual Artist Award from the National Gallery of Kosovo in 2014 and the Hajde x 6 Award from the Hajde Foundation in 2017. She participated in prestigious artist residencies, including the International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP) in New York in 2015, Art House in Shkodër in 2018, and Initiators in Athens in the same year. She has shown her work locally and internationally.

Renea Behluli is an MA student in Culture Studies: Management of the Arts and Culture at UCP. She is also Head of the Steering Committee at the National Gallery of Kosovo and founder of ministudio, promoting artistic expression and cultural exchange.

Dela Christin Mießen is an MA student in Culture Studies: Management of the Arts and Culture at UCP. She works as a junior editor for the Cultural Foundation of German Federal states and contributes as a writer, a freelance researcher for critical cultural theory, and an independent curator to several institutions in Lisbon.

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