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A
GUN
For
EVERY
WOMAN

by Gentë Retkoceri

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A Gun For Every Woman

By Gentë Retkoceri
BA Architecture
BA Acting
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This thesis is a dedication to my grandparents

Fehmi and Hyre Hoxha

*Both were killed then burned in their own home
during the war with Serbia on April 18th 1999.*

*They died fighting for my community rights and today
they would've been proud that I am using activism
(activism through art)¹ to fight for women's rights.*

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Figure 1. Photo of the outcome

Abstract

Six centuries ago in Kosova, my home country, unmarried women known as sworn virgins, were forced to adopt a male persona and carry a gun to protect themselves. But today, guns have become tools of oppression and violence against women. And while the legal system carries penalties for domestic violence, marital rape is excluded.

To shine a light on, and expose the topic of hidden violence, my thesis uses activism to address a sensitive but provocative issue, exhibiting a large-scale sculpture of a gun, designed to provoke raw emotions; to challenge visitors to consider the terror felt by women threatened at gunpoint.

The sculpture incarnates trauma, and manifests gendered-violence concepts, asking how these weapons shifted from tools of liberation to tools of oppression.

Acknowledgements

To Zë Art Zako and Zana Indigo Soul, my two wonderful kids who, despite my absence, always showed love, smiles and warm hugs.

To my incredible husband Eki Rrahmani, without whom I wouldn't have been able to finish my studies of MFA. He used his intelligence, general expertise and wide knowledge to expand my paths and decisions. He drove me all around Doha; he supported me morally and emotionally; he read my thesis every time before submitting; he helped me in production, and most importantly, he posed in my pictures, which he hated but still did it for me.

To my lovely parents Abdyl and Xhemile Retkoceri who were scared to call me or message me because they would distract me from my work. They were trying to encourage me and keep me focused throughout my work. To my sister Artë Retkoceri, who helped me review my writing over and over again, and my brother Ylli for always pushing me to achieve a wonderful outcome.

To my mother-in-law Elhame Rrahmani who was willing to bring me Amazon replica guns from London all the way to Prishtina and then to Doha.

To my friend Sayuri Kurotsu who was the stylist, costume designer, set designer, prop designer in every single shoot that I did as part of investigations during my thesis process. She showed professionalism and expertise in her job and I believe that without her presence my thesis wouldn't have been as good as it is.

To my friend Edina Dober, who did wonderful photo shoots for my investigations and final outcome; she was ready at any time that I asked her help and showed a very supportive and collaborative attitude.

To my friend Katy Elia who brought her wonderful expertise as a make up artist for one of the investigation photoshoots.

To my friend Gabrielle Tesfaye, who used her expertise in painting and background as an artist to teach me how to illustrate, a very important part of my design work.

To my friend Tharwa Dalansi, who helped me shoot videos during my investigations, and was always willing to help me.

To my helpers Hasan Rrahmani, Horia El Haddad, Beth Waggit and Lara Chikhani for being able to experiment during my investigations with film and sound.

To my friend Ayah Elnour, who showed her interest and honest opinion on the design choices I made, which helped me a lot.

To Jeton Kulinxha who read my thesis and helped me edit and revise my writing.

To Edib Agagjyshi who helped me with indesign.

To John Otimi who helped me with the most difficult part of this project, assembling the large gun.

To Woodshop, Flexlab and IMS experts, Hala, Dana and Erika for their help.

To my first main advisor Maysaa Almumin, who in the first part of my thesis process gave the most wonderful push and I believe her introducing me to many precedents helped me make some very important decisions.

To my professor Robert Bianchi, who continuously referenced wonderful precedents to help me shape my writing.

To my professor Rab McClure, who was always willing to find solutions for every matter; I especially thank him for explaining Rhino over and over again!

To my professor Giovanni Innella, who during the first part of the thesis process, pushed me to use creative ways to approach the topic that I chose.

To my advisor Simone Muscolino, who gave me some very important directions for my film shoots and photo shoots.

To my advisor Astrid Kensinger, who expanded my knowledge by introducing me to more than 15 books related to performing arts and performative artists. She also brought very insightful and interesting topics for discussion.

To my reader Basma Hamdy, for constant support, who was always ready to help, came prepared with great energy and showed compassion and professionalism; Introduced me to many artists and authors, she directed me to achieve most of the final outcomes.

To my main advisor Marco Bruno, who played a very important role in the overall design of my thesis; he was available and willing to help at any moment. He used his creative and solution-finding expertise to help me build a strong concept and structure for the large-scale sculpture.

Introduction

The focus of the topic of this dissertation is the country known officially as the Republic of Kosovo. The names of this country follow two different etymologies. The first one relates to the word “Kosovo”, which in the Serbian language means “the field of blackbirds”². A second, older one traces back to the name “Dardania” an ancient territory of Illyria in the same geographical location as the modern country. The Serbian name “Kosovo” and the Albanian name “Kosova” appear to have evolved from “Cascova”, used for the first time in the 14th century, which later developed into the name “Cassovo Merlinus vel Casova” in 1766, and then finally into modern Kosovo/ Kosova forms, by the 17th century (Kepuska, 2009). The name Kosova will be used throughout the text.³

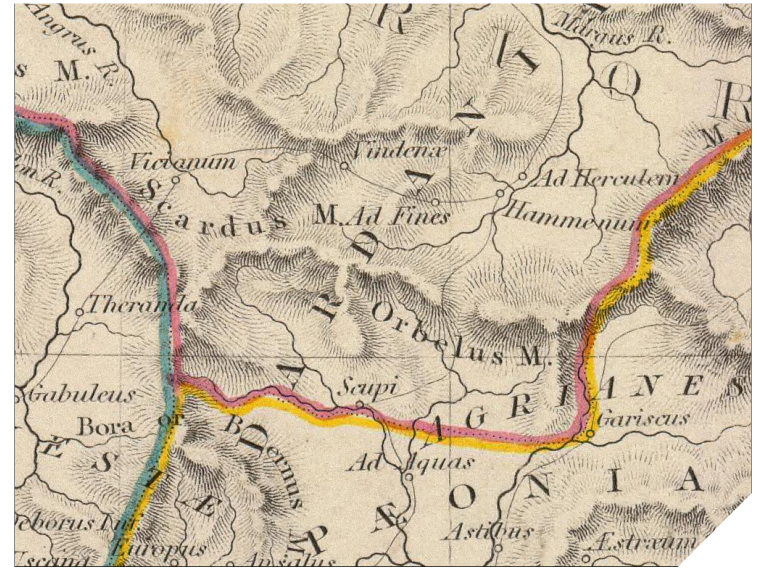


Figure 2. Dardania map from 1830

In 1912, when Albania got its independence from the Ottoman Empire, Kosova was occupied by Serbia right up right up until 1999, when it fell under administration of UNMIK (*United Nations Mission in Kosovo*). Both Albania and Kosova share similar traditions, some of which have negatively affected the lives and the rights of women for many years, and to this day, some traditions still cause trouble for them in both rural and

urban areas. Most of these backward traditions are rooted in patriarchal mediaeval laws.

To challenge this status quo, the main focus of this thesis is on highlighting gender inequality and raising awareness about violence against women, which will be looked at from the viewpoint of art.⁴

Gender inequality is a topic that is of paramount concern for individuals and organizations across the world, and remains an obstacle to achieving an inclusive and sustainable future. According to Women for Women International, one in three women say they have experienced physical or sexual assault. In addition, – 70% of all people living in poverty are women and girls. Further, only 22% of world’s political leaders are women. Consequently, women’s rights have been addressed throughout history in different forms including protests, art pieces, and books. Most of these approaches tackle specific issues like gender inequality, domestic violence, sexual violence and harassment, and workplace discrimination.

Sadly, violence against women is still a common practice in the world, and Kosova and the immediate region surrounding it is no exception. This type of violence can take many forms such as domestic abuse, societal abuse and even militaristic tactical abuse during wars



Figure 3. Women protesting in Kosova about a young woman who got murdered by her fiance

and conflicts, in which rape and torture are weaponized. For example, over the span of two years (1998-99) about 20,000 Albanian women were systematically raped by Serbian forces during the war in Kosova. Today, these women are stigmatized by the wider society as they struggle with the trauma of the war and are unable to lead a normal life and, in some cases, even find a job.⁵ Domestic violence is also prevalent in Kosova and in

most cases, women are murdered by their partners. Even though some of these women have sought help from authorities, their plight fell on deaf ears and they were not taken seriously. The search for a sustainable solution is not straightforward, especially when the problem is rooted in patriarchy and normalized across generations. In countries like Kosova, the issue of inequality between men and women is not just an issue of the past, it is still very much an issue of today.

The goal of this thesis is to examine and highlight women's rights in Albania and Kosova. It approaches the topic of women's rights through the lens of the traditional practice of the Burrëneshat, the so-called "Sworn Virgins". A sworn virgin is a person who is biologically a female, but has chosen to take on the social identity of a man for life. She takes a vow of chastity and wears male clothing in order to live as a man in a historically patriarchal society. This practice developed during the time of the Canon of Lekë Dukagjini (*Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit*), an archaic, patriarchal set of laws that began to be used mostly in Kosova as early as the 15th century.⁶ Sworn Virgins were permitted to carry out all the actions that men were entitled to, including carrying guns, smoking, and taking part in commonplace debates amongst other men.

A brief fictional anecdote describes a man who used to be a girl: Imran had a very long day that Saturday, he wasn't used to cutting that many trees for winter, but it was clear that the family was growing, his sister is having a new baby and Imran is the one who should take care of the family. He sat on a log and was contemplating life when he suddenly heard a gun shot, it was the exact same shot that killed his dad when he was just a little girl...

Problem Statement

Why the Gun?

"A Gun for Every Woman" is the title of this thesis. It was intentionally devised to imply multiple meanings. On the one hand, it communicates that there is a gun pointed towards every woman, and that this gun threatens women each day. On the other hand, this title demands that every woman carry a gun to feel empowered and safe. A gun isn't typically something one associates with women or femininity. However, an exception, perhaps, are the Sworn Virgins who have given up all markers and signs of femininity to align with a patriarchal society that assigns power to men. Is this the only way women can

protect themselves in Kosova today? How can women be seen and heard in their fight for equality and justice? When will the violence against them end?

The Russian playwright Anton Chekov states that whenever there is a gun in a play or film, you'll know that that gun will shoot, and someone's life will end.⁷ This tension builds

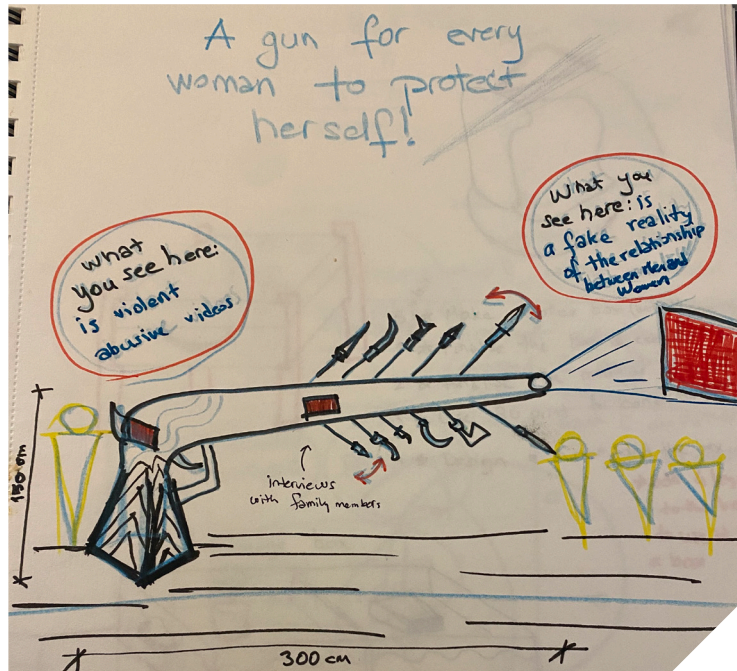


Figure 4. Early concept and idea, VCUarts Qatar, 2021

up in the viewer's mind, as they hold their breath until the scene is done. Through my work, I'd like to build upon these feelings of tension by placing the viewer both in the position of the person shooting and the person being shot. This thesis emphasizes the gun as a metaphor for violence and inequality. The work aims to immerse the viewer in a voyeuristic balancing act of dualities between perpetrator and victim. The large-scale sculpture of a gun works as a video booth, a place where the visitor is able to watch different video clips and visuals of women from Kosova, characters who do not feel safe and struggle with inequality on a daily basis.



Figure 5. Richard Roxburgh and Cate Blanchett in the Sydney Theatre Company's "Uncle Vanya."

Literature Review

Performing Arts

As a medium, the performing arts bring to attention different aspects where not only are the design and the visual plane important, but also the live energy of live performers.

My intention from the beginning was to either have a live performance or an interactive sequence which would allow people to be involved fully in the emotional and visual aspects of an experience. Performances are also informed by research and build a connection with reality, as can be seen in my investigations carried out in support of this work.

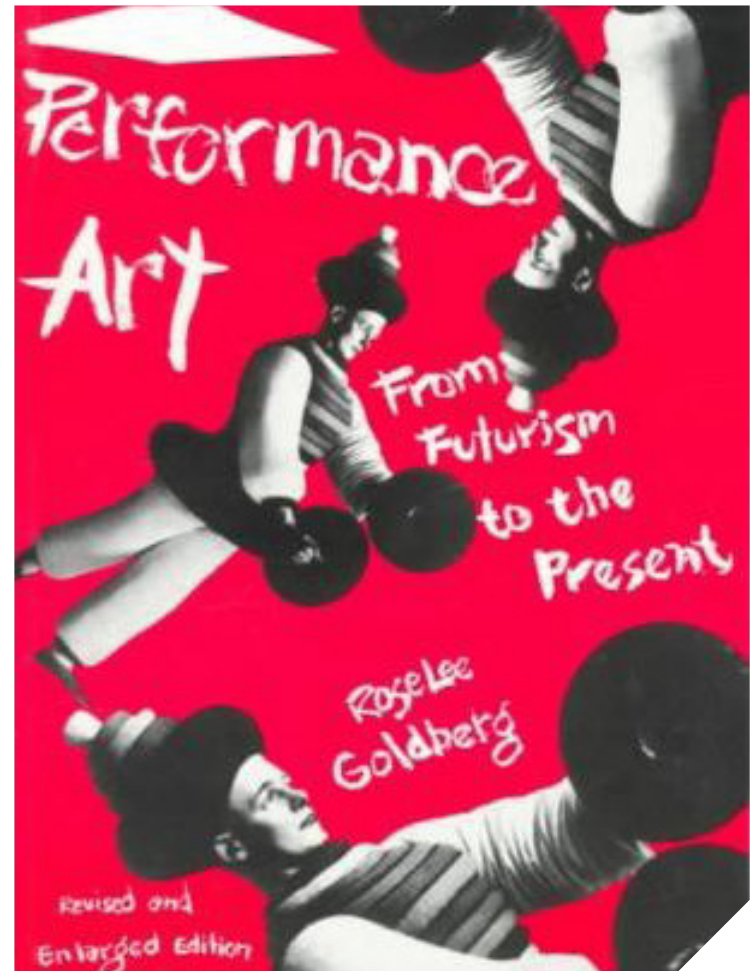


Figure 6. Performance art: From Futurism to present by Roselee Goldberg

RoseLee Goldberg, a pioneer in this field and author of the book, *Performance Art*, discusses how to activate the museum through performance, and argued in the first decade of the twenty-first century that 1970s had already become history and needed to be incorporated in the timeline of the contemporary art museum.⁸

Characters and stories

According to Golderg, unlike in traditional scripted theatrical performance, in a live performance, the performer is the artist. And this is the very goal of an artistic live performance installation; to position the artist himself or herself inside the research that is being made; to feel the struggle; to put themselves in a position where the performance gives information and conveys emotion through the live act.⁹

On the other hand, in scripted performances, roles and characters that are pre-written and the stories behind them are usually based on real life, or if not, they are usually stronger and more convincing when proper research has been done. Many such roles are awarded and critically acclaimed like Nicole Kidman portraying Virginia Wolf, or Mahershala Ali portraying Don Shirley in the *Green Book* film. These actors not only used their

imagination to fill in the missing information about these characters but they also based their characters and stories on a motivation, a problem, a situation that these real characters likely faced in real life.¹⁰

Through my investigations, I also played with characters based on real stories, drawing on my research of my traditions and history, which plays a huge role in how I approach the performing arts.



Figure 7. Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf in *The hours* film

Gender Performance according to Judith Butler

*The American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler states: "Our genders are not stable but are constructed through repeated actions. Rituals and performative actions constantly reinforce our identities: the act of wearing make-up, for instance, or dressing in female or male clothing fosters an illusion that we have a seamless and permanent male or female identity. Similarly, our mannerisms and behaviours work as learned micro performances that continuously signal our identity to ourselves and to others. Importantly, those gender-based cues can be learned or imitated from media products."*¹¹

In her writing *Performativity*, precarity and sexual politics, Butler argues that we are given a gender role before we even start developing our self as human beings. When a baby is born family directs them towards a specific gender role which is in line with political and social backgrounds. As a post-structuralist philosopher Butler also explains how there are sexual and gender norms that in some way condition what and who will be eligible and what and who will not.¹²

The theory of gender performativity not only covers the always acting subject or the incessantly repeating body also covers and addressed the social norms and somatic psyche and shows that the process of repetition is structured by a complex interplay of obligation and desire, both not one's own. When we act we act according to a set of norms and those norms set rules about how we will be treated at workplace or school according to the gender that we are raised to be.

On another note, Judith Butler believes that it is a performance to act like a man or a woman, which is similar to sworn virgins when they transformed from a woman to a man, and this is a key information to understanding better the position of women in Kosovo and in many cases the oppression they face. Especially since sworn virgins the moment they transformed they gained more rights into the community like being able to attend important meetings where only men were allowed to enter.

Women's rights in Kosova

Kanun of Leke Dukagjini

According to Swiss author Barbara Von Glutz, there are many traditions in Kosova that contravene the

emancipation of women and most of them are based on Kanun, - a set of traditional customary laws. The main trait of Kanun is that it imposes a “tradition”, – a set of rules, a patriarchal structure, - where men are expected to work in the field, while women are expected to take care of housekeeping chores and children. One of its main attributes, is that family property can only be passed on or inherited by the male line. This legacy renders the female lineage irrelevant to the family, so when a woman moves in with the husband’s family after marriage, all her assets and tools become the property of the husband and husband’s family or tribe. As a consequence of these rules, the Kosovar society was simply divided in two parts: men, - who had all the rights, and women, - who, - were de facto, without any rights.¹²

Albanians in Albania, in general, are secular in everyday life even though the majority are Muslims. There is a substantial Catholic minority in the north and an Orthodox minority in the south. Blood feuds have been one of the most discussed topics and matters deriving from Kanuni i Leke Dukagjinit. This is mainly because they have motivated and encouraged hatred among diverse families and tribes, and very often stopped men from engaging in everyday life activities.¹³

Laws deriving from “Kanun” regulate day to day social issues including marriage, hospitality and the resolution of inheritance rights in livestock and property, but in general Kanun is notorious for its rules and regulations with regards to homicide and male blood feuds.



Figure 8. Postcard image of Lekë Dukagjini produced by Studio Marubbi



Figure 9. Lume 2011 A sworn virgin shot by Jill Peters



Figure 10. Haki 2009 A sworn virgin shot by Jill Peters

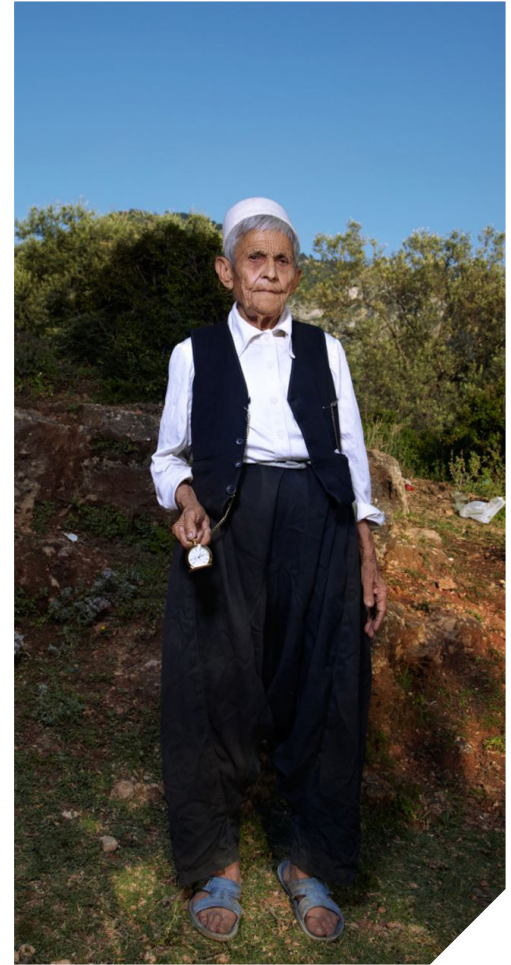


Figure 11. Qamille 2009 A sworn virgin shot by Jill Peters

Sworn Virgins

A peculiar bylaw is observed under the Kanun Law according to which biologically-female women are allowed to decide to live as men under specific circumstances, usually when a family's male heir has died or does not exist. In some cases, the family or the tribe decides on behalf of the woman that she must live as a male, without even consulting her. These women, now seen as men in the eyes of the community, were known as Sworn Virgins. Most frequently this resulted from years of ongoing hostilities where families were losing men continually due to the high number of blood feuds, and in cases where there were no more men alive to save the honour of the family or tribe, women were then left alone to represent the family. "It is against this background of re-traditionalization that, with the frequency of male deaths, women can still elect to become honorary males and, declining marriage altogether, inherit and act as heads of households—as 'sworn virgins'".¹⁴

In that sort of scenario, women could become sworn virgins in two different situations: as an adolescent girl that refuses to take part in an arranged marriage, swearing perpetual virginity, or in another case when there was no heir – meaning no son in the family.

The father would need an heir, a male to leave their property to, so the woman would become a sworn virgin and the master of the house at the same time. These women that became men, transformed completely - a transformation that later is described not as a big surprise according to Judith Butler.

Sworn virgins wore men's clothes, cut their hair short, were allowed to socialize with other men, could start smoking, but also kept a pocket watch and a gun with them to add to the male attire. Over time, they developed and had entirely male gestures and body language.¹⁵

According to the Dutch scholar René Grémaux "Even though the virgins take part in the blood feud, there is no debate as to whether it is proper to kill them: I found no-one with recollections of such an event."¹⁶

How has the process of empowering Women developed in post-war Kosova?

One of the highlights of this thesis is the strong correlation between Sworn Virgins and women's rights in Kosova today.



Figure 12. Painting a mask of the Kosovan's brides, VCUarts Qatar 2021

During the war years in Kosova, from the first flares of the conflict in 1997 to the full-frontal war and NATO intervention in 1999, there were about 20,000 women who were subjected to systematic rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. In the course of the Balkan wars in 1990s, traditional patriarchal gender norms were reinforced throughout the region, and as a result, the role of women in society was heavily stigmatized.

In addition, the wars created an environment where employers were less likely to employ women and in turn this created a high level of inequity.¹⁷

According to Sepna Desai and Melissa Perry, American authors of 'Tracking Gender-Based Human Rights Violations in Postwar Kosovo', the legal system does contain certain codes about domestic violence but marital rape is excluded from that protocol. When addressing gender-based violence,

Desai and Perry explain how even though urban women in Kosova have the advantage of being able to obtain an education and have a professional life, they still face difficulties because of the way Kosovar life is structured.

This comes as a result of the fact that, after marriage, the main form of social support comes from their extended family, and most women would not be willing to threaten its cohesiveness by reporting abuse to institutions.¹⁸

Male relatives are the main protectors of woman against violence in general, which results in an environment where violence of men against women is not really challenged in the Kosovar community; furthermore, even if a woman speaks up regarding this matter, she may face isolation or blame. Many women, survivors of domestic violence, from both urban and rural areas may resist disclosure, because they face denied economic opportunities, which leads to more financial constraints. Women who speak up are rarely able to enjoy a normal, independent life outside of the traditional structure.¹⁹

Precedent studies

Themes of violence, performativity, and the exploration of gender roles are present in the work of a number of contemporary artists and designers. I have selected the precedents outlined below for their connection to various aspects of my project. Their attempt to involve the audience in explaining a social phenomenon through a design or a video content, has inspired me to portray the main topic of this thesis.

Since the mid-1960s, American artist and curator Dan Graham, has been producing a body of work that functions as a sustained phenomenological inquiry into architectural space and time. He has always put a piece of performance in his projects, either by using mirrors, audio and video content, or other designs

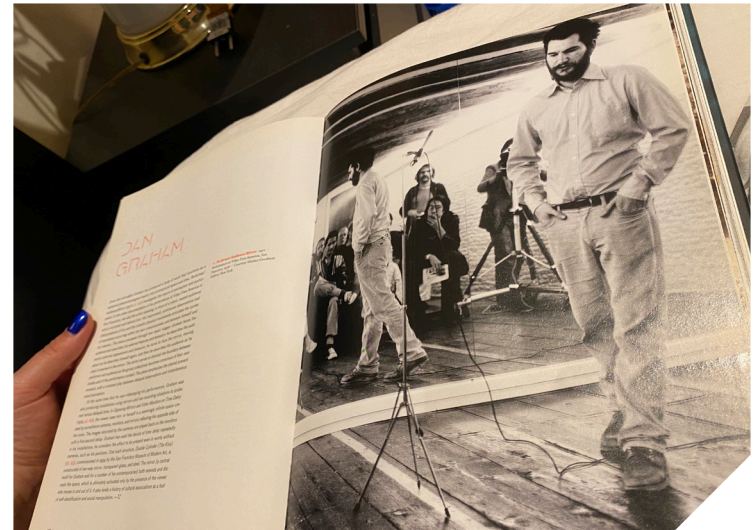


Figure 13. The art of participating, Dan Graham, VCUarts Qatar 2022

that would function as part of the performance. One such case is his project “Performer/Audience/Mirror” where he investigates the nature of perception and participation.²⁰

The artist, Marina Abramovic, has made a huge impact in the world of postmodern art with her installations and live performances. One of the most interesting aspects of her work is the way she puts the visitors and the audience, in

an uncomfortable position. This is done to a point where they end up participating in the performance just by being present as a viewer, and also by participating in the emotional rollercoaster it provokes.

In her performance “Rhythm 0,” which is one of her most extreme performances, she also uses guns, knives and a variety of dangerous objects. During the performance, she harms herself in front of the audience, something that I find immensely extreme and at the same time exceptionally complex. Although these ‘extreme’ examples in her work may be disturbing, in her performance, the ‘extreme’ was justifiable. This extraordinary way to communicate makes her work as an artist very unique.

Her other work “Rest Energy” done in 1980, uses a similar tension and danger where she and her longtime partner Ulay act by using an arrow which points towards her body.²¹

“Following her first experiments with confrontational sound installations, such as ‘Zvučni ambijent rat’ (Sound Corridor War, 1971), – a corridor of ear-splitting machine-gun fire, her early performance works, while equally provocative, worked directly with her own

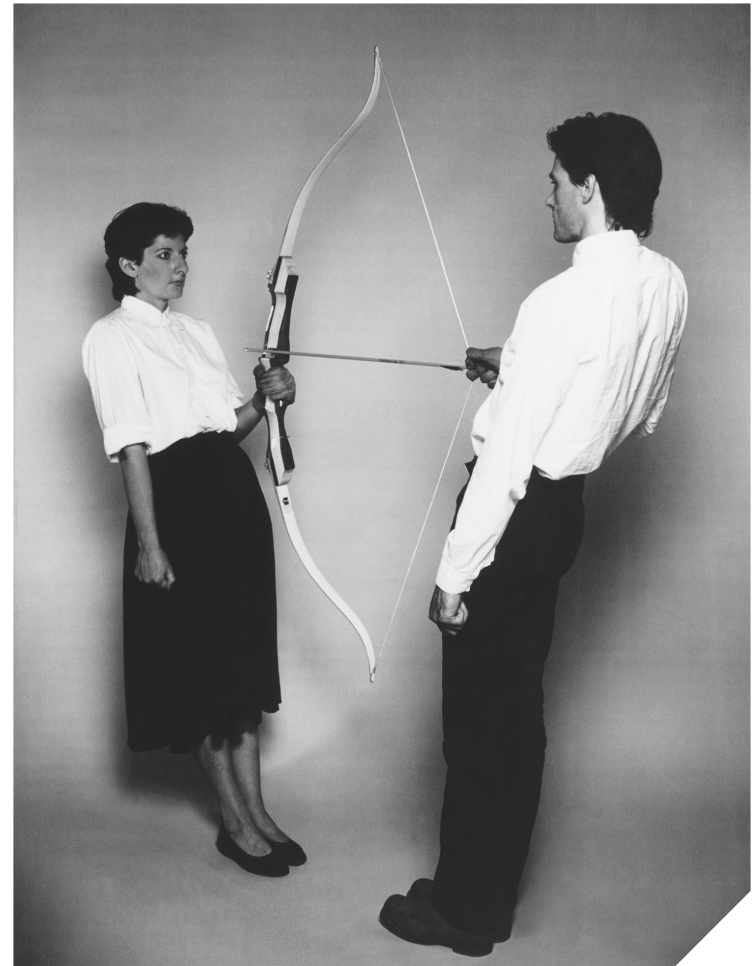


Figure 14. Rest Energy performance by Marina Abramovich

body. The first in the series, *Rhythm 10* (1973), uses knives hitting a surface to create a complex rhythm and a heightened sense of risk. When Abramovic first performed this piece at the Edinburgh Festival in 1973 she did so using ten knives."²²

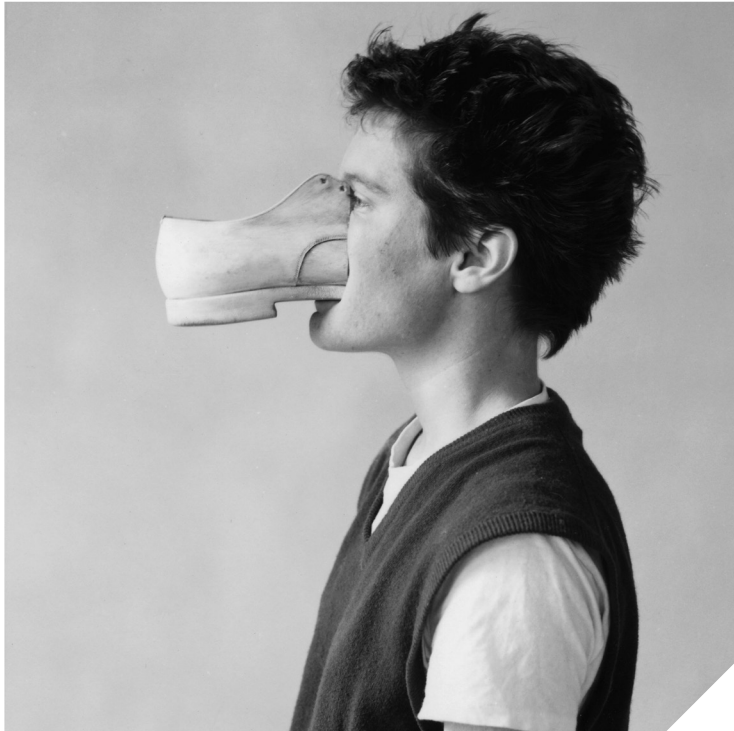


Figure 15. Ann Hamilton, *Body Objects*

Live performance is important because it allows the artist to forego their isolated position in relation to the audience. The participation of the audience on the other hand allows the viewer not only to appreciate the art but also to become part of it.

Another relevant artist to this thesis is Ann Hamilton and the project *body objects* she conducted between 1984 and 1991, in which she used objects that were attached to her body either completely merging with her skin or placed on her body parts. Hamilton's work has directly inspired me to think about guns and other domestic objects.²³

In addition, the work of Alia Farid a Kuwaiti visual artist, displayed in "*In Lieu of What Was*" in 2019, tries to portray economic development, history and material culture, as a form of visualizing the ecological crisis in the Arabian Gulf, which is done in a subtle yet very convincing form using large scale sculptures. In a similar form, the display of this thesis will attempt to visualize the matter at hand, by bringing the reality of violence towards women in Kosova, closer to the audience, creating an opportunity for the audience to observe and sense the issue through large scale design.²⁴



Figure 16. Alia Farid, In Lieu of what was exhibition

American sculptor and performer Chris Burden with his project "Shoot", an 8 second video footage, filmed in 1971 when the artist was only 25 years old, has shocked not only me but the whole world. For this performance, Burden had one of his friends shoot him in the arm with a gun. He survived the performance but the small audience in the F Space

gallery in Santa Ana observed and witnessed the shot.

This performance is a very good precedent to learn from in terms of the risks and dangers that can occur in live performance art. It is worth noting that for this thesis, no physical harm is caused.²⁵

Investigations

INVESTIGATION #1

Interviewing

I have conducted a few interviews that are worth mentioning and many others that helped my project indirectly. These research interviews were done face to face.

I decided that my face-to-face interviews should start with the history of gender inequality in Albania, the importance of family, and the importance of honour. This was more or less a tradition breakthrough and my first instinct was to ask my parents Abdyl and Xhemile Retkoceri: What did women do historically? What did men do? What objects did they use? This will be explored during the third investigation: Objects.

One of the interviews was with Brikena Avdyli who is the Executive Director of the Jahjaga Foundation, an organization that works for women's rights in Kosova. Ms. Avdyli was asked if she could provide a list of women who were murdered by their partners. She was able to provide a list of 100 names of women who were killed by their partners in Kosova in the past 15 years. The list is also published in the local media on Kultplus.com.

Another question was: how are the women in Kosova becoming empowered today? She was able to share projects that Jahjaga has been doing to empower and support women in Kosova. One example is magazine Za. Another is the One in three fashion brand. Both of these initiatives depict the qualities of women in Kosova and support them by promoting them and encouraging them to work.

The other interview was with G.K., the father of D.K., a woman murdered in 2011 by her husband after their separation. The interviewee requested to remain anonymous. During the interview I asked these questions: Why did your daughter's ex-husband murder her? Has he ever gone to jail for this? How did it happen? Where did the murder take place? Did you ask for protection from the public institutions before the

murder occurred? Were the police involved before the shooting? G.K. provided the following:

At that time, she was 27 and wanted to divorce her husband because of the continuous (continual/frequent/regular) violence, the process took some time, so she went to live with her parents. Although separated, her husband followed her to her workplace and insisted that they talk even though she refused; that's when he pulled out a gun and killed her in the old part of town in Prishtina. Just one week earlier, she and her family had requested an emergency restraining order for her ex-husband from the police, but they didn't do anything. The murderer never went to jail for the crime; he left the country and it is believed that he is living as a free man in Spain.

INVESTIGATION #2

Performance/Artivism

For this investigation, I used performances and documentation in order to sensitize an audience to a social problem and social injustice, in other words, Artivism (*activism through art*). One of the strongest ways to express my art is through mixed media involving video, sound, light, and design. This is why

during this investigation I experimented a lot with these elements and to some extent I feel that this gave me the answer to many questions about methodology that were raised through my research.



Figure 17. Photoshoot of Half gun half domestic objects in VCUarts Qatar, 2022

Experiment 1: This is a video where a man and a woman were asked to look at the traditional women's and men's objects and react towards what they saw. The expressions are different depending who is watching and what they are watching. Next, the man and the woman were asked to describe these objects.

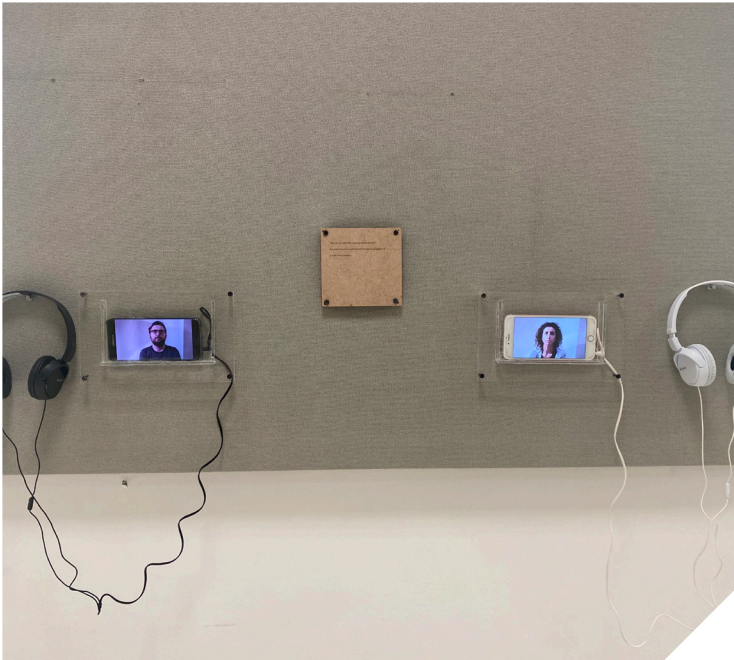


Figure 18. Exhibition 1 in Studio 3, VCUarts Qatar, 2021



Figure 19. Character 1 Sworn virgin, VCUarts Qatar, 2021



Figure 20. Character 2, A housewife, VCUarts Qatar, 2021



Figure 21. Character 3, A bride, VCUarts Qatar, 2021

Performance 1: I chose three Albanian women as characters all of whom used a gun during the performance. The performances were conceptualized and scripted as an improvisation.

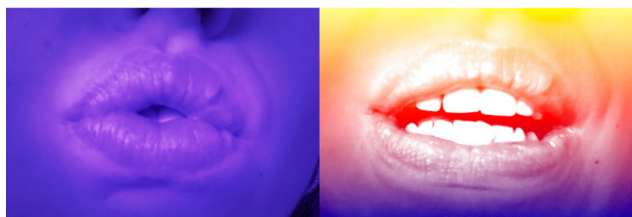
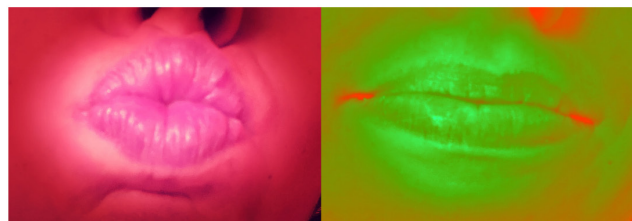
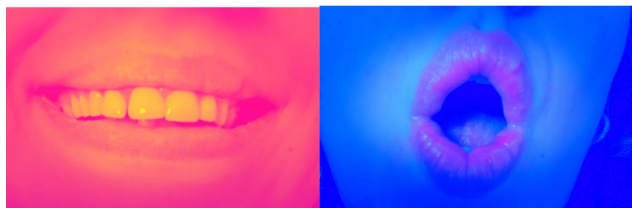
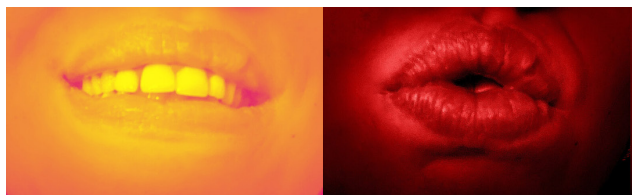
Character 1 is a sworn virgin who is eligible to use the gun. She is acting like a man and is playing with a gun, while pointing it towards the camera.

Character 2 is a housewife who is using Tpia, one of the objects that only women use and then there is a man pointing a gun at her.

Character 3 is a bride whose face is completely covered with paint, and she uses the gun as a suicidal act to protest her arranged marriage.

Experiment 2: Playing with sound where an Arab lady was asked to sing a song where the women are objectified with very sexist lyrics; a British woman was asked to read words that describe women in a very misogynist way; and an Albanian woman was asked to describe her everyday life. In all three cases, these participants ended up depicting women in a very negative way, even though all three participants were themselves women.

This experiment highlighted how the struggle of women in Kosova acts as a microcosm of the issues women face all around the globe regardless of culture.



INVESTIGATION #3

Objects

During the interview with my parents Abdyl and Xhemile Retkoceri, I realized that there are some objects that are only used by women and then other objects that are only used by men, and it is considered inappropriate to mix these objects or have the opposite sex use them.

For example, many decades ago, a woman would use the traditional butter churn in the kitchen and it would be unacceptable for a man to churn butter in this way.

In a similar manner, men using a gun or a plis (*traditional Albanian white felt hat*) was acceptable only for men, even though Shote Galica (1895–1927) who was a heroine in Kosova, was one of the rare women who wore the plis at that time.

Below are objects that only women used to use. These objects traditionally and historically had a use by a specific gender but today you can see them being used by both genders.

Figure 22. Video and sound experiment Exhibition 3, VCUarts Qatar 2021

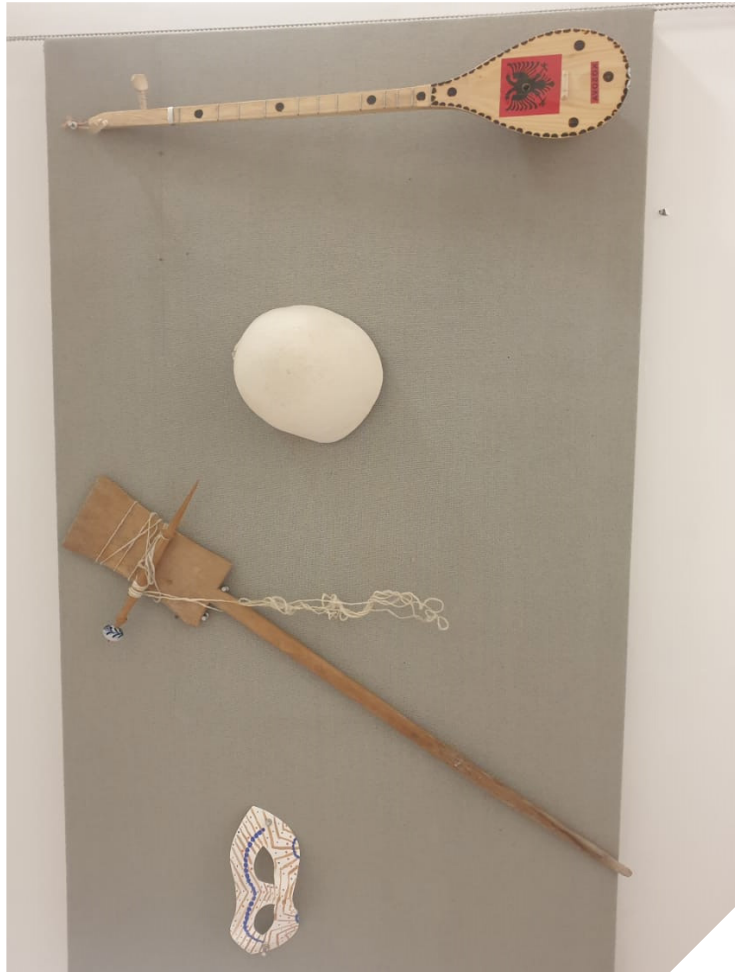


Figure 23. Traditional Albanian objects, Exhibition 2, VCUarts Qatar, 2021

Objects that only men use include:

- ***Plis*** – a traditional white felt hat
- ***Xhamadani*** – A traditional jacket
- ***Shoka*** – A traditional men's belt
- ***Ciftelia*** – A traditional two-string musical instrument
- ***Pocket watch***
- ***Cigarette***
- ***Gun***

Objects that only women use:

- ***Scarf*** – Albanian women used to wear a red scarf on the head
- ***Xhubleta*** – A traditional women's skirt
- ***Tpia*** – A traditional tool for yarning wool
- ***White of mercury*** – a face cream that whitens the skin
- ***Butter churn***
- ***Rolling pin***

INVESTIGATION #4 Exhibitions

During the third semester in the class Studio III with Professor Giovanni Innella we had three mini-exhibitions where I experimented with videos and objects as means of understanding what might or might not work to support this project.



Figure 24. Professor Stella Colaleo, Exhibition 1, VCUarts Qatar, 2021

Exhibition 1 took place on September 2021 in which I used a laser cutter to laser objects that are part of my culture. I also created an interactive collage where the visitors could play with images. Part of this exhibition was also a performance experiment (see *Experiment 1*).

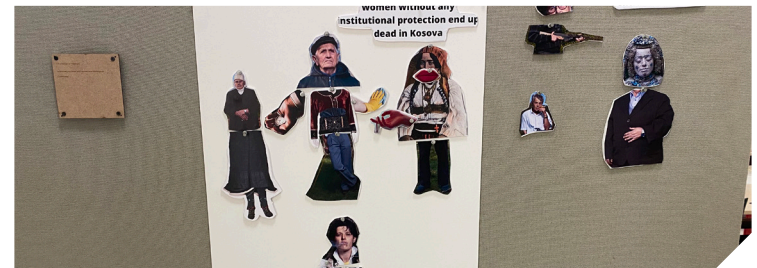
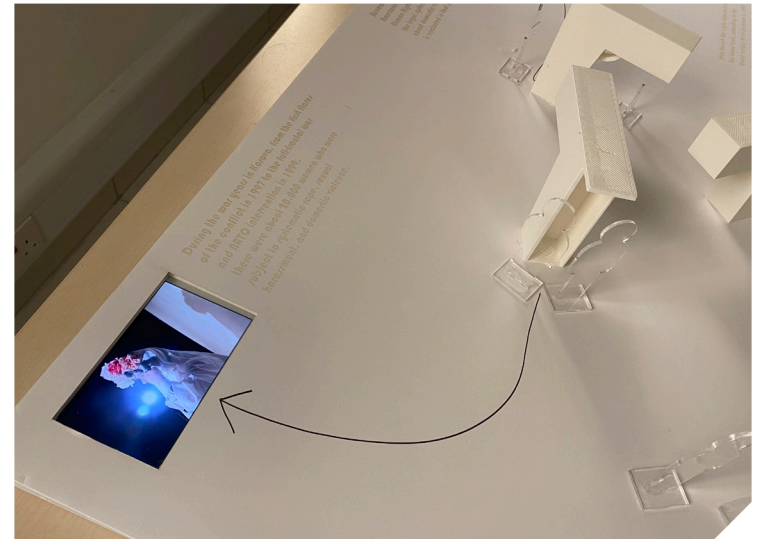
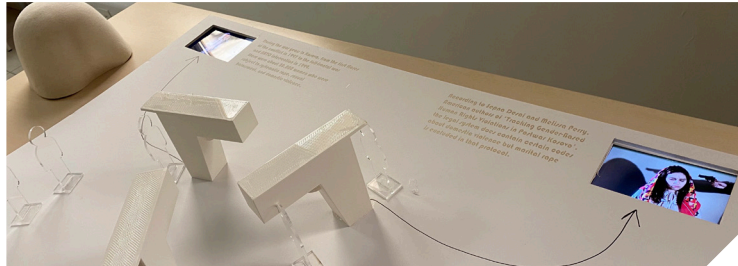
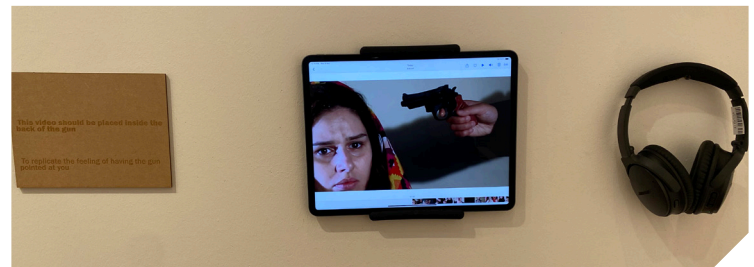
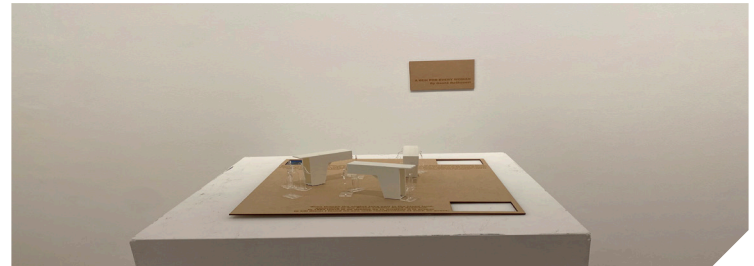
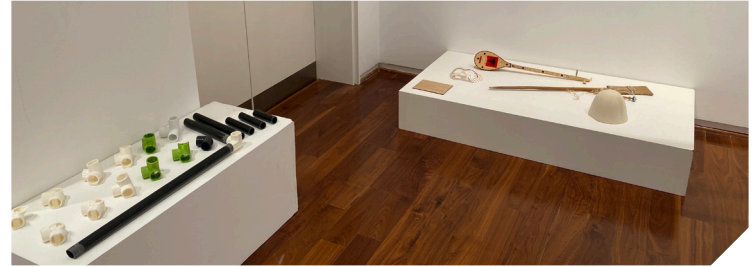


Figure 25-32. Exhibition 1, VCUarts Qatar, 2021

Exhibition 2 took place on November 2021 and it was the layout of a proposal for the final exhibition, containing 3D prints of three scaled guns and experimentation with videos as a performance in real time.



Exhibition 3 took place on December 2021, in which I build a large-scale gun with dimensions 3000x2000 mm made of PVC pipes that connected through 3D printed joints. Part of the exhibition featured two videos as well.



INVESTIGATION #5

Digital Fabrication

As mentioned above, I used 3D printing using PVC pipes to build a large-scale gun. According to Harvard Institution 3D printers are revolutionizing manufacturing by allowing users to create any physical shape they can imagine on-demand.²⁶

This was a process that was intense considering that I had to use more than 50 different joints and for each connection I had to design a specific joint with specific dimensions and angle. This was a very interesting investigation which helped me understand better the process of digital fabrication but also opened many other horizons for me to be able to use in future design work. PVC is a material that can be reused and recycled which made the project sustainable and less costly.



Figure 33. 3D printed joints, VCUarts Qatar, 2021

Figure 34. PVC pipes used to design, VCUarts Qatar, 2021

Figure 35. Sizes of 3D prints, VCU arts Qatar, 2021

Figure 36. Work process of Digital fabrication, VCUarts Qatar, 2021

Figure 37. Installation of the exhibition, VCUarts Qatar, 2021

Figure 38. Installation of the exhibition, VCUarts Qatar, 2021

INVESTIGATION #6

Experimental Design

This investigation started with some very simple sketches that merged guns with domestic objects, and objects that have a direct use on the body like lipstick, fork, blowdryer, etc. It was inspired by the Body objects by Ann Hamilton.²⁷ The intention was to create an interactive sequence where the visitors would be able to play with the gun and the attached domestic object part. I used 3D printing to form the attachment.

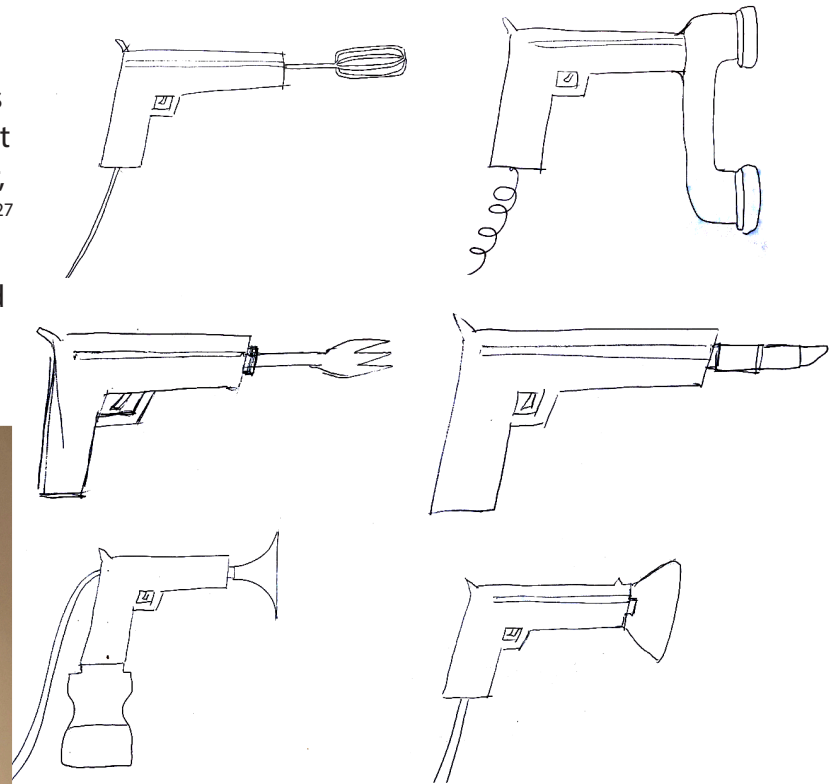


Figure 39. Sketches of 6 domestic objects that are 'gunified'

Figure 40. Applying 3D print as a connection of the gun and the spoon



Photographing the objects in different versions.

Figure 41, 42, 43. Test photoshoot using the objects (left)



Figure 44, 45, 46. Version 1 of the photoshoot, VCUarts Qatar, 2022 (right)





Outcomes

Liberation through performance art, objects and narratives creates an outcome where the audience can engage directly with the work and understand it more deeply.

Large gun

The main structure which is a large-scale gun was chosen because this is the object that everyone who has lost someone hates. The design is based on the model of a TT 9mm gun which is the most common gun amongst individuals in my country. It is an object that evokes fear. Therefore, I believe it will have the same effect when exhibited. In addition, my intentions are not only to show the gun but also to feminize it.

This is achieved through decorative illustrations and engravements across the outline of the gun, which makes it a beautiful object even though it still remains threatening. Wood is the material used for this object because it provides a strong structure holding the large sculpture with dimensions 2700x1750 mm. Wood was chosen for two reasons; first, because it is a strong material and second, it helps to feminize and create a softer version of the gun. The reason for feminizing the gun is because the gun is already scary and intimidating and having it painted in white with engravements will make it more endearing and nurturing.



Figure 47. Outcome of the large gun in the gallery, VCUarts Qatar, 2022



The decorative illustrations have the purpose of showing two different stories of women in Kosova and Albania and how guns have affected their lives. The illustrations are drawn cleanly and contain one line only. There are six bubbles that are trapped within blocks and which don't have enough room to change or to be flexible, which symbolizes the society in Kosova. Through the six bubbles on each side of the gun, a story is told. On one side there is a little girl with her father; later on, this same girl is promised in marriage to someone, but she refuses. Later still, all her male family members end up dead due to a blood feud, prompting her to become a sworn virgin; therefore, she carries the gun as an act of empowerment.

On the other side of the gun, another set of six bubbles depicts the story of another little girl who is dreaming about love, and later gets married and creates a family, but unfortunately, ends up murdered, shot by a gun.

The other function of this large-scale gun is to show two videos inside each end of the gun. These real-time videos, both around 10 minutes each, allow the visitor to experience fear and realize that a gun can be pointed at anyone.

Figure 48, 49. Outcome of the large gun in the gallery, VCUarts Qatar, 2022



Figure 50. Illustrations in each side of the gun

In particular, if the person who is holding the gun is violent and abusive, women are the ones who suffer mostly. The videos feature actual live performances as experiments based on the sworn-virgin phenomenon. The video starts with the title “Sworn Virgin” and a brief explanation of what it means, then a woman becomes a man, giving up her feminine side. She appears as a woman who performs the change of outfits. She

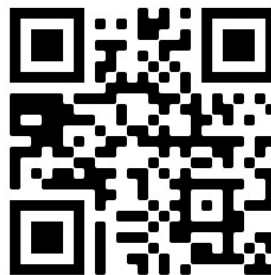
believes that she will continue the rest of her life as a man, and she will also carry a gun pointing it to the camera at the end. The video ends with a question: Is this a society where an intelligent woman has to carry a gun to feel empowered?

The other video shows a man who does the opposite. The video starts with the title “Opposite” and a brief



description about the intention of the experiment is included. The man does a live performance; he begins as a man and after shaving his face, he takes off his male clothing and puts on a dress, lipstick, and a wig; he is seen as a woman, because in that fictional universe, the Kosovar society is requesting him to look and act as a woman for the rest of his life.

The twist is that as soon as he is a woman, someone (*a man*) or the viewer attacks the the woman (*him*) using a gun. The video ends with the question: How would you feel if someone pointed a gun towards you, just because you look like a woman?



QR code to watch the video
Swon Virgins placed in the barrel
of the gun



QR code to watch the video
Opposite placed at the back
of the gun

Figure 51, 52. Video 1 placed inside the barrel, VCUarts Qatar, 2022.





Live performance at the opening

**Disclaimer:*

All of the performances have nothing to do with homosexuality, transgender or crossdressing as commonly understood in western society. They are purely based on research about Sworn Virgins in Kosova.

The videos that are shown inside the two ends of the large-scale gun, are result of a live performance which was documented in real time. Both performances were seen by a small audience including the backstage crew. However, in the official opening of the exhibition the performance was introduced to all visitors.

The performance took place at the VCUarts in Qatar Gallery. For ten minutes, a woman played by Gentë Retkoceri, becomes the opposite gender to express the intention of an experimentation as a research based on Sworn Virgins. Next, the woman who just cut her hair during the live act and became a man holds a gun towards the audience as a provocation, and at the very end she puts the gun on the floor and walks out.

Figure 53. 54. Objects used during the live performance



Half gun – Half domestic object

The second set of outcomes is a photoshoot showing visuals of a woman who is threatened by a gun. The gun is always held by a man's hand in six different images, and the gun itself is attached to different domestic objects that are 'gunified'. These objects are chosen because they are pointed towards a/the body of a human being.

Example: The blow-dryer is pointed towards the head, the phone is close to the ear and the head, the whisk is close to the abdomen and the body and so on. The purpose is to show that women who face abuse may die at any moment, no matter what they are doing.

Figure 55, 56. Gentë Retkoceri in the live performance during the official opening of the BFA+MFA exhibition, VCUarts, Qatar May 8th 2022.



Figure 57, 58, 59,
(next page) Figure 60, 61, 62.
Photos used in the VCU gallery MFA exhibition Figure



Gun fork – The woman is being fed by a man's hand with a gun that is attached to a fork and is directed toward the woman's mouth.



Blow dryer gun – The woman is seated and there is a man's hand drying her hair with a gun that has a blow dryer attachment on the end – aimed at her head.

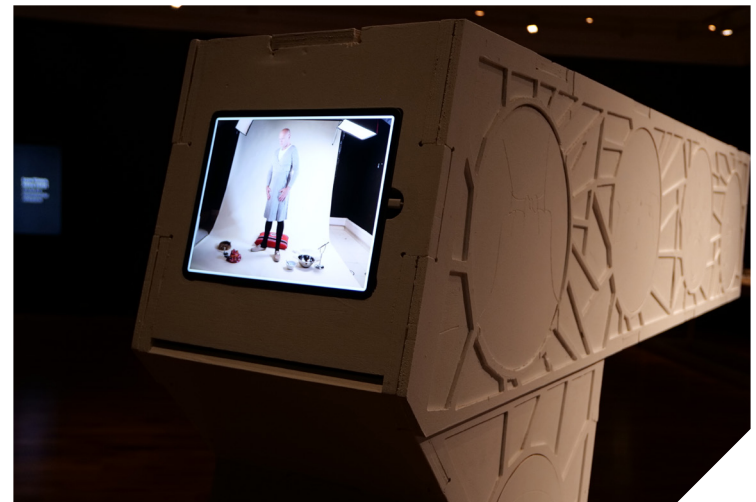
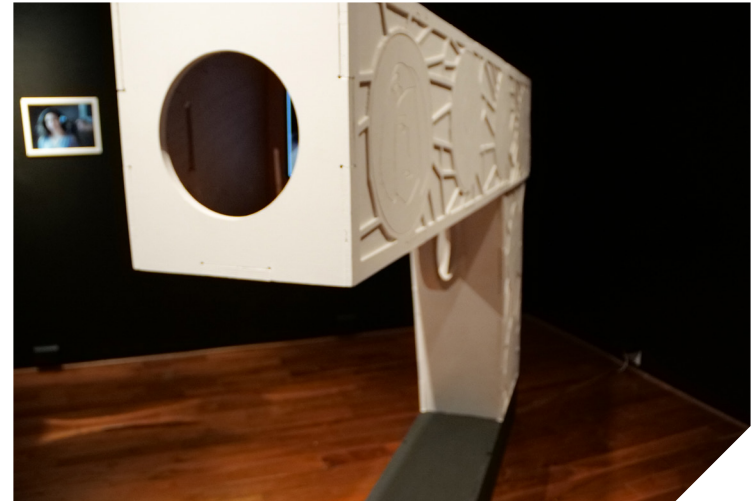
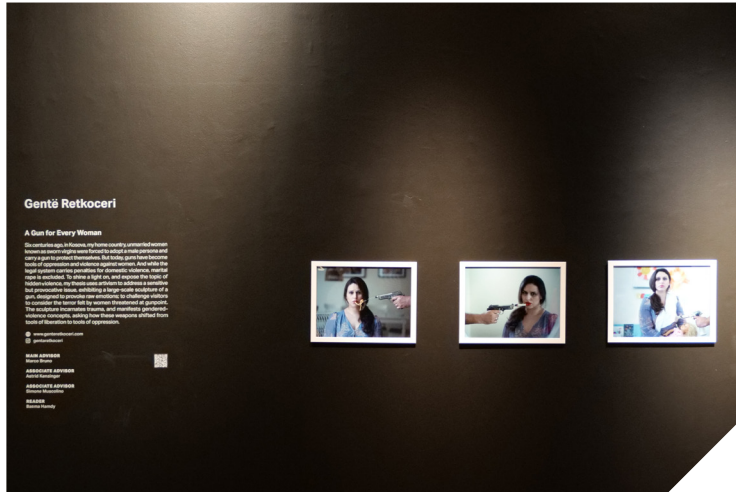
Lipstick gun – The woman is in front of the mirror getting ready and a man's hand is putting lipstick on her lips – The lipstick is attached to a gun and is aimed at the woman's mouth.



Breast pump gun – The woman is pumping milk from her breast. But a man's hand is holding the pump which is in fact attached to a gun and is aimed at the woman's heart.

Phone handset gun - The woman is speaking with someone on the phone. There is a man's hand holding a gun that is attached to the handset and aimed at the woman's head.

Whisk mixer gun - The woman is sitting holding a bowl on her lap. A man's hand is holding the gun which has an attachment of the whisk and is aimed at the woman's body.





Conclusion

When I started working on this thesis, I noticed that a great deal of frustration had accumulated within me over many years from all the stories that I had heard about injustices done against women in my country. Then, while researching, I came to realize that my country's repeated exposure to wars and suffering has affected how our society has developed. Fear has been part of the journey of Kosovars and Albanians for many years and tradition has been one of the things that has kept the society organized and helped it to survive.

I designed a large gun as a means of revisiting those traditions that have made my country what it is today. Next, I drew a parallel between these traditions and

modern life which, unfortunately for some women in my country, is a hellish experience. I also used photography to address violence with fictional objects, because photography is an easy medium to travel and is more easily travelable and perhaps more accessible to different target groups in various parts of the world.

Throughout the making process, I managed to improve my skills as a designer. I learned about 3D printing and CNC cutting machines (*Computer numerical control*).²⁸ I experimented with videomaking and I continually interviewed individuals and collaborated with several artists close to this field of enquiry. These and many other aspects of the journey have made my work complex. At the same time, they have touched upon a highly sensitive subject. But the main aim of the work remains to stimulate an honest conversation about where we are, where we could have been, but more importantly, where we will be. And yet, with so many people who are aware on one hand and, unfortunately, many more who are unaware, on the other, despite our advanced means of communication and the progress of various technologies, it appears we still have a long way to go to achieve our goals of a humanity guided by justice, fairness, and common decency.

I am tremendously thrilled that I used live performance at the official opening of the exhibition, which positions me as a multidisciplinary artist with a background in live performance. Also, this performance art approach is a first methodologically speaking for VCUarts Qatar. This project can continue to evolve as I plan to continue experimenting with similar ideas.

I believe this would be a useful way to continue to raise awareness and the trigger for positive change, and I also believe this work is relevant not only for the women of Kosovo but for all the women around the world as well who continue to struggle against domestic violence and the trauma of gender-based abuse.

End notes

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Figure 66. Pictures from the exhibition in VCUarts, Qatar, 2022
Figure 67. Pictures from the exhibition in VCUarts, Qatar, 2022
Figure 68. Pictures from the exhibition in VCUarts, Qatar, 2022
Figure 69. Pictures from the exhibition in VCUarts, Qatar, 2022
Figure 70. Pictures from the exhibition in VCUarts, Qatar, 2022



