

H: The location of Kanazawa is quite isolated, particularly in winter because of the mountains. And people are independent, and kind of an autonomy and the reason why people enclose themselves inside, but nowadays because a lot of the situation have been changing so the city must open its gates to survive in the future. You are always dealing with boundaries and thinking of immigration and people's mobility and changing the situation which also makes conflict. People in Kanazawa are not just simply conservative, but this is something else.

X: I came from one country of provincialism. (laughter) It was the most highest achievement, and naivety, of not opening, and closure, thinking of being closed and being natural. The city itself, I realized, that Kanazawa is very traditional. And I don't know anything about Kanazawa and I just try to feel about the provincialism that the city has. I am very careful when I talk about the boundaries, the first thing is the communication to the people, the people who are located in the city. It is very easy to become ridiculous but we need to go step by step, so that was the example, when I talk about a wall, or why I wanted to go a very smooth way, and definitely any kind of special project in the future, in the city, I realized, should be in a very subtle way, subtle and soft, because the people are very delicate here. (1)

S: You obtained the correct idea in a very short period of time, I think.

X: But you see, at least when I live in a place, because all of my work is related to the space, for me it is very easy to make work for white cube. Because white cube is something that will materialize art and its something that every one is ready to be part of. Anything can have a form of art. But when I talk more about individuality, the object, the piece, taking the people to the space, to the city, that is different, because you don't have any more art lovers, just society. Whenever we talked about the philosophy and art, and something like that, like the example of Joseph Beuys, we have to challenge the society because

we have every kind of society has different consumer culture and prosperous, and of course, that is more of value when we can give different reflection because we have to highlight different realities. I believe that we become more naive in that case. Because we've been to the borderline but we are maybe forced. I don't believe in individuality. People need a dream, a desire, because we materialize and that is the big problem of individuality...but at least I try and in this case and other cases to question the people. I know nothing still. At least I have made an approach.

Mobility / Phantasma

S: You have many experiences in confronting the different cultures because you moved from Kosovo to America to Italy... so your sense of grasping the society and situation is very smart and very quick and very accurate. Of course, we personally came from other cities, so we weren't born in this city so we're not typical Kanazawa citizens. But if you go to people in the streets and look at their behavior, I think you can see their characters. That's the important thing, because if we try and tell you about Kanazawa, it's something that we translated.

X: You see, now we're definitely living in an era where we are creating individualities and independence in phantasma by the broadcasting and by the imagination, by desires and dreaming. And this is something that we are not realizing, that we are part of the network itself, that it's forced us to live and subscribes images, so that means our capacity of individuality is really a minimum, of course, even to Kanazawa or to Tokyo or maybe to Beijing or New York, it's the same thing.

S: While you were talking you used the word "phantasma" and I think you are definitely separating what is phantasma and not phantasma. Can you explain more about what you think phantasma is? What is not phantasma then?

X: Well, it's very funny, it's a very good question, but I can tell you this, because we are living in a phantasma all the time.

S: That's why it's very difficult to separate phantasma from normal life.

X: For instance, when we talk always about the past and the future, always we are in the present that is always very tricky. I believe that phantasma is the imagination of human but its more personal imagination because you don't have to agree what is phantasma, you can invent your phantasma. But in that case I believe there is phantasma and ridiculous phantasma and latter is the institution. How can I say, I don't want to use evil phantasma (laughter) You trust something that has not value and this kind of phantasma controls your every day life. You understand? But phantasma is something that can be beautiful, or the most beautiful thing, I believe, is when we are sleeping. You create this passivity and you are fully secure, because darkness is security. And it's a feminine world because it's you and yourself. Phantasma is more pleasure, but it's relative thing we talk something that we invented. But I definitely believe in that kind of phantasma which give another life.

S: Also you said that you'll move to New Delhi. Of course moving and traveling is an important factor in your life and also in your work. I think there are some artists who separate their work and their life. But in your case, it's very strictly tied together. And if you're planning to go to New Delhi does this have something to do with your work, or...?

X: First I want to tell you one thing. I believe that for myself, its related to the confrontation of the very different realities in the world...that is my life and of course I don't want to use the term art and blah blah blah, but I believe my life is related to facing other realities. That is something very much a natural process. When I think about that, definitely, I am against Orientalism. Instead of understanding other cultures by reading books

Interview with Sislej Xhafa

X: Sislej Xhafa

H: Hasegawa Yuko

S: Sumitomo Fumihiko

about America or England or any kind of countries. I like to understand other cultures by going there, facing it physically, that for me is more important rather than getting information. I think confrontation with reality and living in New York, New Delhi, living in Singapore, living in Tokyo, it's the same. You can make this world, you can deal and you can build.

S: The interesting thing is that you've never been to New Delhi before, so you just decided.

X: That makes me more feel more safe and secure. When you go there you realize what is life, and what is reality to the customs of society or of India. But don't forget one thing, I don't want to talk about nomadism here. I believe that when we talk about nomadism in art, is something that we aestheticize. In the people from China and Afghanistan, Pakistan who immigrate, there is real nomadism. And you have to go to other land for these kind of new strategies of art.

H: How about cosmopolitanism?

X: Cosmopolitanism is a beautiful, it's a very beautiful word and it's very easy to say that. I believe in non-borderline, in the sense of the transparency of movement and I believe in the possibility of exchange. But definitely I want to be more realistic way of facing this kind of cosmopolitan idea. It's very important that we who really dream of being an artist, to pass through the cosmopolitan cities. It's very important to build yourself in a healthy way.

H: When you say that confrontation with reality, there are lots of different levels of reality. The very physical and materialistic appearance... You just confront what you see, what you think, what you feel, what you get. Now the most difficult thing is that there are so many gaps in generation. All the people of the generations have their own reality and is sometimes completely different. So now it's a very difficult time because now velocity is much faster than gravity. I'm just using this word very metaphorically. And sometimes I think gravity is

greater than velocity and really consider the place where you want to live. What do you think about this?

X: When we talk about the two generations, I believe definitely that we live in two different velocities.

H: Because change is so quick.

X: When we talk about the two generations, it depends on the sensibility of any responsible people. Which kind of sensibility, in front of the person, in front of the generation. Of course in democracy, you have left and right wings and you know, but it's worst when the individuality gets killed. That is the most dangerous part. When velocity is speeded it can do that.

H: Interesting.

Individual and Society

S: May I ask you about the Stock Exchange (Fig. 1)? The piece we acquired. I was very impressed, because when I saw that work, I could only see the existence of you, and it was so strong. How did you develop the idea of that performance?

X: Okay. First I want to tell you that I went out of my hometown when I was 18. My goal at the time was to study in England. Because of the political situation in Kosovo, it was impossible to study in my mother language. In the meantime I realized something very interesting in which I received from my college. I received nothing. And I decided to go to work because I had to work to survive myself and I went to wash plates in one restaurant.

H: In London?

X: In London. After that I called my professor of painting at the time, and I said please come to see. I opened the door because he was there and said come to the kitchen, and seeing, washing the plates, said this is the best culture ! (laughter). I

believe that there exists no individuality in art college. Everybody was good because the students paid the money for the college, a lot of money, and for not hurting the feelings of the students, the premises had to have no identity inside. It had to be kind of uniform of the goodness, and I don't believe in that. So I withdrew from the college after one year and I just went to work and to do research. When I went to the Academy of Fine Art in Florence I went there only for one reason, that was for the purpose of the papers. Because I had to have the paper to stay in Italy. The only way was to be a student at the academy. At the same time I did other jobs like bars, that was my real life, my physical life. The people who escape from other countries, I believe they don't escape because they're well. They escape because they're forced to escape. Two reasons that I truly believe is political motivation and economic motivation. These two things. But these two things that belong to the culture itself, because it belongs to where I am born. It was a kind of geographical relation of exchange.

Slovenia is at the border between the West and East (2). And there is actually the movement of the people going to hell or heaven. It was more to deal with the human market. Where the billboard of the train station becomes Wall Street. So that departure, of course I don't want to talk more because we know too many tragic things happened in the past. But this phenomenon is part of every day life. Lots and lots of people in this case passed through to Europe and lots of people died in the boats. And of course using the irony, for me, helped me to confront the very delicate issue. And that is very ambiguous to society. And in that case, the billboard became Wall Street and I announced the departure, the number of the train, the destination, the arrival.

H: Who is shooting you?

X: Staff of the Museum

X: I direct them. And when I did, it was seven minutes, it was intensive work. And you can realize how deep it was. Too deep for me, and it

was too serious, and ...

H: Also the ordinary people passing through?

X: That's right, the old man. Everything was passing through because nothing was artificial. The only thing artificial was me. (laughter)

H: That's the reason. Because many video performances are very artificial, very directed.

X: Thank you. But I believe that this kind of element that we are facing in everyday life, and life of course is always related to my work. And of course always thinking and feeling of going beyond all that. Never really staying, just reflection, going beyond, to at least moderate our thinking. For example I believe through art we can do other things.

I use in my next project, for example, in Kwangju, what we saw there, it was maybe sad because it was maybe taking over other things, but I believe in the physical. But physical for me is surviving. It's not metaphysical surviving in the sense of having being or not, it's physical. That is reality and strength.

H: Who is the most influential artist for you?

X: Well, I don't have... I have two personalities who contribute to me a lot. The first person who gave to me possibility and a healthy integration of the world that is so complex, is my father. The two things that he actually gave to me, a kind of transparency and respect for others. But in a real sense of contemporary art, a Japanese artist called Kinji Akagawa. (3)

He's a professor. He's an artist too, he's a little bit old, and in 1964, 65 he immigrated to America and he has still a connection with culture in Japan. He gave to me a sense of responsibility, responsibility and putting things to the proper condition.

S: You told me that the work he made was conceptual work?

X: Yes, he makes conceptual work.

S: You were not so affected by his work itself, but what he taught you?

X: Of course, We have to know one thing. He gave to me a kind of basis of reflection of art, and the meaning of creativity, responsibility. That he gave to me. He had lessons in the course of critical Studies in the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. He was strong, and he was a hard, dry critic. And I love that because he was pure, and he for example pushed some girl, forced a girl to cry but I believe that he contributed to this student really to grow and face reality after College. That was only one year. But of course I'm not affected by his work, no, because he's a typical conceptual artist. (Laughter) It's very conceptual and we belong to different ages but I respect his work. Walker Art Center had one piece of his. Actually I was influenced most by the people who don't have anything to do with art. From different communities in New York where I lived, for example, Puerto Rican community, Albanian community and Kosovo. There're different communities. And sometimes we go over and we exchange things.

Illegality

(Looking at the images of his works)

X: In this case, it was my first time exposure to an audience (Fig. 2). Because before that my work was just for me. It was a very selfish way of seeing, without no shame. 1997 was my first time when I did something that I wanted a really, really good exchange. And this was at the Biennale Venice. And it was an illegal pavilion, the Albanian pavilion. And I passed through illegally. Inside were two speakers relaying a football match, so I was walking around.

H: Where did it come from?

X: It was a game between Italy and Holland. And you can listen to two speakers, but I was walking. If people asked me for the ball I passed it to them,

but again I was walking normally how people walked. Why Venice? Because I belonged to this immigration culture, the mobility. When I went there it was through the sport which was the only one chance to survive. So we have the question of exclusion and inclusion. For example we have Luxembourg, with 400,000 people living there. Luxembourg has a pavilion in the Biennale in Venice. India with billions doesn't have a pavilion. For me it was injustice. The artificiality of participation, of inclusion and exclusion. So I said I want to be part of the Biennale in Venice. No other reason but to raise the question.

I can also talk about this (Fig. 3). I'm stealing. So Albania steal from Moroccan.

And in terms of the system of the media, there are stereotypes of thieves. For example, normal people know that Albanians, or Moroccans, or Tunisians were burglars, were criminals. In this case when Albanian is stealing from a Moroccan. I used the medium of photography because if you do a kind of action through the video you will definitely have a different direction. And photography is the only medium for this kind of project. So that is because that I believe that surviving way of showing life to the society, and talking bad about society, and being critical about the society I believe is the most powerful thing. This is the piece called Sweet Invasion (Fig. 4).

When I went to Tirana, I met one man who was in Tirana can he bring me to some places where the people, who for surviving, were stealing. And I went to one place where people were playing with the cards, and too much smoke. And I went to talk with them and I talked about the project and I wanted to photograph them smiling and laughing and it was real. And after that I went to Germany and I went to Hamburg and I went to two people who had to do with prostitution. But it's the reality of society, it doesn't matter east or west, in all countries of the globe. We never think about that, that somebody really steals because they want to live. In another context, I don't blame the thief if he steals something. I blame the person who doesn't take care of him.

S: I think irony is very important.

X: It's the best, irony, because with irony I truly believe that we can approach to very delicate issue. For example, the Police Station, you understand, it's a very complex issue of police and other institutions (Fig. 5). And you can make a mistake so easily because it's so delicate. And I used this kind of installation of making so warm, so agreeable for everybody, so welcome. In the end, the best critic that I had was the police who loved the piece. It was amazing for me that they could dream and realize the dream, because it's police who should defend people and not be scaring people.

On Responsibility

X: You see, we are reduced in minimum weight of value itself of freedom and individuality. We believe in a dream that we want to feel secure for our selfishness and that is the scary part. And we have the art and art I believe is the only thing that

can survive in this world. And of course, I always like to be more responsible for what I do.

S: Responsible is a keyword. For instance the prime minister is responsible for Japan, but what happens outside? So responsibility is always dealing with borderlines and boundaries. And this borderline, boundary is what he has to be responsible for. But in outside of Japan, war is going on in Africa, Kosovo ...everywhere. But the Prime Minister of Japan is responsible for Japan and he doesn't have to do anything for these wars. But is it true? The word responsibility means to respond, to respond to what is happening everywhere, but how can we do this ?

X: You want to know who was responsible in this world? Mother Theresa. I'm proud to live in this era and to know her. She was responsible. Only one person. When I talk about responsibility it should be more starting to be more critical with ourselves. Because it's very easy way of seeing. What I don't like is when you materialize your feelings, it becomes so easy. More difficult is when we have

a kind of unconsciousness of movement, of sharing, and it becomes more why I'm like this, why ... and you start to build yourself, and that is the healthy way of responsibility. This means he takes full responsibility for his actions so he knows what he is facing. And of course when I say that I believe that we have the example of Mahatma Gandhi, a new form of resistance. Non-violent resistance. England had to face this new phenomenon of passivity. Do you understand how powerful that is? Not necessarily to kill others. And you don't need necessarily to try to manipulate society using all the forms of violence, visual images, physical, all the things. You have just to be modest in the way of participation. So that is actually my approach. Use art to question what is relative, what is ambiguous to this society.

(Edited and translated by Sumitomo Fumihiko. This interview took place at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art Kanazawa construction office on April, 2002)

- (1) It is a project he proposed for the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art Kanazawa. Unfortunately it was not realized because of a technical problem.
- (2) The performance of Stock Exchange took place in Ljubljana.
- (3) His works collected by Walker Art Center are on the website : <http://collections.walkerart.org/item/object.html?id=489>