

**Radical Education Collective:  
School of Missing Identity: Conversation on  
Politics, Arts and Education in Kosovo with  
Mehmet Behluli and Dren Maliqi**

**RADICAL EDUCATION COLLECTIVE — What was the context in which the School of Missing Identity was initiated?**

**MEHMET BEHLULI — We must look at the cultural and political significance of the former Yugoslav territory. As you know, Kosovo was quite underdeveloped. It was a closed society with a strong patriarchal way of thinking. In fact, only the region of Kosovo proved a big problem when it came to integrating into Yugoslav society. This was probably also due to the language, as the language we use in Kosovo is completely different from the other, Slavic, languages.**

**When we refer to the development of the art scene in Kosovo we are referring to the 1970s, not earlier. I studied classical painting in Prishtina and finished my course of study in 1987. At that time the only way to receive further education was to pursue postgraduate studies. I went to Sarajevo and studied there from 1988 till 1991. At about the same time other friends went to Ljubljana – Sokol Beqiri did and Gani Llaloshi, who is actually still living there. They were the first artists with a different way of looking at art and the artwork. Because up until that time we had one artists' society, one government party, everything had a uniform structure and everything was controlled. In this sense, it was very difficult to know about what was going on outside of Kosovo.**

**REC — There were only connections established with individuals who went to other cities in ex-Yugoslavia and then returned?**

**MB — Yes, exactly. At that time we exchanged experiences and situations. If I remember correctly, not many things**

were happening in Bosnia in those days, but at least one thing had caught my interest: “Jugoslovenska dokumenta”. Perhaps you remember that back then it was a big exhibition on an overall Yugoslav level. From Ljubljana we received information about the Graphic Biennale. When we returned to Prishtina, to our local situation, we tried to do something... In the period after 1990, however, the situation had completely collapsed, also in a political sense. We have all heard of what went on in 1990-91 and of the complete segregation of Albanians and Serbs that ensued.

The 1990s were a very interesting period because Albanians were expelled, evicted from buildings, removed from legal spaces. Consequently, we started to organise a completely alternative way of living, of acting – a new society. We are conducting this conversation in a café because ever since that period bars have been very important places for artists. From culture to politics, it all happened in cafés. As a matter of fact, Ibrahim Rugova did all his politics in two cafés.

In this process education was very important. We also tried to organise education in an alternative way in various private spaces: homes, basements, etc. In the beginning it was interesting for me to find out how to resist the situation without actually fighting the situation but by trying to find alternatives. Unfortunately, that was the situation at the beginning only; now the situation is completely different.

**REC** — You were organising your entire life in a creative way; how did this formation of alternative institutions sustain its autonomy?

**MB** — The Albanian diaspora was quite strong at the time, and ‘thanks’ to Milošević we were able to set up a new so-

ciety that functioned on different levels. One level implied that we established a government that operated in exile and was in charge of collecting taxes. Everyone gave 3% and the government functioned with that money.

I don’t understand this even today: how is it that the people were satisfied? You are living your life – we all are living our lives – and there is this complete segregation from the local Serbian authorities. Even our childhood seems somehow forgotten. No friendship, no solidarity... no nothing... a complete segregation occurred. Like a Berlin wall; an invisible one, but effective nevertheless.

As I said, we tried, we organised a parallel system. It was not completely financed, but it was partially financed. Also the health care system was organised in this way. The intention was to further organise some level of security, but that was repressed because Milošević was afraid of any kind of security institution.

This financing, which came from abroad, primarily covered basic needs. It was the government in exile that set up a legal structure to collect taxes. It then forwarded that money to the parallel institutions here – commissions in a way – and that actually worked out.

**REC** — The official system of education – the higher educational level, the secondary school level, the primary level – completely collapsed. What happened next? Was the Albanian majority made redundant at work, expelled from school in the wake of the violent annexation of Kosovo between 1989 and 1991?

**MB** — Yes, they fired us, but they used small tricks. You see, they demanded that an agreement be signed stating that you accepted new programmes. Of course, these new

programmes were not acceptable for the majority at that time. But nobody – let’s say, 99 percent – accepted that declaration and consequently people were fired from the educational and cultural institutions. But these people never considered themselves as having been fired, because they immediately started organising themselves in a parallel way, in an alternative way, and this resulted in a kind of continuity of our educational system. As a small, uneducated society, we put a great deal of effort into education, and this was very important, terribly important.

**REC — Did the School of Missing Identity emerge from the situation in which the arts were practically marginalised?**

**MB — We learned how to fight institutions. Today we are quite alternative. Probably because of that, I am not sure. If you are not accepted, you find alternative ways to organise yourself. It is very simple. After 1995, when I started working in an art academy, I realised this was not adequate because its organisation was very formal.**

**I wanted to further develop the programmes, invite young lecturers, and so on. And this was very difficult at that time because everything was considered from a patriotic nationalistic perspective. Also at that time independence was a very strong idea. The official narrative was: if we became independent, like Slovenia, everything would be perfect. But the situation in Kosovo was completely different. So, when we tried to do something new at the academy we met with very tough resistance.**

**Some of our colleagues had a very conservative view: Picasso, the 1950s and 60s, and then they seemed to think that nothing happened after the 1970s. Even today Duch-**

**amp is “forbidden”, nobody realises how important Duchamp is, not to mention Beuys and the others who came after him. So we agreed to leave the system, to leave the Academy. Through this we learned that being the majority against the dominant regime we can try to do the same thing, but at another level. So we said, if you do not accept our programmes, we will leave the Academy and we will create our own educational system. But it was very difficult because we had no idea how it might function with different sponsors. The Soros NGOs were established in places in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia, we had an office in Prishtina and a Belgrade branch.**

**These were our first experiences of learning how to fight, how to overcome the segregation, and how to be a part of the system but in a completely different way and at a completely different level...**

**REC — ... by creating alternative institutions?**

**MB — Well, we never said alternative, except in conversations as we are having now. Officially we never said “the Academy is very bad”. Instead we said: “The Academy is a very beautiful, very good institute, but it is too classical.” What we tried to do was to help them update through another system. This was a very soft, a very peaceful approach.**

**REC — Like Gandhi?**

**MB — No, more like the “Art of Resistance” – this really involved learning from life, from practices. In the 90s all activities took place in cafés – exhibitions, politics and so on. And you can see that in some of the cafés in Prishtina this is even the case today.**

**But let me go back to our situation, our position. The very classical ways of teaching art caused difficulties. In those days, the professor was a kind of *hodja*, an imam, and a student must learn what a professor decides and nothing else. And we were against such practices, we wanted dialogue, we wanted a challenge, we wanted opposing viewpoints.**

**REC — What was your proposed alternative to reproducing the dominant – vertical, hierarchical – teaching practices?**

**MB — We proposed an entirely different practice in which the professor is no longer a god. The professor is just there to moderate the discussion. Even today they have a ‘recipe’ here for how art should be made and what it should look like if it is to be considered good art. If you don’t follow the ‘recipe,’ the art is considered bad. So these are the roots of how we adopted an alternative way of approaching the lectures, in fact the institution, how to take on completely different ideas.**

**After 1999 we took the same approach; if you don’t want to accept the common way of thinking, you act outside of the system. Missing Identity started somewhere around 2002; we were quite engaged in it, but completely on a voluntary basis. I would like to mention that here I met Irwin for the first time. They were doing a project with the Kosovo army on a completely private basis. We – when I say we I mean the group of people who opposed the institutional way of making art at the time – invited them and their friends to join our courses, which were not classical courses, but rather exotic. You know, we were trying to invent hot water once**

**again. But here was a situation in which nobody knew what hot water was. It was a pioneering way of dealing with things that are perhaps very common in the rest of the world.**

**REC — Were the students that took your courses enrolled at the Academy?**

**MB — Most of them.**

**REC — Were these non-formal courses additional to the courses at the Academy, i.e. part of the Academy’s curriculum?**

**MB — No, no, not at all. The courses were completely separate from the curriculum of the Academy. How to put it, until that time we had gained some experience in subverting the official programmes of the institutions, with officials, with the government, how to try and fool them, but in a very peaceful way. The peaceful approach was very important because probably because of that we succeeded, because we never openly opposed the classical way of teaching art. We seemingly agreed with the established way and added that we wanted to try different ways. Of course, the students were not obliged to accept what we were saying, nor the way of communicating. We just wanted them to know there existed another way of teaching art. And this was quite successful because young artists were free to choose. Of course not everybody was with us, not everybody accepted this way of thinking.**

**REC — Dren, we would like to ask you if you could comment on how you experienced Missing Identity?**

**DREN MALIQI — To make a long story short, I started my studies in 2000 and at that time with fellow other students Jakup Ferri, Driton Hajredini, Alban Muja and Lulzim Zeqiri an artists group was set up at the Academy. We knew the study programme was bad. Together we started talking about art and related things, and at a given moment Shkëlzen Maliqi and Mehmet organised courses, so we started gathering there. The number of students grew from five to fifteen. Every Friday we met to discuss various topics.**

**REC — Were these courses organised at the university?**

**DM — No. They were organised in the alternative space that Shkëlzen was running. Every week we gathered to discuss contemporary art, how it started off from Duchamp through Beuys and evolved to what is happening at present. We were discussing and producing works. It was quite a relief for us, students, because we didn't have this opportunity at the Academy. We were creating a platform for discussion. For me setting up these discussions was the most important moment in the process. In the period from 2002 and on some of the most important works of this new generation of artists were made.**

**REC — So by now you have at least six years of experience with the Missing Identity?**

**DM — That's right. Gradually, the time was ripe to transform this platform into an institutional platform. Now we have offices, computers, and so on. And now it is time to start with a new generation. Now we are thinking of a sort of alternative Academy. At some point we would like to call**

**it an alternative Academy that provides lectures two times a week...**

**MB — In my view, Missing Identity is important because it offers courses that are completely free. The topics are freely chosen. We might even decide to talk about the weather or about nationalism. Anything goes. That is the situation. As long as we are aware that everything has a kind of artistic background, as do the participants. So we regularly stage exhibitions and art projects, and we do educational work of course.**

**I usually tell this joke that is not actually a joke... Dren's friend who had graduated from the Art Academy came up and said to me: "Hey Professor, listen, I didn't learn anything at this Academy, believe me." And I answered: "No, no. You learned something. You learned that you didn't learn anything." In my view, it is very important to be aware of what you are learning, but also of what you are not learning. It is essential to have a constructive way of thinking. You start off with a model and then you begin to research that model, using all the means available. You turn it upside down, and then it becomes a completely different thing.**

**REC — This initiative emerged as an alternative to the institutionalisation of knowledge, as an alternative to the situation at the Academy. As Dren mentioned, the School of Missing Identity is now becoming an institution in its own right that requires funding. This usually draws positive and negative consequences that have to be dealt with critically. It would be interesting to hear about the current situation and recent debates.**

**MB — After 1999 the situation completely changed. It may be hard to imagine, but from 1981 till 1999 life was very insecure, very day-by-day, very unpredictable. The situation was really difficult. Even when we were talking about making culture, making art, forming an opposition, we experienced a strong sense of fear.**

**After 1999 we had the feeling that we were free at last. There were no policemen, we didn't have to be afraid of what the government might do. This "freedom feeling" was so strong that it actually became a problem. Everybody thought they could do anything.**

**On the conceptual level we talked about reaching a point of chaos: no rule of law, people trying to get as much as they could, doing away with borders – this kind of mentality. In 1999 we started from zero.**

**Eventually, institutions with really strange organisms were formed, and the collateral damage – in consequence of the freedom of expression, the freedom of making decisions – was well handled. Yet, our modes of functioning have to be formalised in line with the idea that you are free as long as you are not attacking someone else's freedom. We are waiting for this 'independence' to happen. We will see what this declaration of independence will bring.**

**Today at the Academy it is no longer a taboo to teach in the ways we are used to at our alternative school. At this point, I think we have done a good job. Even the conservative guys [the professors] started changing their minds. They may still believe that video is a poor medium, but they see that the visitors like the video's, the installations, action art, so they may find it is not so bad after all. Just recently my Academy decided to start a new department, a department of contemporary art. This is really something. The art galleries now want to collaborate with us. We have made all**

**sorts of compromises with them except about the 'quality of the show'.**

**REC — Is there, then, no longer any need for Missing Identity?**

**MB — I think there still is a need for it. I believe that even if you have a 'perfect institution' you still need to have an alternative to that because you need to move things ahead on a different level. Once you are established you start dictating things.**

**REC — So there will be new people involved?**

**MB — Yes, I am waiting for the new guys.**

**REC — Do you see any problems with the way institutions "think" art?**

**DM — Prishtina has two institutional galleries and there are also two small galleries that are dealing with contemporary art, the Rizoma and Stacion Center for Contemporary Art. The problem with the institutional galleries, the National Gallery for example, is that they have no criteria at all. We had a discussion a while ago in which we argued that we could do things outside these institutional spaces; I think young artists are expecting too much of them. After all, they cannot give much here in Kosovo, except perhaps some media coverage. So we said that it is important to do things ourselves. This reduces the budget. Sure, art is a luxury, but you don't have to make a work of art that requires 5,000 Euros or more. We need to make the scene vibrant, to bring new people in.**

**REC — Would you say that Rizoma is such an initiative that wants to go the way Missing Identity was going at the beginning, pursuing a “radical becoming”?**

**DM — In some way Rizoma is a direct consequence of Missing Identity. As Mehmet mentioned before, it is linked to institutions, to the Academy, where they are having a new department for contemporary art. It is not only that, it is also a space open to new thinking and new approaches to art.**

**MB — I would say that at the moment Rizoma is a space where everybody can participate: anthropologists, activists, artists, punk musicians, anti-militarists, and so on. The space is indeed designed like a rhizome.**

**DM — Missing Identity and Rizoma have created a very lively art scene in Prishtina. The problem as I see it is that the scene is functioning mostly from the outside. Foreign curators are coming, engaging our artists to participate in exhibitions, and our artists are just waiting for them to come, involve them in their shows, and take them abroad. But this is not the way a healthy scene should be; we have to function from the inside as well. Rizoma in a way tries to fill this gap.**

**REC — So there is a strong desire in people to go abroad, but the idea is also to do things at a home level, to introduce changes locally?**

**MB — Well, we have done some very interesting things we will not easily forget.**

**It is important to develop this free energy, but also to channel it in creative ways. I am sure this can be done here,**

**but not immediately. Ten years have passed, another ten are coming, and now we are questioning ourselves regarding how to develop and not merely repeat ourselves. As I see it, it is no longer relevant to act like an art guerilla; now it is time to somehow be part of the institution and as such try to change something.**

**REC — This is, of course, one perspective. But another one is a more rhizomatic way of organising subjectivity. This can emerge from anywhere and its timing cannot be predicted.**

**MB — The School of Missing Identity is trying to establish itself as an institution that will act as part of the system but with some degree of independence. And then these young people will oppose our situation, take a different stance and attitude. And this is rhizome.**

**This conversation between Radical Education Collective (Gašper Kralj, Bojana Piškur / Ljubljana, Slovenia) and Missing Identity (Prishtina, Kosovo) took place in a café in Prishtina on 4 February 2008.**