



**Viktoria Draganova: Isabella and Katharina, one year ago you opened LamdaLambdaLambda in Pristina. Why did you decide to create your space precisely in Pristina, certainly a city on the periphery of the art world? In her text on the exhibition Daily Business at your space, Ovul O. Durmusoglu describes the architectural and social contrasts within which your space functions, which made me very curious. It reminds me of Sofia.**

*Isabella Anna-Maria Ritter and Katharina Schendl:* Katharina, an architect with an arts background, had been visiting Pristina quite often since she came for the first time for the exhibition of Albanian artist Adrian Paci at the National Gallery of Kosovo in 2012. Isabella came to Pristina for the first time for Flaka Haliti's exhibition at the National Gallery last year. We had known each other for about fifteen years, and we decided last year that it was about time to team up, bring our energy together and do something out of the ordinary.

Pristina is difficult to describe in short. If one were to put it into a few words, it could be described as chaotic – especially with regard to the architecture which, due to weak urban-planning, got out of control after the war. When you are in the city you just have to readjust yourself. What is definitely happening in Pristina is that a great number of cafés, restaurants, bars, clubs are opening constantly and they are very nicely designed. Some people compare it to Berlin in the years after the fall of the Wall.

Our space is located in a small dead-end behind a busy street. Even within Pristina we are not that easy to find. We like the idea that we are already on the periphery and that even there we are sort of hidden. The space itself is quite small but it has a nice big window towards the alley we are on, so you can see most of what is inside from the outside. Our neighbor Vigan has a very nice vegetarian restaurant with some tables outdoors, where it starts to get quite lively in the late afternoon. His place is also our extended office. In terms of layout, the space consists of a rectangular room that is structured by some wall niches and weird stucco elements. We left these elements on purpose in order to keep some of the original character of the space. The idea was to create some sort of “white cube” with its important elements such as a proper light and clean walls, while not giving into it all the way so that there could be some tension left.

**The cultural scene in Sofia still feels very much like a “national affair”; one can hardly find people coming from the outside and bringing with them their own initiatives. You are both foreigners in Kosovo – how does it feel and are there any (dis)advantages with regard to trust of international institutions, funding or accessibility by the local public?**

Since Katharina had been coming to Pristina for a couple of years, there already existed some relationships before λλλ opened, which definitely eased the way for what we are doing now. There are certainly both advantages and disadvantages in being a foreigner, but we don't want to see ourselves in those terms. We are part of the local scene and we were fortunate to be welcomed more like old friends than

foreigners. As for local support, we've just found out that we've received some funding from the Ministry of Culture and the City of Pristina – this makes us very happy because it means that we are being accepted as a local space by the government.

In terms of funding, the situation is rather complicated since the constellation is a bit confusing for most of the institutions that are funding projects like ours. For these institutions, it is important to fund projects where people of the respective nationality are involved – which, as you can imagine, is a bit difficult in our case. We are Austrian citizens but we run a space in Kosovo and work with artists from all over the world, which makes it quite difficult to fit into certain requirements that in most cases prove to be very rigid. There are quite a lot of funding possibilities apart from the government-related ones, but then again one needs to combine artists from certain regions or nationalities – we just cannot think in those terms, as it takes away the freedom from our program. If one wants to think in terms of local/foreigner, one advantage of being the latter is that through λλλ we can bring a different kind of international visibility to the local art scene, since people start to think about it in another way when they hear that foreigners are moving there to do what we do. It is unfortunate that things are still this way but it is a fact, not only in Kosovo. And of course there is always the problem of needing visas when travelling as a Kosovar, which hopefully will end soon...

**Regarding such visibility, you received the best possible coverage within the first couple of months – Artforum and Art Agenda wrote about you. But I would imagine that, as in Bulgaria, these platforms are not really well-known in Kosovo. So how would you assess their relevance?**

Of course we are very happy to have already had such fantastic coverage for being new in all of this. We do what we do for artistic reasons – namely, to put the art scene of Kosovo and consequently of the whole region more on the map, and to show to international artists that it can be interesting to exhibit their work in peripheral places, too. We think that locals who are not part of the art world understand the long-term impact of this specific kind of coverage. One can also see that in the example of Flaka Haliti representing Kosovo at the Venice Biennale – through the realm of the art world, Kosovo was also put on the map for a wider audience. In the case of λλλ, maybe not yet for a wider audience; but art-related people are becoming aware of it, which is great.

**How do you select your artists?**

For us it was important from the very beginning to select our artists according to what we find interesting in terms of a potential discourse. Hence, we are interested in different aspects of contemporary art practice. Still, when we like the work of a certain artist we still have to consider whether the artist would be interested in doing something in Pristina. We don't just want to show artists' works in Lambda; we also want them to experience the place and to take some experience back with them, foremost the energy. When it comes to those who are interested to experience more



“peripheral” places and their idiosyncrasy, it is very easy for us to “light their fire”. As for the ones who concentrate their career around showing in centers such as London, New York or Berlin, it is of course harder to gain their interest since we cannot offer them as much “fame”. This also reveals the mechanisms of the art world in some way, which is one idea we like to experiment with.

**An organic mixture in cities such as Sofia or Pristina I suppose is still not an easy thing. Sometimes the local art scene is simply better known; sometimes clichés like “famous international artist” are still well in use and replace the process of learning that is so much needed. Do you try to mix the local and international scene?**

Yes, definitely. In our cosmos of thought, this mixture is crucial. Nowadays ideas overlap in different countries, regions and cities. Of course each country has its own history with art, and hence the “state of the art” differs in certain ways from country to country; but rather than pointing that out, it is more interesting to fathom our mutual interests and detect multiple readings of the same thing in a more abstract manner. In one way or another, the exhibitions definitely function as a platform for exchange. However, it must be stated that the outcome of mixing should occur rather at the subliminal level and not referring to geographical criteria as a tool for mixing. It is all part of our long-term project to figure out ways to avoid that. That is to say, mixing if there can be a mutual interest in some way, even if the practices of the artists together totally differ.

**Do you have a concrete example?**

λλλ’s inaugural exhibition featured new work by Flaka Haliti related to the neighborhood of the gallery, as well as site-specific work by Austrian artist Nadja Athanassowa that was inspired both by her train/bus journey from Vienna to Pristina and by her time spent here in Pristina. Flaka’s fences acted as a testimony to the architectural changes that occurred in our neighborhood after Kosovo gained its independence. The old fences, which served for decorative purposes rather than as tools to screen off one neighbor from another, were replaced by higher militant-looking fences, and this ultimately led to a different kind of communication among neighbors. Nadja’s works also revolved around communication, but in a totally different manner: she collected local newspapers and magazines and transformed them into wall collages and sculptures. In doing so, she reacted to the exhibition space as well as to Flaka’s fences. So, in a way, both artists’ works at the same time were and weren’t about the same thing.

**From the outset, you have also introduced different formats – besides the exhibitions, there are also rituals. Tell me more about these rituals – is this a more flexible alternative to exhibition-making?**

Rituals are very interesting as a concept. If we think about it in a very basic way, rituals connect people because they share a certain spatial or temporal event. The idea of performing rituals comes from our interest to fathom out certain ideas, behaviors, etc. inherent in them. Most people perform rituals without being aware of what those rituals actually mean,

or why they are actually doing them – it seems more like automated behavior. According to Catherine Bell, “[i]t is a cultural and historical construction that has been heavily used to help differentiate various styles and degrees of religiosity, rationality, and cultural determinism.”[1] But we don’t really want to analyze rituals in a “scientific” way; rather, we try to challenge their characteristics while we are enjoying them. We guess it is something to create awareness; we don’t know yet what ultimately will come out of it.

Our first ritual was in the tradition of a “cleaning”, i.e. cleaning a space to get rid of old energies before moving in. Astrit Ismaili, who performed the first ritual, also combined it with some sort of initiation rite, a rite of passage, referring to the birth of λλλ. It was improvised. Astrit is an amazing performer who managed to make it feel very serious. We were a quite random group of people, some of whom we picked up at a theater event a couple of minutes before we performed the ritual – everybody in the space was part of it. Some were totally into it while others were quite skeptical. After the performance, everybody shared their experience and some interesting as well as funny conversations resulted out of it.

**Artist Flaka Haliti represented Kosovo at the Venice Biennale this year and you were directly involved in it – in what form?**

Yes, λλλ was involved as a “gallery”, meaning that we helped through the process and also backed it by standing behind it in a commercial way in case someone would be interested in buying. Separately from that, Katharina was project-coordinator and the co-curator of Nicolaus Schaffhausen.

**Are you interested in switching roles between a commercial and non-commercial way of acting? Do you think that in countries where there is hardly a commercial art sphere and where there is a lack of models for basic financing of such types of organizations by the community, commercial work may turn out to be even more important as a tool to activate the community?**

λλλ started as a project space for the first year to keep it more experimental. We think it is quite annoying that everyone needs to “manifest” her/himself and declare the one motive that drives a project.

We don’t really like to be put in a drawer as easily as that – things are not that black and white anymore, even though most people are hanging on to that because it makes it apparently easier to understand things. We think that it is possible to show relevant artistic practices that have the potential to create a discourse and, at the same time, to be commercial – there is no real contradiction in that model.

From the very beginning, we were planning on working together with some artists long-term in order to pave the way at least for a handful of artists so as to enable them to live from their art, and of course also because it is beautiful to grow together. The situation, not only in Kosovo but in the whole region, is that there is no real art market – hence, the artists are dependent on state support, and this makes public institutions much more a catalyst and a means of income for artists than in the western world. As we know, both models,



the state as well as the capitalist one, carry their respective inherent problematic – maybe there is a smoother way than that along the far end of those dichotomies.

We have decided to become commercial from 2016 on. Since local collectorship (apart from a few individuals) does not really exist yet, this will definitely make us dependent on doing some international art fairs so people can become

aware that the works can be bought. We hope that – given that it will work out – this in turn will make local/regional people more interested in collecting “our” artists.

[1] Bell, Catherine, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, Oxford University Press 2009, ix.

In January 2015 curators Isabella Ritter and Katharina Schendl (both from Austria) opened the art space **LambdaLambdaLambda**, envisioning to establish a dialog between artists and cultural workers from various backgrounds and to bring so more visibility to very interesting young artists in Kosovo. Being located in Pristina LambdaLambdaLambda brings together local and international artists from the young generation with the aim to provide upcoming local artists with an opportunity to exhibit and to open up a channel for communication and cultural exchange between the local and international artists- and curator scene.

The opening exhibition in January showcased works by the Kosovo artist Flaka Haliti (who currently presents Kosovo at the Venice Biennale) and Austrian artist Nadja Athanassowa, followed by a group show of three artists from Kosovo in March, in May by a Swiss and German artist, currently on view a show by young Austrian painter Tatjana Danneberg and the next exhibition to open in October will be with the Canadian Artist Jeremy Shaw.

<http://www.lambdalambdalambda.org>

### **SWIMMING POOL**

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SWIMMING POOL is a space for art in Sofia. It hosts artistic and curatorial projects as well as readings, screenings and performances. Its premises are located on a rooftop in the city center of Sofia. Built in 1939, they consist of inner spaces as well as a terrace with a swimming pool situated in the middle. Director of Swimming Pool is Viktoria Draganova.

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This conversation has been published online on [www.swimmingpoolprojects.org](http://www.swimmingpoolprojects.org) on occasion of **us**, an exhibition in collaboration with I: project space (Beijing), Jenifer Nails (Frankfurt), LambdaLambdaLambda (Pristina), Life Sport (Athens), Linda (Sofia), Opening Times (London), Peach (Rotterdam), and The Green Parrot (Barcelona) at SWIMMING POOL from 7 November to 15 November 2015. Organised by Viktoria Draganova. With the financial support of Stolichna Programa „Kultura“ and Austrian Embassy Sofia as well as with the generous support of all invited art spaces.