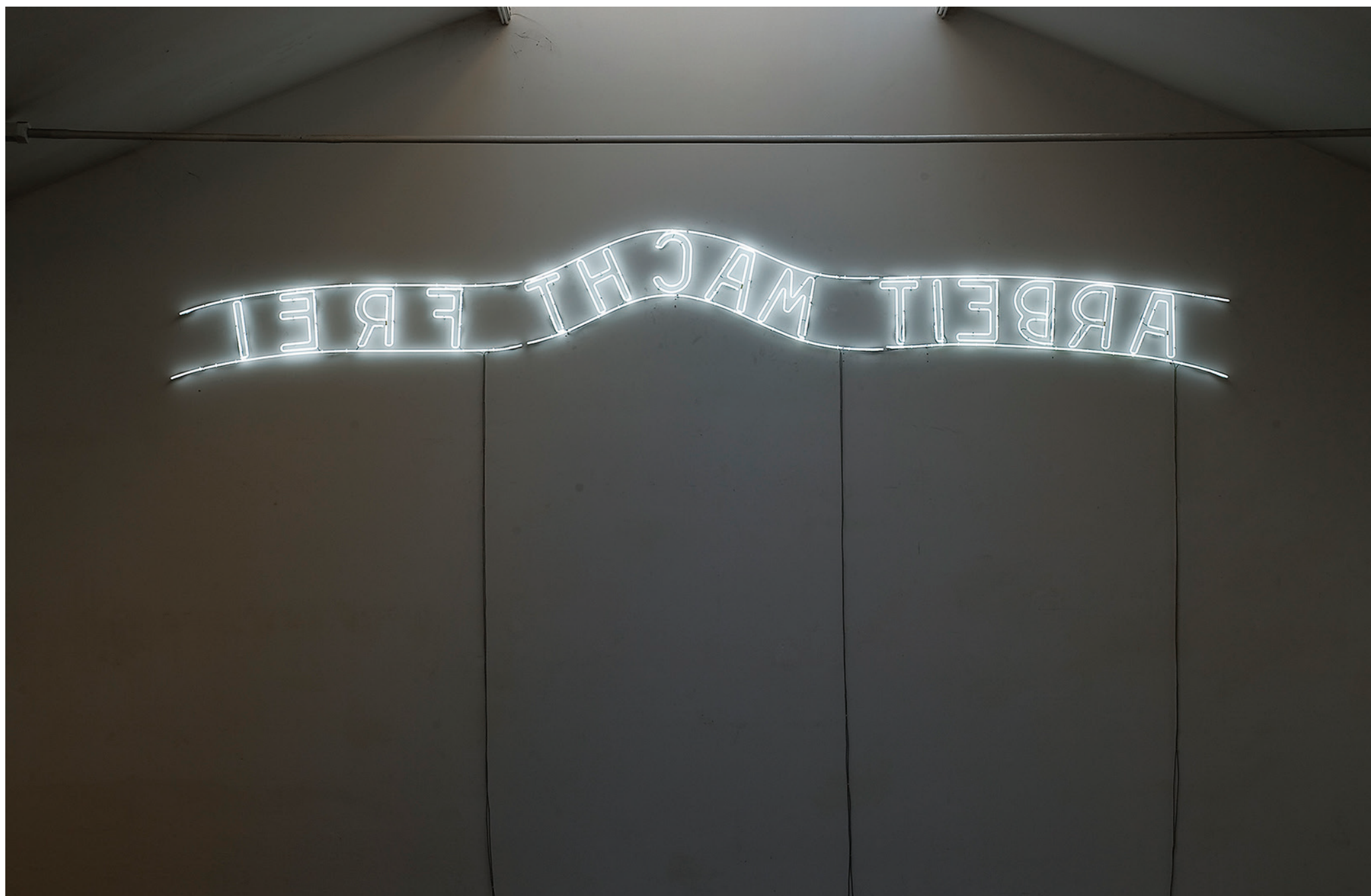


# MANIFESTO

GREAT WAVE



Armando Lulaj, *UNTITLED (ARBEIT MACHT FREI)*, 2010. Installation.

## Vulnerable Lives in Tirana

“Death Death Death.”  
Page 2

## These Are (Not) the Things We Are Fighting For!

“Rama’s attempts to  
integrate art and design  
... betray a totalizing  
impulse.”

Page 3

## How to Launder Art and Money through Waste Management Concessions

“Bribes, corruption, im-  
personation of officials,  
falsification of documents,  
tax fraud... the list is over-  
whelming. What I provide  
below is only the tiniest,  
simplified sliver.”

Page 5

## The Violent Curator

“My aim is to suggest  
this figure as a legitimate,  
necessary, and perhaps  
even urgent position of  
practice.”

Page 6

## Athens–Tirana

“Even revolution might  
fall short of our demands,  
for what it is necessary is  
to change life.”

Page 8

## Activating the Power to Desert History Itself

“We operate like ghosts  
within the Albanian art  
scene.”

Page 10

## The Last Socialist Realist Painting

“... is a reverse shot.”

Page 12

## Art as a Medium of Truth

“Given the anticipatory  
structure of Marco La-  
vagetto’s project, and the  
speed and efficiency with  
which it was repressed, I  
propose to read the hoax  
at the center of the first  
edition of the Tirana Bi-  
ennial by way of analogy,  
that is, as the primal scene  
... that structures the  
birth and development of  
Albanian contemporary  
art.”

Page 18

## How to Demolish a Cultural Monument for an Oligarch

“They were only found  
much later, alive.”

Page 19

## Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake

Page 21

# Vulnerable Lives in Tirana

## A Surveillance Poem

■ ATAOL KASO

Arab  
ASHK  
Neutral  
Astir  
Avni has talked to them  
Empty  
Brisku  
Jailbird (*derogatory*)  
They invested and they  
didn't fix this specific  
alley  
Stavrulla's husband  
In a foreign prison  
Switched off cellphone  
Lulzim (*Basha?*)'s cousin,  
but they don't speak  
Damage from the  
earthquake  
I'll think about it  
I'll negotiate  
Needs more work  
Needs accompaniment  
because sclerotic  
Need to meet them they  
don't vote imams  
Openly declares they're  
with PD when we tell  
them we call from PS  
Divorced (*woman*) doesn't  
care about voting  
Keeps vote secret  
Wavering (*woman*)  
Unstable (*woman*)  
Hung up screaming  
Deceased (*woman*)  
Unable (*woman*)  
Paralyzed (*woman*)  
Sick (*woman*) can't vote  
Is brought in by Lorena  
Is brought in by Sali  
Entire family with PD and  
are thinking of making  
a turn to our force, PS

Blind (*woman*)  
(*Woman*) disappeared 30  
years ago  
Could return to our midst  
Emigration  
Emigrant  
(*Female*) emigrant  
Seasonal emigrant  
Emigration  
Is indifferent  
(*She*) is unhappy  
(*She*) is happy  
(*She*) is sick  
...comes and goes  
...oriented by the party.  
Gramoz (*Ruçi?*)  
...not so positive  
...has expressed positivity  
Is sick, with dementia  
Is very sick with COVID,  
let's hope he makes it  
Kastrioti family  
Religious  
Religious Muslim  
extremist, does not  
come to vote because  
his religion won't allow  
it  
Fresku  
Greek  
Gray  
Gray, lives at Haway  
residencies  
Gray, Vaçe Zela  
Blood feud  
Madman  
Turned off  
Fiery (*man*)  
Unknown (*man*)  
Certain (*man*)  
Dead (*man*)  
Disappeared (*man*)  
Disappointed (*man*)  
Indifferent (*man*)

Ex-President of Kosovo  
Jehovahs don't vote  
They are in 1944  
We're negotiating  
They live in Fresku  
Has declared ambiguity  
Is mad at us because they  
didn't get employed  
Has gone  
Has passed away  
Has died  
Has died. For years has  
been a PD voter  
Has voted for the Chams  
Has unemployed daughter  
Needs motivation \$  
...they are annoyed  
Asks for legalization of  
apartment, while they  
at the legalization  
office  
Asks for meeting with the  
member of Parliament  
Haven't they left for  
Malta? (*repeated 11x*)  
Gone, house destroyed  
by the earthquake  
(*repeated 3x*)  
Las Vegas  
Lorena, uncertain  
Lorena says they're not  
coming  
Lorena says they're in  
Spain  
With mental disorders  
With religion  
With Jehovah  
With Kreshnik Spahiu  
With color, Roma people  
Renting  
Mexico  
Fine  
Fine  
Fine

Could vote for PS if the  
legalization deed for  
the bachelors' condo is  
approved  
They have given us their  
word  
Separated from life  
Is in Korça  
Not coming maybe, is  
with diapers, but we'll  
drag them by their  
clothes  
Wanted by the police  
In hospital  
Enrik's mother  
Rudina's people  
No comment  
Does not go out  
Does not live here  
Does not get out to vote,  
she's gone mad  
Does not want to talk  
Don't know  
Don't know  
Don't know  
Religion won't allow it  
Don't know who she is  
Doesn't walk  
Doesn't exist  
Not home  
Doesn't open the door  
Doesn't pick up the phone  
Promise not kept  
Legalization not done  
Totally uninterested in  
voting  
No one knows them  
Doesn't identify, is gray  
Not alive  
Not alive (dead)  
Does not live here  
anymore  
Doesn't talk well about  
the government  
Doesn't respond  
Didn't want to respond,  
no time  
Does not express themself  
They don't tell  
Door wasn't opened  
Doesn't come  
Imams don't vote  
Jehovah witnesses don't  
vote  
Don't vote for religious  
reasons  
Doesn't vote at all

Doesn't vote, paralyzed  
Doesn't vote 'cause he's  
old  
Doesn't vote, vulnerable  
Wife of ex-MP  
Wife of Dritan, Vladimir  
Wife works at the Prime  
Ministry  
Good opinion  
Poor opinion  
Or agricultural  
A bit  
Religious party  
Another party  
For Zef  
Our definition is correct  
Earthquake beneficiary  
Drinks  
Drinks  
Drinks  
Partially satisfied with the  
Rama government  
Old man in wheelchair  
Sick old people  
Old age  
Old age  
Old age  
But they don't vote  
Down the railway, but has  
not decided yet...  
Is affected by the Ring  
project  
Priest, doesn't vote  
Problematic  
Prosecutor  
Works in the Prime  
Ministry  
Works as painter  
Prison worker  
SHISH employee  
Refuses to speak  
Because is sick  
Because cleaning job was  
promised and didn't  
happen  
Serbia  
Excellent  
Extension  
Down Syndrome  
Meeting through Nexhi  
Damaged by the  
earthquake old lonely  
lady  
Let's hope we're in good  
health until April 25, as  
for parties, they don't  
interest us much

Repatriated  
Left  
Harrallamb must be  
contacted  
Left because of the  
earthquake  
Wavering  
Uncertain  
Annoyed  
Politically annoyed  
Confined at home (*blood  
feud*)  
Confined at home (*blood  
feud*)  
Confined at home (*blood  
feud*)  
Confined at home (*blood  
feud*)  
Confined at home (*blood  
feud*)  
Young  
Disappointed  
Earthquake  
Earthquake  
Earthquake  
EARTHQUAKE  
Tetraplegic  
Texas  
Just an emigrant  
Just an emigrant  
Was contacted and spoke  
terribly on the phone  
Was contacted by the  
delegate  
Girl  
Girl is campaigning...  
Depends on the job  
Dead  
Dead  
Dead  
Vietnam  
They vote but they don't  
tell  
Vulnerable lives in Tirana  
Lady has left this area  
after her divorce...  
The gentleman... did not  
want to tell his political  
preference he even  
threatened that he'll  
file a denunciation  
Switzerland ■ 2022

MANIFESTO is a multi-disciplinary project that brings together artists, filmmakers, academics, activists, architects, writers, publishers, journalists, translators, critics, curators, cultural theorists, and imaginary and real collectives, Albanians or not, to reflect on the current state of contemporary art in Albania and beyond, with the aim of provoking a "momentum" capable of breaking the current artistic and historical narrative by proposing an alternative. Given the current political and geographical state, this movement proposes itself as an antagonistic project and laboratory of

ideas in a territory where the neoliberal experiment fused with contemporary art is more evident than ever. Albania has not invented a great historical narrative, unlike many of its neighbors. Here, the conditions of modernism are still able to open up different possibilities for art, possibilities that can be developed without replicating situations and experiences that have already happened elsewhere. For several years, the MANIFESTO project has been analyzing and working on these particularities, through its first two editions *MANIFESTO Hijacking* (2022) and *MANIFESTO Desertion* (2023).

In this third edition, MANIFESTO comes as a *Great Wave* (2024–25), proposing a new movement in the visual, cinematographic, theoretical, and political arts: a movement that deconstructs the country's past along with its current neoliberalist consolidation, offering a critical retrospective outlook that focuses on social reality and proposes a new historical narrative of Albanian arts and society.

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MANIFESTO Newspaper no. 0  
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Copyediting and graphic design: Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei.  
Texts: Jonida Gashi, "These Are (Not) the Things We Are Fighting For" was first published by *Reporter*, November 29, 2015; Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, "How to Launder Art and Money through Waste Management Concessions" was first published by *The*

*Albanian Mechanism*, May 6, 2024; Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, "How to Demolish a Cultural Monument for an Oligarch" was first published by *The Albanian Mechanism*, June 3, 2024; Raino Isto, "Activating the Power to Desert History Itself" was first published by *Linking Art Worlds*, November 8 & 9, 2023.  
Printed in Albania in an edition of 1000.  
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# These Are (Not) the Things We Are Fighting For!

■ JONIDA GASHI

It is a truth universally acknowledged that contemporary art is fundamentally powerless vis-à-vis the status quo and unable to produce meaningful or, at least, long-lasting change. Of course, this does not preclude the existence of politically motivated artworks, though, on the flip side, the label “political” has possibly never been applied as liberally as it is today. Thomas Demand, Carsten Höller, Philippe Parreno, and Anri Sala would probably describe their work as “political” too, which would explain their otherwise unlikely involvement in Albanian PM Edi Rama’s project for the newest cultural space in Tirana, the Center for Openness and Dialogue (COD). In the context of this collaboration, Parreno and Höller produced two site-specific works, *Marquee, Tirana* (2015) and *Giant Triple Mushroom* (2015) respectively, which they donated to the Center, while Thomas Demand agreed to kick off the Center’s temporary exhibition programme. As for Anri Sala, he played a key role in bringing the whole project together.

As far as cultural centers go, the COD is unremarkable, apart from the fact that it occupies the first floor of the Prime Minister’s Office. Given its location, it is perhaps not surprising that the COD was inaugurated on the occasion of German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s visit to Tirana on July 8, 2015, with Thomas Demand’s most recent work in the exhibition in the entrance hall, *Sign* (2015) which symbolizes, rather conveniently, the “partnership between the people of the world by consumerism,” providing the backdrop to Rama’s and Merkel’s joint press conference on the day. As it happens, Angela Merkel’s visit to Tirana took place only a few days after the Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras

called a referendum on the bailout terms that the EU, and in particular Germany, were trying to impose on the Greek people. It meant that the topic of the Greek crisis would inevitably come up during the press conference, and come up it did. A local journalist asked Edi Rama whether the recent tensions inside the Eurozone had tempered the Albanian government’s enthusiasm to join. In his answer, Rama stressed that his government was more determined than ever to steer the country in the direction of EU integration, even at the cost of being considered “old-fashioned,” an unfortunate choice of words the sole purpose of which was to gratify Merkel and, by implication, extend the Albanian government’s modest support to the German government’s hardline stance toward the situation in Greece.

In the following weeks, as news about the COD began circulating on the internet and puff pieces started to appear in newspapers like the *Financial Times*, the artists representing Germany at this year’s Venice Biennial, Jasmina Metwaly, Olaf Nicolai, Philip Rizk, Hito Steyerl, and Tobias Zielony, along with a number of Biennial employees, hung a Greek flag emblazoned with the word “Germoney” over the inscription “Germania” at the entrance to the German pavilion. The gesture was intended as an act of solidarity with the Greek people and as a note of protest against austerity measures everywhere. Of course, the gesture was very modest, though quite loaded symbolically, and its impact on government policy was absolutely nil. At the same time, given the spectacle of the inauguration of the Center for Openness and Dialogue, it is difficult to imagine how even such a gesture would be permissible in Tirana’s newest cultural space. This raises a number of

questions about the relationship between art and politics today, specifically about contemporary art’s ability to function as an emancipatory force inside the spaces of power.

Edi Rama’s affair with contemporary art began in earnest fifteen years ago, when, having graduated from Minister of Culture to become the Mayor of Tirana, he began the project he is still most famous for: the painting of the façades of the socialist apartment buildings of Tirana. It is around the same time that Rama lent his support to the first edition of the Tirana Biennial, itself the brainchild of Italian entrepreneur Giancarlo Politi. In 2003, two of the curators of the second edition of the Tirana Biennial, Anri Sala and Hans Ulrich Obrist, decided to invite Olafur Eliasson, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Liam Gillick, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, to each design the façade of one of the socialist apartment buildings. Much in the same vein, in the context of the fourth edition of the Tirana Biennale in 2009, curators Edi Muka and Joa Ljungberg invited Franz Ackermann, Tomma Abts, Ann Edholm, Per Enoksson, Tala Madani, Adrian Paci, and Helidon Gjergji to contribute to the project. Needless to say, the association with the Tirana Biennial helped to give the façade project more exposure, particularly among art circles, as did Anri Sala’s *Dammi i Colori* (2003), a sixteen-minute video projection that was first shown at “Utopia Station” at the 50th Venice Biennale.

*Dammi i Colori* is structured like a conversation between Anri Sala and Edi Rama in the back of a moving cab, where the latter can be heard commenting on the façade project as images of Tirana pass before our eyes. Jacques Rancière has discussed the work in *The Emancipated Spectator*, comparing Rama’s

post-communist project to the dream of the Russian avant-garde of “an art directly involved in producing the forms and buildings of a new life,” and praising Sala’s work for using the “distant” art of video to question the kind of politics of art that attempts to “fuse art and life into a single process” (2009, 78). We can, of course, question the extent to which *Dammi i Colori* represents, in fact, a cool reflection on Rama’s initiative, or “political art” in general for that matter, but the more interesting question is why so many other artists, curators, critics, etc., participated in and supported the façade project as well throughout the 2000s. The comparison between Rama’s project and that of the Russian avant-garde is fitting here, for just as the artists of the Russian avant-garde enjoyed for a time the support of the Soviet authorities, so the artists, curators, critics, etc., who have collaborated with Edi Rama on various projects, from the façades to the Center for Openness and Dialogue, have been afforded an extraordinary degree of access and support. This

instead, since as a politician he makes decisions that shape reality on a daily basis. Moreover, the possibilities are potentially endless and the façade project is but an example of what can be achieved. This is especially true today, now that Rama is Prime Minister.

The fact that Edi Rama is sympathetic to the plight of the contemporary artist who seeks to not merely criticize the status quo but also change it, as well as the fact that he himself does have the power to change the status quo, is probably what makes him so attractive to artists, curators, etc. – foreign ones in particular, who have no real understanding of Albanian society or politics. The support Edi Rama has received from powerful members of the art world, such as Hans Ulrich Obrist, may in turn explain why he has never had to develop what might pass for a policy or set of policies for the arts and culture. As a consequence, two years after Rama’s government took office, the most important arts and cultural institutions in Albania are still in a dire state. In

also because the spaces in question stayed open for very short periods of time (only a few days usually) and the events taking place inside them were organised hastily.

This is not to suggest, however, that Edi Rama has not used art politically, for he certainly has done so throughout his political career, most consistently in conjunction with *design*, broadly understood. The façade project, for instance, is an urban design project in the first place and then an artistic project. Already when this project was still underway, it made no sense to think of the contributions of the artists as actual works of art (hardly any one does in fact, least of all the residents of Tirana), and it was impossible to distinguish between the handful of designs that the artists were responsible for and the rest of them. This is truer than ever today, since many *new* constructions in Tirana now feature colorful painted patterns on their façades, and the trend has spread to other cities as well. Additionally, the façade project could only take place in the context of Edi Rama’s campaign



Rirkrit Tiravanija, Site-specific installation for *Tirana Biennale 2*, 2003.

kind of access and support is as unusual today as it was at the turn of the last century, and the fact that Edi Rama was (is) an artist himself is frequently offered as an explanation. Rama discusses his decision to give up painting and move into politics in *Dammi i Colori* as well. What we take away from his narrative is that Rama is all too aware of art’s fundamental “uselessness,” so much so in fact that he decided to stop practicing art altogether and start practicing politics

the meantime, there have been several misguided attempts to use contemporary art as an interface between Albanian society and the country’s difficult communist past. Specifically, art exhibitions have been set up to mark the opening to the public of spaces closely associated with the communist regime, including Enver Hoxha’s official residence in central Tirana. Needless to say, these turned out to be encounters from which neither art nor history benefitted much, in part

to transform Tirana’s cityscape, by demolishing the countless kiosks that had sprung up (illegally, of course) in the city center after the collapse of the communist regime in 1990, while simultaneously signing off on countless planning permissions that transformed Tirana into what many of its residents describe today as a “concrete city.” The Center for Openness and Dialogue is also a design project first and foremost. It marks the completion of substantial renovation work that not



only goes beyond the first floor of the Prime Minister's Office where the Center is located, but actually started out in the upper floors of the building, which are not accessible to the public, and in the surrounding grounds, where the transformation of a car park facing the back of the building into what looks like a miniature golf course is perhaps what stands out the most. For the doubtful, it suffices to examine a picture album uploaded on Edi Rama's Facebook page titled "Images that Speak for Themselves" that follows the logic of "before and after" advertisements for weight loss, hair loss, cosmetic procedures, and the like (Rama 2015a). For the more curious, there is a time-lapse video of the entire process as well, which looks like a sophisticated advert for an architecture studio or an interior design firm, and where the works by Demand, Höller, and Parreno which appear toward the end of the video assume the questionable status of "finishing touches" (Rama 2015b).

Now, design, in contradistinction to art, is useful. That is, design serves a practical purpose, usually to make "things" more attractive or more appealing to the user. Art, on the other hand, serves no such practical purpose. For instance, painting the drab façades of the socialist apartment blocks of Tirana with bright colors made these buildings more attractive for the people living and working inside; it also made the streets in which these buildings are located more appealing and thus helped improve Tirana's urban landscape as such. By contrast, Anri Sala's *Dammi i Colori* serves "merely" as an object of contemplation – contemplation of the relative success or failure of the façade project, among other things. Similarly, at the Center for Openness and Dialogue, even if we accept that it was founded so as to bring the institution of the Prime Minister's Office closer to the people and not only to make this particular Prime Minister's policies more popular, it is the state of the art facilities inside that will ultimately entice visitors to return and use the space in the future. (After all, in order to justify staying open,

in the literal sense of the term, the COD will have to attract not only a continuous stream of visitors but also users.) By contrast, the artworks by Demand, Höller, and Parreno fulfill what is essentially a rhetorical function, encouraging critical reflection and debate as art is wont to do – the "Dialogue" in the title. Rama's attempts to integrate art and design in the projects he has initiated or lent his support to, betray a totalizing impulse that, as Jacques Rancière suggests, is reminiscent of the old idea about the so-called "total work of art." At the time when the likes of Malevich, Rodchenko and El Lissitzky dreamed of "an art directly involved in producing the forms and buildings of a new life," however, the Bolsheviks were actually in the process of radically transforming the life of the society on all fronts, not just the artistic or the aesthetic one. By contrast, the totalizing impulse we detect in Rama's artistic/aesthetic endeavors evokes rather a particular take on the idea of the "total work of art," namely, the notion of "total design." Mark Wigley argues in "Whatever Happened to Total Design?" that this concept is so central to modern architecture that it underpins both the tendency toward "implosive design," i.e., "designing everything in a single work of architecture," and the seemingly opposed tendency toward "explosive design," i.e., "adding a trace of architecture to everything" (Wigley 2007). From this point of view, the move from public space, i.e., the façade project, to the spaces of power, i.e., the Center for Openness and Dialogue, is not accidental. The COD, as a space where every detail, down to the door-knobs, has been paid the utmost attention, at times at the expense of functionality, is paradigmatic of this Prime Minister's vision for the entire country, namely, of architecture as the driving force in the transformation of Albania.

Already, the instrumental use of art in political struggles has often been criticized on the grounds that it inevitably leads to the aestheticization of politics (fascism) instead of politicizing aesthetics (communism), as Walter Benjamin famously put it in the 1930s. Of course,



Top: Armando Lulaj, *ARMORED*, signed on the upper left edge, 2019. Site-specific installation; bottom: David Kampi, *BLIND (or another fucking found performance of violence)*, 2024. Site-specific installation.

many cultural critics and theorists would argue that ours is a time of total aestheticization, or total design, so that everything from art to politics has become a spectacle, which is something that Philippe Parreno's *Marquee, Tirana* clearly alludes to, since Parreno's marquees have usually been installed in spaces dedicated to contemporary art, such as the Guggenheim in New York, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, etc., rather than in spaces embodying political/state power. Be that as it may, the spaces of art and the spaces of politics are simply not equivalent. I alluded to this at the outset when discussing the German pavilion at this year's Venice Biennial, but let me take another example. A few months ago, on May 1, a group of artists and activists occupied the atrium of the Guggenheim in New York to protest against the working conditions at the Guggenheim's Abu Dhabi site. It is difficult to imagine that Albanian student activists who have taken to the streets (again) to protest against Rama's controversial higher education bill will similarly be able to occupy the entrance hall of the Center for Openness and Dialogue without the National Guard getting involved, if anything for reasons of security. It might be useful here to think of the question of "aestheticization" along the lines that Boris Groys does in "On Art Activism" (2014). Groys suggests that the notion of the "politi-

cization of aesthetics" is grounded in an understanding of aesthetics that is rooted in design, since the function of design is precisely to make the status quo more attractive, whereas the notion of the "aestheticization of politics" is grounded in modern (and contemporary) art, whose function is to recognize the status quo as being already dead, thus theoretically opening up the horizon for its overcoming. Because the Prime Minister's Office is still the place where, more than anywhere else, the status quo is produced on a daily basis, this makes it rather difficult for the art inside it to transform the status quo into a corpse, as Groys suggests. Conversely, every artist exhibiting at the Center for Openness and Dialogue will have to ask themselves about the politics they are being used to further. This is a tall order indeed, for although some of the finest politically motivated artworks are the product of an engagement, often the fruit of years of research, with specific events and histories, we do not usually think that art's task is to keep up with the politics of the day in the way that, say, the media does. The risk then is that the artworks displayed at the Center for Openness and Dialogue instead of making the Prime Minister's politics more transparent, will obfuscate it.

I want to conclude by giving an example of how this obfuscation can take place. In the speech he

gave during the official opening of the Center for Openness and Dialogue, one day after Angela Merkel's visit, Edi Rama thanked a number of people, among them the architects who supervised the project, Johan Anrys and Freek Persyn (Kryeministria 2015). The names mean absolutely nothing to most Albanians, even though they should. Anrys and Persyn are two of the founders of Belgian architecture firm 51N4E, responsible for developing a number of important architectural projects in Tirana when Edi Rama was still mayor (some of which were completed and others not). When Edi Rama became prime minister, 51N4E played a key role in founding Atelier Albania, a "laboratory" unit inside the National Territorial Planning Agency that is directly responsible for all major architectural and urban planning/renewal projects across the country. It is irrelevant here how capable or incapable the founders of 51N4E are, the fact remains that the ethics behind allowing a foreign private company to play such a decisive role in shaping the urban development of the country are highly questionable. Apart from this, there is the fact that it is impossible to find out who works for Atelier Albania, certainly not from Atelier Albania's webpage or any other government website. Finally, Atelier Albania as well as 51N4E have been involved in tendering procedures,

both in Albania and abroad (Belgium), that have given rise to suspicions about corruption, suspicions over which one of the founders of 51N4E and Atelier Albania, Peter Swinnen, was dismissed from his position as State Architect for the Flanders government in February 2015 (Hope 2015). The Albanian government and the Prime Minister himself have never addressed these suspicions, at least not convincingly. Contemporary art, which was once Edi Rama's strongest selling point, especially outside of Albania, is thus quickly becoming his alibi, particularly in view of the most recent news stories about Rama and his government. I am referring here to the coverage in the German media of the dramatic increase in the number of Albanian asylum seekers in Germany since the beginning of the year, during which time Rama managed to attend the openings of two solo shows featuring his drawings in commercial galleries in Berlin and Munich, but not once visited a single refugee camp. In the meantime, the local media have focused on Rama's ambivalent attitude, to put it mildly, toward the process of the decriminalization of the political parties in Albania. These are the kind of issues that the art at the Centre for Openness and Dialogue should address but does not and perhaps cannot. ■ 2015



# How to Launder Art and Money through Waste Management Concessions

■ VINCENT W.J. VAN GERVEN OEI

On July 1, 2021, contemporary art platform Harabel presented a bronze sculpture of Kosovar artist Sislej Xhafa, entitled *Bleta* (“The Bee”), on the Sharra landfill, the municipal waste deposit site of the municipality of Tirana. Xhafa’s sculpture was supposed to be the first of a series of public artworks that would transform this “private property” into a “contemporary art sculpture park” (Harabel 2021). Historically, the Sharra landfill is the site where on August 7, 2016 an excavator crushed 17-year-old Ardit Gjoklaj, who had been illegally employed by a waste management plant on the landfill operated by 3R, a company from Peqin owned by a Socialist Party functionary.

Mayor of Tirana Erion Veliaj had publicly promoted the waste management plant as an exemplary employment opportunity for the local community, claiming it abided by all legal standards. But when the tragic circumstances around Gjoklaj’s death were uncovered, media reporting of the scandal was aggressively suppressed. The prosecution of 3R and its owner was shut down. When confronted with this history, Harabel commented on social media that “Sislej chose to install his oeuvre at the Waste Treatment Area of Tirana, a very delicate location which he visited and solely chose, without any prior suggestion by Harabel” (Van Gerven Oei 2021).

Harabel is a non-profit foundation that “focuses on the promotion of contemporary art” founded in 2018 by artist Driant Zeneli and “cultural promotor” Ajola Xoxa, a lawyer specialized in energy law who also happens to be Mayor Veliaj’s wife. Soon after its establishment, Harabel

launched a number of high-profile public art projects, featuring internationally renowned artists such as Anri Sala (also on Harabel’s board), Adrian Paci, and Xhafa. With the contemporary art scene in Tirana struggling both in terms of funding and space, and considering that neither Zeneli, then a recent remigrant, nor Xoxa were firmly rooted in that scene, Harabel’s meteoric rise was remarkable.

On the current Harabel website, Xoxa lists herself as “co-founder” and “creative director.” She is also founder of NAAN Gallery and GurGur Gallery, where Harabel has been organizing exhibitions. Harabel’s official address at Sky Tower in the heart of the expensive Blloku area of Tirana is in the same building as Xoxa’s law practice, The Partners, and Harabel’s former program executive and current legal coordinator, Xhoi Skënderasi, also used to sit on the board of Xoxa’s publishing company, Botimet Enciklopedike. In other words, Harabel is very much connected to Xoxa’s business interests. But how is this non-profit funded? And how does it get access to prime plots of land for its public art projects?

A recently published document provides one of the missing pieces of the puzzle. The contract stipulates that Xhafa will “donate” his work *Bleta* to Harabel, and that a company called “Integrated Energy BV SPV” will install and maintain the work on its property for at least five years on behalf of Harabel and the artist (Xhafa & Kodra 2021). Whereas this document solves the question as to how Harabel structures its public art projects, this particular legal construction raises a number of others, the obvious one being: Why would Integrated Energy BV SPV, a

private company established for “the management, administration and realization of works for the construction of the Waste Treatment Zone Tirana,” provide its property and support free of charge for the creation of a sculpture park on the outskirts of Tirana?

In order to be able to answer this question, we need to understand how Integrated Energy BV SPV came into possession of the Sharra landfill. One of the best sources to do so is the dossier on former Deputy Prime Minister Arben Ahmetaj compiled by the Special Structure against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK) in July 2023 (Dumani & Millonai 2023). This dossier, 320 pages long, provides a detailed account of Ahmetaj’s business relations and exploits since 2008, in particular with those people who turn out to be in charge of the Sharra landfill. The amount of criminal activity documented in this dossier is staggering: bribes, corruption, impersonation of officials, falsification of documents, tax fraud... the list is overwhelming. What I provide below is only the tiniest, simplified sliver.

Our part of the story begins on January 28, 2016, when Mayor Veliaj writes to the Ministry of Finance about the “improvement of the management urban waste in the city of Tirana,” claiming to have recently completed a feasibility study about setting up a concession for the waste management in Tirana. The proposal finds its way to the desk of Minister of Environment Lefter Koka, who responds positively to Mayor Veliaj about his plans. Minister Koka’s response is also forwarded to businessman Klodian Zoto: “look at this and tell me if you agree.”

At this point, Zoto and his business partner Mirel Mërtiri already control

two other waste management concessions in Fier and Elbasan through a series of interconnected companies all headquartered in Sky Tower. Now, they eye another concession, the largest so far: waste management of Tirana at the Sharra landfill. Having been informed of Mayor Veliaj’s initiative, the unregistered company Integrated Energy BV follows the Elbasan playbook and makes an unsolicited offer to the Ministry of Environment for the construction of a waste management facility near Tirana. On the basis of this offer, the government opens a public tender procedure, while on August 19, 2016, the company registers itself as Integrated Energy BV in the Netherlands with €50,000 in capital and Zoto as one of the directors. The rest of the board is filled with various lawyers specialized in setting up shell companies, one of the main vehicles through which the Dutch government facilitates international tax evasion.

Integrated Energy BV is actively involved in the drafting procedure for the tender in which they intend to take part, and receives information about its competitors from the Ministry of Environment. In a flawed procedure, the Council of Ministers then grants Integrated Energy BV an 8% bonus in the tender evaluation, all but securing the concession for the company. On August 31, 2017, Integrated Energy BV SPV, registered a day prior and owned 100% by the Dutch shell company Integrated Energy BV, is granted the €130 million, 30-year exclusive concession “for the construction of a landfill, incinerator, and rehabilitation of the extant depositing sites in Tirana and the production of electric energy” by Minister Koka. The convenience of this contract for the concession holder is that he is paid per metric ton of urban waste, even if none of the promised construction work is undertaken. This urban waste inflow is, in fact, guaranteed by the Municipality of Tirana, which commits to paying the difference in case the inflow falls below a pre-established threshold.

In clear breach of the concession contract, the construction of the incinerator is never started, and several Albanian jour-

nalists, including yours truly, start investigating Zoto and Mërtiri’s multiple concessions and the intricate relations between their different (shell) companies. In 2020, the Special Structure against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK) launches an investigation into the waste management concessions at the request of the opposition.

In March 2022, SPAK issues arrest warrants against former minister Koka, Zoto, and others in their investigation of the Fier concession. In response, Geogenix BV (the new name of the Dutch shell company Integrated Energy BV) releases a press statement claiming that they have severed all bonds with the companies managed by Zoto.

On September 25, 2023, the Special Court on Corruption and Organized Crime sentences Koka to 6 years and 8 months in prison in the Fier case. Bllako receives 2 years and 8 months and Zoto 8 years. A month later, on October 5, 2023, Koka receives an additional sentence of 5 years and 8 months in prison in the Elbasan case. Mërtiri and Zoto both get 6 years and 8 months.

Meanwhile, the SPAK investigation into the Tirana concession continues. In August 2023, the Sharra landfill and all the other properties of Integrated Energy BV SPV are confiscated and a new set of arrest warrants is issued in December.

When an investigate journalist makes public, based on the Ahmetaj dossier, that it was Mayor Veliaj who initiated the concession procedure, he attacks her by calling her a “contract killer.” He denies in public to have any close connection to the concession, claiming he simply “has the duty to bring the waste to the gate” (Javanews 2023).

Mayor Veliaj is summoned by SPAK to testify in the case on April 30, 2024, concerning his role in initiating the concession procedure and the involvement of his direct subordinates in the fraud and falsification of documents in the process of its drafting and approval.

Let us now return to Ajola Xoxa’s presentation of Sislej Xhafa’s work on the property of Integrated Energy BV SPV: Why would a waste management company be interested in sponsoring the

curatorial vanity career of the wife of the mayor?

As may have become clear from the events surrounding Zoto and Mërtiri’s exploits and the multiple SPAK cases that feature them in corrupt entanglements with a host of Socialist Party politicians and bureaucrats on both local and national level, every gesture is transactional. It would thus not be unreasonable to think that also their sponsorship of Harabel’s art event has ulterior motives, a single episode in a complex mutual exchange of favors between Veliaj’s municipality and the businessmen.

So perhaps we may, after having presented a factual account, end with a brief speculation: As evidenced by the Ahmetaj dossier, Integrated Energy BV SPV was granted the Sharra concession thanks to the initiative and support of Mayor Veliaj, whose municipality is also responsible for the payments to Integrated Energy BV SPV for a period of 30 years. In return, the company made the small gesture of supporting the mayor’s wife’s nascent curatorial career by sponsoring a sculpture park on top of the landfill it manages. In all this, the artist, Sislej Xhafa, who had spontaneously chosen the site “without any prior suggestion,” provided a façade of respectability, while in practice facilitating the artwashing of a concession managed on blood-soaked ground at the long-term financial detriment of the citizens of Tirana, who are already faced with a steep increase in waste collection costs.

At the end of the day, the money that circulated via Xoxa’s “non-profit foundation” Harabel and her gallery spaces is negligible within the broader landscape of Albanian expropriations, privatizations, and concessions. But the principle that emerges from it is certainly the signature of the government’s modus operandi, which since its inception has actively appropriated certain forms of cultural expression to serve its propagandistic needs, distracting the public eye its internal workings. ■ 2024



# The Violent Curator

■ SONJA LAU

## PROLOGUE:

### “COCKROACHES”

An incident. On May 29, 2009, a crucial trial started at a Civilian Court in Moscow. Subject of this trial was the exhibition *Forbidden Art 2006*, curated by Andrei Yerofeev and Yuri Samodurov, at the time director of the Andrei Sakharov Center. Following research on the subject of self-censorship, the two men had gathered inside their exhibition all artworks that had been withdrawn from major exhibitions over the course of 2006 as a strategy of precaution. In this new exhibition, the “dangerous” works had been shielded behind walls, and it was only possible to look at the through small drill-holes. But nevertheless, to no surprise, *Forbidden Art 2006* got into trouble. Shortly after the opening, Yerofeev and Samodurov found themselves under prosecution, incited by members of the orthodox church and from the far-right political sphere. The indictment read: “the fueling of religious and national hatred.”

In the course of the trial, which stretched over a period of several months and included over a hundred “witnesses” (from the side of the prosecutors), was carefully documented in the format of a court reportage by the artist Victoria Lomasko, who attended most of the sessions. Her drawings encompass the stages of the trial, as much as its brutalities and absurdities, and, last but not least, the artistic interventions that were performed, unsolicitedly, on behalf of artist activists: such as the following that I would like to quote from the book:

“As we wanted to enter the court room, suddenly the doors opened and we saw a group of police officers dragging out a young man, who was vitally resisting. It was Pyotr Verzilov, an activist of the artist group VOI-NA. He had planned a ‘terrorist attack’: During the pronouncement of the sentencing, he wanted to set free 620 Madagascan cockroaches, 900 Venezue-

lan cockroaches, and 2000 grey cockroaches. He had smuggled them in inside small cardboard boxes, but one of the guards had become suspicious about the scratching sounds and had opened the boxes, which had allowed the cockroaches to escape and roam through the entire court building. Petja was taken to one of the police busses, while he was shouting something like ‘this is a court of cockroaches!’”

Writing about the “violent curator,” as I will do in the following, is certainly always a declaration of solidarity with artist activists such as Pyotr, and their irregular, but important, artistic “terrorist attacks.” But speaking about the “violent curator” is also, in itself, an attempt to spread some unorganized thoughts across the territory, like the cockroaches were spilled over the court building.

*How long does it take to hunt down several thousand cockroaches? Long.*

*How much power does one need for such interference? None.*

*What is the impact of cockroaches on a corrupt juridical institution? BIG.*

## WHY?

I have titled this text “the violent curator” and the question is, why?

Why do I choose to claim, right from the start, a sense of violence, and to tie it up with curatorial practice? Even more so, since curatorial practice, etymologically and beyond, points precisely to the opposite: to notions of care, to being careful, to preventing damage, to generating healing? We may therefore wonder, when confronted with such title, about its intended tonality. Is the violent curator a “good” curator or are they the opposite? Is the title meant as a form of critique or as an encouragement?

Clearly, violence is a disputable term. It is challenging on a theoretical level, unbearable and inhumane in its application. It is also, as mentioned above, the most antagonist term one can connect with curating.

Yet, on the other hand,

one thing is equally evident: It is in situations of conflict, of structural violence, that the mechanisms of power and its abuse become exposed most clearly. They gain momentum, one could say, but they come unmediated, without a clear readability. How then, we should also ask, can such a field be ignored by or dismissed from a curatorial point of view, thus failing to seize the opportunity to mediate this yet unmediated information? How could it not impose questions on the curatorial work, in terms of being responsive toward instances of violence, up to the point of “hijacking” the violent power dynamics for a different purpose? How could it not, in some way or another, encourage us to think of the “violent” curator?

The following text does neither intend to become a manifesto about curating, nor a manual for channeling artistic and curatorial practices in one direction or another. What I will do instead is simply following an intuition – albeit a very strong one – that is concerned with evoking what I consider an important mode of curatorial and artistic operating, a mode of action that has been missing, blanked out, or rather, feared, all along the way. Drawing on my earlier concerns about *vandalism as an artistic practice* – and indeed, at times, as a strategy of survival – I will try to illustrate how the “violent curator,” like the vandal, seeks above all a meaningful relation to the world, which more than often means to *break things* before constructing others; to irritate, contaminate and dismantle them, before putting them back into (a better) place.

My aim is to suggest this figure as a legitimate, necessary, and perhaps even urgent position of practice. But as you will see, we will eventually have to construct and shape this figure together. For the moment, this text serves first and foremost as a temporary host to this conception, a place of dwelling for the figure of

the “violent curator,” an archive of ideas.

## BECAUSE

It is important, if we are to enter the realms of the “violent curator,” to have a much more nuanced understanding of violence and destruction. We have to be able to play with the terms, to invert them, or to appropriate them. We will have to understand the “breaking of things” as a moment that entails both destruction and construction.

But let us consider, for a moment, the “violent curator” not from a moral point of view, but first of all as a person that is absent, excluded from the narrative, a persona non grata. In order to do so, I would like to read a passage from another text, the introduction to Armando Lulaj’s publication *Broken Narratives*, and the take on vandalism that I evoke therein:

“What is a vandal and what is he after? How does he choose his matter, set the target, but also, inscribe himself into the shreds? About the language of the Vandals little is known, following a generic description from the net (Wikipedia in fact), referring to the historical tribe of the Vandals, to whom the term *vandalism* is owed. As the phrase suggests, whereas the deeds of the vandals have been well recorded, there seems to be confusion about their verbal accounts. Which language did they use, if they spoke at all? Also, we must wonder, why has this language escaped the historians’ record in the first place?” (Lau 2022, 7)

Little is known about the language of the Vandals, and this phrase seems to me more relevant than ever, especially if considered in the realms of art and politics, a constellation that has become, more often than not, a metaphor for violence of many kinds. If the witch hunts have been, as Silvia Federici (2004) wrote, closely tied with both the rise of modern capitalism, the privatization of land, and the mechanization of the body for better production purposes, all of which the “witch” did not consent to, thus posing a threat to their application, these appear to be similar conditions, up until today, from which the vandal artist operates. Equally similar

is the public silencing of their political agenda. A vandal, as we are told, acts through destruction, but they do not speak. Thus little is known about the vocabulary that emerges from the broken remains of their excesses. Even less so, if the artist-vandal does not choose objects and concrete matter as a source for decomposition, but history itself.

Let us not forget – on a side note – that the punishment for vandalism in antiquity, thus the punishment for someone who breaks things, was the *damnatio memoriae*, which literally means to be convicted to be forgotten. The punishment of *damnatio memoriae* entailed the eradication of any possibility to memorialize a person, e.g., by never again mentioning their name, never writing it down or recording it anywhere. It was to disappear, without a trace, from history.

This last phrase is crucial. What it does, is to help us read the vandal, and with them “the violent curator,” the one who breaks things, as a figure that is not necessarily interested in the destruction of concrete, physical matter, but objects to a different kind of “rigidity”: the rigidity of history, of narratives, of belief systems.

“Breaking things”, as one of the modus operandi of the violent curator, becomes an important and necessary activity to access hidden and underlying narratives, things that have been covered up in all too smooth, often manipulative social or political stories. It is, if carefully applied, a *constructive* gesture. A gesture that allows for new constructions, without falling into the trap and the ideology of “progress.”

## THE GREAT CONTAMINATION

Let me give you two examples, where the “breaking of things,” “the breaking of narratives,” or even the temporary inhabiting of such “sites of destruction” becomes, in fact, the only sincere way of working.

One I assume is very well known to most of us, but I recall it here nevertheless: it is Artur Zmijewski’s work *80064* (from 2004). In this work, Zmijewski had approached former inmates and survivors of the concentration camp Auschwitz–

Birkenau, to offer them to “refresh” the tattoos of their internment number on their arm. Decades after the liberation of the camps, the tattooed numbers had naturally lost their contours over the years, and some of them were hardly readable any more. The former inmates agreed to Zmijewski’s proposal. In the video that followed, we see the new tattooing – exemplified with the tattooing of the prisoner’s number 80064 – in process. The former inmate leave the scene with a fresh, black imprint.

I am referencing this work here because its specific dealings with violence: violence that can be sensed with regard to working with an excessive trauma, of going right into it, including the decision to, in fact, “physically hurt” the skin of the former inmate again. But what becomes clear here is that that the violence performed in this work is above all a radical act against forgetting, a gesture to make something present again, to place it into the immediate now that has been considered, by the official narrative, as an event of the past.

Of course, a number of viewers of this work were outraged – how could the artist dare to dig in another person’s trauma, even bringing it back to the present? But the question that Zmijewski poses is a different one: what if the trauma of this person never aged in the first place, what if the faded number suggests, wrongly, that time has passed, whereas it really didn’t? Zmijewski’s violence thus is impersonal and directed at the destruction of the myth that history “grows old,” that historical distance and personal distance to an event are not related. In Zmijewski’s work, they become synchronized again. The fading of the numbers, Zmijewski considers rightly, represent a betrayal of sorts: they suggest a somber way of progress, where history, over the long run, dissolves into neutrality, and in which pain gradually and naturally declines. By tattooing the number again, he gives the autonomy over history and memory back to the subject itself.

Another, quite different example that I would like to describe here, equally points at the necessity to, at times, keep pain intact



instead of anaesthetizing it. It relates to a scene that has been written down by the philosopher Sylvère Lotringer, published as part of a longer essay in the *documenta 14* catalogue, and I'll summarize this account as follows:

Lotringer, of French Jewish descent, had spent his early childhood during the Third Reich undercover. His mother had organized him a fake, French Christian identity, which allowed him to live publicly under a false name (an experience which of course later influenced his philosophical writing as well). It was a stolen identity, taken without the permission or knowledge of the actual beholder, in this case a boy living somewhere else in France. Many decades later, when already an elderly man, Lotringer found himself still concerned with this person: who was this French boy who had lent him his identity, thanks to which he had managed to survive?

So against the warnings of his friends, he set out on a search, and eventually tracked down the address of the man and name-giver, in a nearby arrondissement of Paris. The day came that he decided to go, without further notice, to the address, rang the bell, and explained his story to the stranger he found on the door step. At first, the stranger was struck with surprise, but suddenly, his face cleared up in joy. "Well

then," he said to Lotringer, "I am hero, a life saver. I had no idea, this is the happiest moment in my life!" And he went to the kitchen to fetch a bottle of champagne, offering it to Sylvère for a shared toast. Sylvère made a mental note, realizing that in this very moment, the distance between the two of them, could not have been larger.

The point of telling this story is this paradox of distance and proximity. Standing together, just a meter apart from each other, marked at the same time the moment of the immense, unbridgeable distance.

And here, our fictitious "violent curator" may ask: If it weren't for the experience of violent pain in this moment, the experience of history going utterly wrong, well until the present moment, what else would be there to be told? Do we really want to follow the story, as the self-entitled life savior and name-giver would suggest, that all things have, eventually, ended up on the right track, that experience can be shared?

To the "caring curator," the encounter between Lotringer and his French name-giver might serve as an excellent example of solidarity and the possibility of collectively mastering of the past. For the "violent curator," by contrast, the significance here lays in the fact how this encounter rather

elucidates divergence, and allows us to think also of the impossibility of companionship, because it is at these dangerous fractions where history is contained and in the glimpse of a moment, breaks out into the present. The "violent curator," we could say, destroys the "dream" of a peaceful ending. But it is exactly this destruction, and I can see Lotringer affirming this, that renders meaning to a situation that would otherwise risk to turn dull and ignorant toward history in all its complexity.

From here, an important feature of the "violent curator" emerges. This has to do with the consistent striving to keep a moment of violence intact, just long enough to have a closer glimpse at how it is construed. A wound that heals all too quickly and without the trace of a scar is of no use, if it comes to prevent future attacks. It is silenced before it speaks, burying words before they can be uttered. I assume that the "violent curator" knows that and often acts accordingly to prevent premature healing.

**BREAKING THINGS**

Of course, the "breaking of things" often comes contrary to how we instinctively define needs and urgency. Isn't everything already cracked up and broken, so that building instead of breaking ought to have the highest priority?

We often think we are already moving inside of ruins. But the truth is that very often ruins have to be constructed from scratch. More than often, the ruins that would be of interest to us are not visible at all. They may come to view only due to the efforts of an artistic operation.

And just to illustrate this again I am quoting another time from the same essay I read from earlier, taken from the introduction of Armando Lulaj's *Broken Narrative*:

"To transform a complex, political moment of contingency into a punchline, is the central strategy of propaganda. In response, the production of 'broken narratives,' rather than the fixing of them, becomes the artistic operation that is in need." (Lau 2022, 9)

We are at the moment, here in Zeta Gallery, quite literally surrounded by "ruins" that were not supposed to come to the fore: A broken chair and other objects from the National Theater, furniture from the American Embassy: a relic from a pre-Cold War time, a moment where what we call the "recent past" had not even be invented, and of course, most difficult to grasp, the remains of the roof of the "Yellow House," a site of violence that exists today neither as an object/architecture, nor as an official record in the history books.

All these "agents of history" have gathered here in this room, a gallery room really, not an archive, not a university and also not a court room, where you would normally find them – and yet without this exhibition, the labor of gathering these objects, of noticing the disappearance of evidence in the first place, none of this would be here, none of this could have been examined, neither historically nor artistically.

We are in a gallery space, and that this happens in a gallery space, and not in a court room or elsewhere, says something very important about the role of art in this context, and I would even say, it helps to define another conception of art as such.

What we see here, basically, is an artwork's job, but it is also a state's job. The works here have not only hijacked the official, historical narrative and provided for alternative evidence to be inspected, but they have also hijacked a government's responsibility and taken it under its wings.

It is an inversion of power relations, performed on a few square meters.

It is where this talk on the "violent curator" ends... almost.

**FIXING THINGS**

I am not here with you in the room, I can't sense where we are in time,

where we are with our attention.

I have been hijacked by a virus, which has in return hijacked this text – its performance, and the dialogue that was intended. I'll thus give a last input on the "violent curator," this breaker of things, breaker of narratives, and creator of ruins. I won't be long.

So I have decided to close this text with a poem – because the violent curator is a master of the breaking of narratives, the breaking of patriarchal narrations, and of "strong language," as we will see.

It is the poem "Penelope, fed up" ("Penelope, angfressen"), by the Austrian writer Elfriede Gerstl, and the translation is anything but perfect, but I am sure you'll get the idea. Here we go:

*Penelope, fed up*

*Ulysses you asshole  
If you don't come back  
home soon,  
I am not waiting here  
like a complete idiot  
you are taking the piss  
at sea  
with your buddies  
It is not like there is no  
other guys here  
If you come home and  
you find some dude in my  
bed, no whining  
you don't impress me  
with "your Odyssey," you  
king of earplugs!*

■ 2022



Armando Lulaj, *Breaking Stones*, 2017. Video.



# Athens–Tirana

## *Resisting the Flatlands*

■ ARIE AMAYA-AKKERMANS

The bus for Tirana always departs at the same hour, 19:30, from a very narrow parking lot in Metaxourgeio. It's only a few minutes off Omonoia Square, which in spite of many additions and attempts at beautification through the last decade, including colorful fountains and public art, remains inescapably ugly. In the curious ways of the Third Hellenic Republic, perhaps the most heavily policed country in Europe, ugliness translates into unsafety, which paradoxically, makes it unworthy of securitization, therefore it remains somewhat free. It was also there that I was robbed countless times. One is supposed to know that it is unsafe. But at the same time, Metaxourgeio was one of the first parts of Athens, other than the Acropolis Hills, whereupon I set a slow gaze, slow enough to digest the irregular landscape of covered up far-right graffiti, a lingering smell of curried lentils and the vanishing ghosts of modern buildings covered up in plastic and scaffolding.

That was a decade ago, before this part of the center of Athens became a cheap rental, bringing hordes of budget tourists to enjoy the highlights of the area: A neglected problem of drug addiction and crime, the insufferable stale tiropita from 24-hour cafeterias, and the fliers from Greek political parties on the question of migrants, in an area where, in fact, few Greeks remain. But you could still be a little free there. Maybe pee against a tree, fall asleep drunk on a bench, or make out in the dark. Only a few hundred meters away, in Exarcheia, once upon a time the site of every Greek myth about revolution, riot police patrol the streets around the clock, to make sure you're comfortable in your short-term rental owned by a foreign holding, surrounded by all the banners about poverty, homelessness in Athens

and the situation in Palestine, which give the area its edge, would say a travel guide.

The journey from Metaxourgeio to Tirana is going to be very long, but in fact, you never know how long. The bus company tends to change regularly not only the number of stops along the way, depending on the tiredness or patience of the driver, and the extra tips that he received to deliver a package somewhere in the middle of nowhere near Ioannina, or to bring an elderly woman directly to her village around Fier. Sometimes even the crossing point might change, between Kakavia and Krystallopigi, the latter journey bringing you through the mountains of North Thessaly, to a semi-otherworldly landscape of marshes, freshwater lakes, and a vast emptiness that could be anywhere in the world; it's almost entirely unpopulated.

Then there's the question of why would you want to go from Athens to Tirana? After all, you're in Europe, and once you cross the border, you will be somewhere else, somewhere unspecified, somewhere boundless, but also outside the warm civilizational embrace of European democracy. The long crossing lines, always on foot, including two passport checks, X-raying of your luggage, and a series of explanations as to why you want to leave, why you want to enter, why you want to remain, why you don't want to remain, under thermal cameras, iron barriers, and barbed wire fences remind you that the border is real; you're exiting Europe.

At Krystallopigi, however, the X-ray machine is not working on the Albanian side, and there's a very kind young officer who will take your word for whatever you say it's in your bag, especially if you're nice and smile at him. And so it goes.

In Greece of course nothing could be more

speculative than the idea of Europe itself... The country represents the two narratives of Europe that are closely interrelated: One is the ownership of the rocks and yellowing columns that signify the beginning of the fictional fantasy of the West in Ancient Greece, but reconstructed through the puritanism of Victorian philology. The other version is Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency in paper, but in practice, a far-right organization, much beloved by the Hellenic Republic to indulge openly in its racist and supremacist fantasies, the countless deaths and disappearances at the Evros River, and the Pylos Shipwreck on June 14, 2023, from which at least 500 people are still missing in the largest

**“Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world. For Hegel the point is to lose it—to delete it, to suspend it, to destroy it, to dash it to pieces—to refuse the world as we know it and create a new one.”**

– Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda

Mediterranean graveyard, our sea. But once you cross the border, though you might no longer be in the European Union, you still continue to exist within the border-productive regime of Europe. Europe is an idea after all.

Once you have entered Albania, there's a slight angle of inclination in the topography, which gives you the vertiginous sensation that space is losing shape, or at least receding. The feeling is incremental rather than instantaneous, and it begins already north of Patras or Volos. Straight lines begin to dissolve. The straight lines that make up the configuration of Athenian modernism and the faux neo-classicism of the University of Athens. The straight lines that buried under concrete the Kifisos and Ilissos rivers which bathed the southern part

of the city in antiquity. The straight lines that demolished more Byzantine churches than the entire Ottoman rule to make space for the same brutalism and international style that is today forgotten in Omonoia and Metaxourgeio or turned into hypermarkets and clothing outlets (there's no other profitable use for the structure except demolition).

The transformation of a city, or rather, of aggregates of communities – Balkan Greeks, Albanians, refugees from the Levant and Anatolia, Roma, the surviving Jews, and Western Europeans – into an homogeneous flatland is not only very labor-intensive and costly, but incredibly difficult to maintain. In principle, the linear space of the Cartesian grid does not exist in nature, and it is only in the world system of colonialism that blank slates are possible which are not temporally cumulative and spatially viscous. To create a flatland you need to terraform the earth itself, and in a process so invasive, so destructive, so repetitive and continuous, not only large quantities

of complexity are lost, but the *physis*, to use a term that transcends the dogmatic dichotomy between nature and culture, will always fight back. Space will continue to bend, ooze out, fluctuate, corrugate, fold and break.

This process is perceptible as soon as you leave the hills of Attica and the Gulf of Patras, but in the presence of massive agricultural exploitation, landscaping and archaeological conservation, the lines only shake but do not bend. As you come closer to Albania – a place that although profoundly violent in its economic inequality and feudal hierarchies is still a shifting space of many historical transitions rather than a solid block of Cartesian space in the absence of master narratives (with the exception of a comic parochial nationalism,

so comic that it doesn't regard itself seriously enough) – you can feel the void of the world under your feet, and the space begins to bend rapidly. It becomes so unstable, so abstract, so indefinite, that it can be filled with any content.

But politically, it doesn't really matter, because there's ultimately no container to hold any specific shape. Therefore, the pendulum of modernity moves in different directions at the same time, and the possibilities of freedom and emancipation latent in this shapelessness can easily be put at the service of salesmen and charlatans. This freedom has no ground, because freedom doesn't have any specific content, and under the ground lies only the abyss. Arriving early in the morning in Tirana, nothing seems extraordinary, other than the exorbitant prices and the traffic, but there's always a constant renegotiation of reality as a whole that the people of Tirana take for granted. Everything in Tirana is chaotically arranged in such a way as to politely resist the impulse of the straight line. But the urban and environmental violence with which the city is being punished is stronger than the gravity of chaos, and it is completely possible that this shapelessness might be yet robbed by the clowns of the town. They are more swindlers than entertainers and will not even replace the ambiguous space with a master narrative or a solid block of reality, but merely with a mediocre capitalist realism, which is already emphatically in place but that it hasn't completely replaced the real yet.

We might be here more than 700 km away from the Acropolis, the putative symbol of Athenian and European democracy, even though for the larger part of its short-lived history it housed mostly tyrannies and oligarchies, practicing consuming imperialism. But yet, we're not too far from Frontex. The refugee camps that Italy built on Albanian soil, with the shameless approval of the clowns of the town, and praised by both European media and bureaucrats as innovative and “out of the box,” have been struck down as illegal by the courts in Rome, and migrants will need

to be returned to Italian territory. But their point remains. The extraterritoriality. The illegality. The shamelessness. The cruelty. The opacity. The crony capitalism. The profiteering. The moral vacuum. You would like to think that a situation such as Albania's would be ideal as a paradigm of modernity in its malleability and shapelessness, given that it can take any form you please. But that's the risk of the pendulum: In the absence of decency and morality as existential choices, it can only take the form of the casino. And yet it's not an unpredictable risk. The extraterritorial camps will return. If not here, elsewhere. They've been made possible now.

There are, nevertheless, moments of effervescence, emancipation, even liberation, associated with the configuration of a shapeless space or container, in the absence of master narratives or highly prescriptive political systems. I suppose that the oral repetition, memorialization, and even restaging of those moments falls under the category of what Peter Osborne (2014) called postconceptual art, to refer to artistic practices that are constantly reflecting on their own historicity and ontology. And that's fine. But I also wonder whether in this terrifying moment of uncertainty, genocide, displacement and impoverishment, we shouldn't make politics out of art rather than art out of politics? But I'm not necessarily convinced even whether this path is viable at all. I don't know if perhaps it's too late. But if it's not, we might need to destroy this world altogether. Even revolution might fall short of our demands, for what it is necessary is to change life. I haven't read philosophy for a long time, but I'm reminded now of Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda (2018, 112) writing about Marx and Hegel, less than a decade ago: “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world. For Hegel the point is to lose it – to delete it, to suspend it, to destroy it, to dash it to pieces – to refuse the world as we know it and create a new one.” ■ 2024



February 18, 2018

Dear Harald,

I am still thinking about the fake revolution in 1990, and the dozens of orchestrated strikes in 1996, and even more so of those six months of explosive street theatre in 1997 - things They have put to sleep. I keep thinking about all of this because people are leaving the country en masse once again, and the only thing that can be exported and recognized as contemporary art is political power and corruption.

You see,

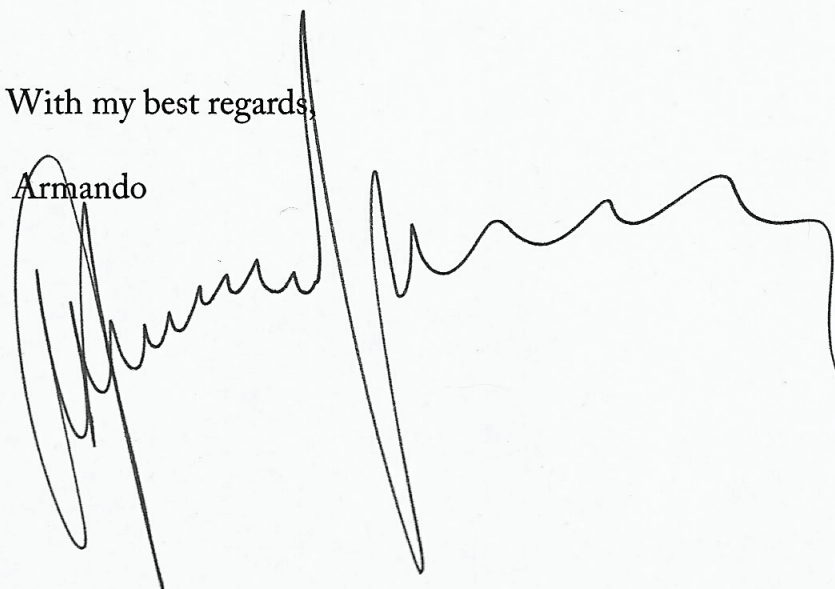
We understand corruption better than the lousiest representative of this lousy political class; We can stage unimaginable atrocities, more impressive than any real war; We can outact any popular uprising, deliberate strike or flash revolution on HDTV plasma displays or the Internet.

So, we agree that now is the right time for *The Great Wave* to happen, this time For Real. But you must understand that the old kind of support and the old strategies will not do, and we will not accept them.

Thanks again for your recent note but this fiction without imagination must end!

With my best regards,

Armando

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Armando', written in a cursive, somewhat stylized script. The signature is positioned below the typed name 'Armando'.



# Activating the Power to Desert History Itself

## Raino Isto and La Société Spectrale Discuss “Moving Billboard”

Art historian Raino Isto interviews La Société Spectrale (Armando Lulaj, Jonida Gashi, Pleurad Xhafa), a collective comprising members of the Debatik-Center of Contemporary Art (DCCA) about the project Moving Billboard. The second iteration of Moving Billboard was agitated (as La Société Spectrale characterizes it) as part of MANIFESTO Desertion, a project organized by DCCA in collaboration with Zeta Contemporary Art Center in Tirana, Albania, from July 4 to September 11, 2023.

**Raino Isto:** Let's start with what *Moving Billboard* is: it is the second chapter of *Eden Eden Eden*, an exhibition in three parts that is also part of the second MANIFESTO project, *MANIFESTO Desertion*. The first chapter of *Eden Eden Eden*, *The Deserter*, opened in Zeta on July 13, with the arrival of a copy of the eponymous Ilya Repin painting (*The Deserter*, 1917) created by the well-known Albanian socialist realist painter Zef Shoshi. This painting joined the audio installation *Radio Desertion* – a nearly hour-long recording of artists, philosophers, critics, activists, historians, and others reflecting on the topic of desertion – in an otherwise empty gallery space with a floor paved over in fresh asphalt. A few weeks later, the documentation of the *Moving Billboard* project entered the space: 24 billboards, installed across the city of Tirana and its peripheries, within a single 24-hour period. Each billboard at a different location, documented on the hour at a different time, featuring a single work of art.

*MANIFESTO Desertion* – like its precursor *MANIFESTO Hijacking*, which took place at the same time last year (in 2022) – was an exploration of the interconnectivities between art and politi-

cal power, the forms of complicity and agency that shape contemporary art not just in Albania, but across the globe, in conditions of pervasive neoliberal capitalism and oligarchy. This time, as the name suggests, the projects comprising *MANIFESTO Desertion* revolved around ideas of abandonment, escape, flight, exile: the attempt to desert from history itself is mentioned in the exhibition text. How does the *Moving Billboard* project fit into this context of desertion?

**Armando Lulaj:** *MANIFESTO Desertion* is the second episode in the series of three MANIFESTOs, originally conceived as a direct response to the current situation in art, but also strategically conceived as reference points for a future generation. Furthermore, the project attempts to analyze the current situation of the local art scene, which currently does not self-analyze and does not work much on local contemporary problems but instead limits itself mainly to reflecting the problems of the global scene. That said, it is unable to analyze these issues, it simply copies them.

We started with *MANIFESTO Hijacking*, providing a set of “tools” to hijack the status quo, proposing different and more difficult topics to address, topics that were obviously critical of politics and the government – which remains the main sponsor and promoters of contemporary art in Albania, advancing its own precise idea of what sort of contemporary art should be developed in the country.

*MANIFESTO Desertion* could have been third in the order of the three projects, but we thought that the question of what needs to be deserted is quite urgent. Certain narratives and trajecto-

ries should be deserted immediately, in order to try to imagine something new. Considering the contemporary condition and today's art system, a corrupt system structured by politics and money, whose rules are reflected here in Albania in their worst condition, stripped bare, I truly believe that the most radical act for an artist today remains the act of desertion. But since this was a collective project, we focused more on the collective process of desertion. Desertion remains a difficult and challenging topic in the arts and we worked more on the process of it. We wanted to explore different aspects of desertion: desertion as an attitude, but above all how this attitude is already incorporated and how it can be further developed in and by our society and our art.

To transform it into a manifesto, we conceived of the project as a shaking movement, an explosion of ideas that would spread rapidly out from the center and expand toward the periphery, just as the state apparatus does when it expands. The scheme used was the same, in order to intentionally contrast the abortion of ideas coming from the center (read: the government and its affiliated art foundations). Conversely, starting from the outskirts to reach the center, the entire project was then brought back and exhibited within a display we called *Desertion Archive*. So, mostly everything that has been produced or, rather, the documentation of this process has been collected and placed within this ever-evolving archive, located in the space of Zeta.

Another aspect of this project was the desertion of exhibition making, and this aspect interested us much more. We therefore decided to operate on the fringes of the exhibition context. In fact, the

gallery where the archive was gradually installed was first paved with asphalt, thus becoming a difficult space in which to spend a lot of time, even though it was necessary to enter the space both to see the archive but also to listen to *Radio Desertion*, the other part of this archive, which is in sound form. The smell of asphalt and its viscosity were an important part of the desertion process. Visitors were ultimately forced to leave due to the conditions created within the exhibition space, which were uncomfortable precisely in the way they presented the contemporary conditions of the neoliberal narrative on a different scale. We wanted to highlight the exhibition space itself, so instead of entering the gallery space as if something had already happened, as if the story had somehow been produced, we thought of building an “archive” that would grow organically, day after day. This process was obviously very slippery, and you couldn't frame it because it was an ongoing process. This process of framing desertion as an

highly controlled artistic situation. We see it as a form of liberation from this, but also from the other known strategies in use for staging exhibitions. It's very strange, because in Albania even the form of the funeral procession has changed, but the exhibition model still remains the same. It is profoundly worrying that there are very few exhibition spaces in Albania, and those few that exist are forced to capitulate to the artistic policies provided by the central government, the Ministry of Culture, or the Municipality of Tirana. Obviously, as a result, what they manage to achieve is often very lazy and absolutely not very courageous programming, because it is not in tune with the situation that surrounds us. It still follows models consolidated in the 2000s. As foundations and art centers – but not private galleries supported by the market – they understood that the copy-paste operational strategy was the safest one in these situations. My criticism is aimed at their directors, or rather at the directors of their artistic programming, who con-

are referring to the way that the whole discourse of contemporary art has been instrumentalized in large part because of the fact that Albania's prime minister, Edi Rama, is an artist. Since Rama first came to prominence as mayor of Tirana – and achieved notoriety in the artworld through curators like Hans Ulrich Obrist for his project painting the buildings of Tirana, the connection between art (and the whole cultural industry) and political power in Albania has become increasingly linked in a circle of corruption. And this tight connection is constantly further legitimized by the global neoliberal art world, a world that invites Rama to speak at Creative Time, to show his drawings at the Venice Biennale, to show at Marian Goodman, which serves in turn to artwash the abuses of power carried out in Albania. In the face of this, some art spaces simply choose the path of least resistance. You have tried to do something else.

**AL:** Since its beginnings in 2003, the Debatik-Center of Contemporary Art



Walid Raad, *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair: Engines* (4 March 1982), on a billboard inside the Sheshi Skënderbej parking garage, Tirana, Albania, 2023. Courtesy of the artist. D.C.C.A. Archive.

act caught in the moment that it was about to take place seemed much more interesting to us.

When we conceived *Moving Billboard II*, we were likewise thinking about different strategies of exhibition-making, and specifically ways to unmake them, starting from the re-conception of the vernissage itself. This was a necessity for us as a response to the existence of a single exhibition scheme developed over the years in this very politicized and

continue to atrophy the art situation and stimulate a crowd of trained spectators who are always the same – positioned horizontally, never vertically – who do not seek any density of context. These spectators desire a kind of lazy tourism from the art world, which is provided to them.

**RI:** When you speak about art spaces capitulating to the current artistic and political system in Albania, I assume you

(DCCA) has been looking for something different, a different kind of melting point. Being positioned outside the above-mentioned context, we used a different strategy. Instead of the gallery, we used the street as the most important space to produce art, but also as the most interesting space to meet a different type of spectator. Nowadays, we live in another context, one in which the role of the acute contemporary researcher (an inexist-



tent figure in the 2000s) has become extremely important, putting into question accepted models of exhibition making, the art critic, the artist, the politician, the contemporary art historian, and the figure of the curator (all uncontested figures in the 2000s). The project was not looking for this type of lazy viewer; rather, it was looking for a new one – one produced in that particular one-hour time frame. We could also say that this contact

where these fragments of art history intersect with the specific histories of Albania. How does *Moving Billboard* relate to a global art history? And how does the placement of these images intervene in local art histories of Tirana, of Albania?

**AL:** I would like to point out that the name we chose, La Société Spectrale, has a particular meaning, which should not be confused with Society of the Spectacle nor

tivities of these individuals, politicians, or the government itself—but not only that. We wanted to remind the masses, the viewers, of when it all started, to return to the 90s, and connect the role those entities played then with the role that our group has today. La Société Spectrale likes to be defined as the repentance who expose the government's shady activities.

*Moving Billboard I* took place throughout

a certain way. It becomes extremely difficult to counter all these appearances in many foreign newspapers or local media and it becomes even more difficult when all the other narratives by various artists or authors that tell a different truth, another narrative of the country, in contrast with the official state narrative, cannot be published. And if they are published, still they can't get to that level of attention; they don't appear in *The Guardian* or *The Financial Times*. This is why we take to the streets to meet or provoke, to wake up this other spectator that the system does not want, showing them some real problems of the country's future, but in a different way: making them see the terrible neoliberal reflection that is projected onto them. This future often comes from the past and happened elsewhere, or else it comes from a present that is happening parallel to us in other countries. It is important for us to highlight these reflections from the past, but also to mix them with our current issues, not by equating them, but by showing that the collapse happened some time ago. By changing time and space, we talk about this present and terrible future more than any other project carried out in the country in the last two decades.

To further answer your question: this curatorial scheme – like every curatorial scheme – has incorporated within itself a question of control that cannot be completely eliminated, which starts with the artists' choices and ends in the narrative it produces. From the beginning we were very interested in how to marginalize in the production of our new narratives. Obviously we couldn't do the same as the avant-gardists with their choices produced by chance;

instead, we wanted the controllable to become uncontrollable. That is, I am not very interested in the main narrative, but rather in the parallel narratives that escape the control imposed by and on us at the outset. We cannot control the uncontrollable – let's say, the flow of people who come across these billboards that appear before them. It is also impossible for a single spectator to see all the billboards in this order, in this period of time, and at those locations. But most of the time, the space was indicated by the works themselves and the idea was to create or agitate as many narratives as possible within the main one. We decided to circumvent the process and above all to eliminate the role of the curator or sometimes even that of the artist, who in this project also played the role of curator, since the images were chosen by living artists. We worked on different levels, starting from the addition of the apparitions, focusing on how all these images, combined in various ways, can become something very different. All these combinations of narratives, and different places where the billboard remained positioned for an hour, inevitably intervene in both history and memory in a continuous process, which suggests the idea of deserting HISTORY. To return to the archiving of the *MANIFESTO Desertion, Desertion Archive* is perhaps an impossible archive because of the difficulties of unearthing that slippery uncontrolled moment in time, i.e., desertion. At the same time, *Desertion Archive* is an archive composed of those moments that are built in times or spaces that are capable of activating the power to desert HISTORY itself...

**RI:** I would like to hear about some of the specific sites where these billboards have been photographed. In the documentation, they often appear innocuous: a field of corn; a crowded square in Tirana's city center; a mountain road with water pipes; a hangar; the dense bushes of a park; a darkened underpass. Indeed, the billboards placed in these locations seem to gesture – in their visibility – at the invisibility of history. It is hard to know

what these places mean: some viewers (those living in Tirana) might recognize almost all of them, while other viewers might know none of them. How did you choose the sites? Could you describe the significance of a few of them?

**AL:** It is important to remember once again that in this project we defined ourselves as agitators. This term is very important. As I said before, many of the locations were "chosen" by the work itself. For example, the piece by Christoph Schlingensief: I remember the first person who told me about this work and this was many years ago. It was a curator who became a fan of our Prime Minister, and whom I have worked with, and who has worked quite a bit in this region. Alongside the piece we also talked about the fusion of fashion and fascism, starting from Austria when the word *Feschisten* was invented and how these ideas were being incorporated into Albania using contemporary art. In *Chance 2000, documentation of the Aktion Baden am Wolfgangsee (Swimming in the Wolfgangsee)* (1998), Schlingensief created a fantastic piece referring to the high unemployment rate in Germany, and the responsibilities of the government and former Prime Minister Helmut Kohl at the time. It was decided this work should be placed in the area of Surrel, where the Prime Minister of Albania lives, and has built a huge house – so big that a Prime Minister of any country could never build it unless he were corrupt, much less in one of the poorest countries in the world, where unemployment is very high. The pension here is around €150–300, and the minimum wage is €350 per month. So we thought that the photo of the performance – which shows a sea of unemployed German people forced to raise the level of a lake to submerge the summer residence of the former German prime minister – was very appropriate to put in that specific location. What the poor in my country or the new generation of artists have to do is something I can't find an answer to.

► Continues on p. 14.



Christoph Schlingensief, *Chance 2000, Aktion Baden am Wolfgangsee (Swim in the Wolfgangsee)* (1998), on a billboard on SH54 Surrel–Tirana, Albania, 2023. Courtesy of the artist, Bettina Blümner, and Aino Laberenz/Nachlaß Schlingensief. D.C.C.A. Archive.

with such a new viewer was a violent encounter, made up of unwanted pieces of recent history, or moments not present in official history, let's say. From all this, we realized that the street remains the most interesting space to act because the work of art is encountered by chance. For me this is the most powerful aspect of *Moving Billboard II*.

**RI:** *MANIFESTO Desertion* is the second time La Société Spectrale has organized the *Moving Billboard* project. The first time, in 2018, you selected all 24 images to appear on the billboards, correct? This time, instead, you asked twelve living artists to select one work of their own, and one work by an artist now deceased, to appear on the billboards. The new iteration, then, is at least partially about the formation of historical consciousness in the present. The 24 billboards represent a kind of new history in the making – a new set of references, and a new set of juxtapositions. But La Société Spectrale – as the “agitators” of the project – selected the sites where the billboards were installed, the places

with Specter Society, nor with La Société Anonyme. It is the literal translation of the famous *firma fantasmè*, or “ghost companies,” which are companies that appeared in the early 1990s in Albania during the neoliberal reforms. This name becomes even more important for us because strangely we still find ourselves there, in those years, trying not to drown in the vast sea of neoliberalism. These ghost companies were companies whose owner was a front man or was very difficult to discover; companies that could not provide documents on where their shares were registered or who owned them, etc. These companies were local, but also foreign, and they made billions disappear in collaboration with local and foreign politicians. Nowadays, we have many companies operating in the country, mostly winning government contracts, but now they are all registered to numerous offshore corporations, and both they and the government communicate this with pride.

By using this infamous name, we wanted to expose the dubious ac-

Albania in 24 hours, and given the large expanse of territory it covered it was very difficult to carry out. This time we chose a much smaller perimeter, the capital city of Tirana, for many reasons. This city is changing very fast. I often listen to tourists who visit the country telling me that Tirana is a city of art, with beautiful and innovative architecture. I am still very surprised when I see widely circulated foreign newspapers, which these tourists rely on and believe in, publishing articles so full of falsehoods. Many people, including some curators visiting the country, try to respond to this huge number of lazy tourists, to make them see that the narrative created through paid newspaper articles thought up in the halls of government are part of an aesthetic strategy somewhere between amnesia and full control. These people, curators or otherwise, who like to go in depth, have a message that is more suitable for the trained spectators, to whom I was referring to before, a small audience that is prepared to look at art





Desertion Archive by D.C.C.A. Photo by Agim Kubati, 1990.

# The Last Socialist Realist Painting

*Or, We Don't Call It Anachronism, Baby!*

## ■ SONJA LAU

If Walter Benjamin would be alive today, claims the fictitious editor of *Benjamin: Recent Writings* (written, as he assures us, between 1986 to present), he would probably not be interested so much in the history of art, but rather argue for abandoning the story of art as we know it – along with art itself. This strategy to have a dead author talk again vividly about the present conditions of art, including the suggestion to rather desert the story than alternating it, as well as the fact of his writings being published by an

obscure, spectral editor, is not so much implausible as it is coherent. How could a critical reading of Benjamin's texts, for example, be ever as accurate as him, albeit dead, speaking for himself? Or: how could an endpoint of socialist realist art be defined in a more precise manner, than through an actual "last socialist realist painting"?

Socialist realism – and its aftermath in the present conditions of the arts – has been of great relevance to the artistic and academic practices of this constellation, also known as MANIFESTO.

Every art-historical narrative is also a product of the structures that design it and the needs it is requested to fulfill for the latter – such as, to close a certain chapter in art history and to start a new one, if the political narrative in analogy requires so. The framing of socialist realist art by – according to the official narrative – the birth and the death of the past regime, is thus of particular interest as well as questionability to us, as the title of the new work, *The Last Socialist Realist Painting*, suggests. If we are to believe the title's claim, a new work has

entered the story against expectations, arguing for a different time of closure to the genre in question. It is an almost festive claim, one that is celebrating its survival in spite of its long presumed demise. What is most striking here, however, is that this last socialist realist painting – unlike its many less fortunate fellows – has not come here under the order of some ruling power, but has apparently self-declared its entrance, as well as desertion, from the story.

Clearly, *The Last Socialist Realist Painting*, as it can be currently conceived in the framework of *The Great Wave*, is a complicated breed: a work not exactly situated in the past, nor precisely in the present. It seems to have entered the story from various points in time at once. Such as, from an oppressively hot summer day on July 13, 1990, when a migrant named Agim Kubati took a photograph upon arriving at the port of Brindisi – producing the very image that

became both incentive and template for *The Last Socialist Realist Painting*. Or, from the moment when the artist Zef Shoshi, commissioned by the MANIFESTO collective to transform this photograph into a painting, took to a "socialist realist" technique in 2024, a practice he was known to master best until the aforementioned ships hit the ports of Bari and Brindisi, and that he was asked to neglect ever since (but held intact). Necessarily, it also touches upon a decisive moment for the MANIFESTO collective itself, whose members are merged into the matrix of the image – slipping into the positions of cameramen, civil servants, soldiers.

Kubati's photography of July 13, 1990, the key image for the painting in question, has been an essential part of the archives of DebatikCenter, first and foremost as presenting a rare, almost impossible reverse shot of the events. Despite the many Alba-

nians who embarked on the first ship that left the port of Durrës that day, the presence of a camera on board, and therefore the existence of the photograph, is no ordinary event. The crossing was difficult, tightly packed, inhumane. As the official media featured again and again, the men boarded the ship with nothing at hand, many of them only half dressed, eager to have at least two escape routes in place: to somehow reach the ship's gangway, or to swim. Some of them, so the media reportages of these days proceed, were still running once the ship had anchored on the Italian shore, as if the flight had not yet been accomplished but was only beginning. Kubati's photograph entered the archives of DebatikCenter for being nothing like this. Kubati did not consider to swim (impossible for the sake of the camera), and he also did not run, not right away. He turned.

Thanks to Kubati's single shot, ships were not





Zef Shoshi (with MANIFESTO Collective), *The Last Socialist Realist Painting (witnessed by)*, 2024. Oil on canvas, human skull.

only “leaving” the harbor of Durrës starting July 13, 1990, but they were also “arriving” elsewhere. The obvious fact that each departure would eventually be met with an arrival, and therefore, must suggest a continuation rather than rupture, was largely ignored by the media at the time, which instead focussed on the establishment of an Albanian Exodus as a one-directional escape route. It cemented the view that traveling toward the country, instead of away from it, was an impossible event. It seized a sort of collective memory loss that Kubati’s image unflinchingly deceives, by daring to look back.

It looks like nobody from the journalists was very interested in the migrant with the camera who stood to look back at them. Their gaze goes right through him, focusing on an event that

seems to take place somewhere behind Kubati’s back. Only one videographer seems to notice the man in blue jeans and with the naked torso, who starts to walk slowly right through the journalist crowd, heading toward the anchored ship that has just turned him from a citizen into a migrant. The more his body gains momentum, the more he seems to become invisible for everyone else in the picture. It was then that Kubati touched the shutter of his Russian camera, which in response joined, for a brief moment, the strange orchestra of clicking sounds and shutters produced by the Western photo equipment.

It is a rebellious image not only for this reason. It is also rebellious for acting, in terms of composition, more like a painting than a documentary photograph, as if desert-

ing from the expectations of its own medium (feeding facts). In fact, it is not easy to draw a clear line between Kubati’s photograph and *The Last Socialist Realist Painting*, and the title equally applies to both: On the one hand a photography with a composition so strong that it wants to be read like a painting, and on the other hand a painting that seeks to become a recording device akin to a camera.

The distinction becomes more clear with the alteration of the photograph as it is translated into the painting, now proposing a different set of characters or, rather, (delayed) witnesses to the complex event of July 13, 1990. We understood the production of the *The Last Socialist Realist Painting* as a point of entry into the story behind the image, keen to slip

into the curious bunch of bystanders and image producers that Kubati caught on film. The point was not to reenact the scene, but to gain a better view on the “future” that was apparently performed behind Kubati’s back (and the future on hold behind our own).

We decided to not enter the image through a mere painterly trick or some technological mimicry, such as photo-shopping our headshots into the image. The bodies in the painting are our bodies, the clothes are clothes we obtained during our preparation, in a fashion as similar as we could find, the camera equipment in our hands was carefully selected in order to match the technology of the times. The light and shadows cast on our faces and on the folds of our clothes is the light of the fading sun in the

summer of 2024, during days of piercing heat just like 34 years earlier. This quite laborious approach is of importance, because it deliberately hides a portion of the real inside the painting that otherwise appears flattened, made up. We could also say: there was no way to hide better inside the image than doing it for real, fully painted, from tip to toe.

Socialist realist art has it that the events and subjects it depicts often involuntarily carry an allure of fiction, of ideological imagination. With the end of socialist realism, we have learned that the hero does not exist, that it has merely entered the image to conceal the drama that surrounds them. The place for the hero in socialist realist art is actually vacant. *The Last Socialist Realist Painting* is a reverse shot also in this significant regard. There is nothing

abstract, nothing invented or inflated about its hero. His naked, muscular back, the diagonal he cuts through the composition, the color of his skin as a counterpoint to the fading sun that bathes everybody else in a blueish light, are not the result of artistic imagination and even less of ideology, but a segment of history that happened, even for the short duration of a camera’s shutter.

Whilst currently “under detention” at the Zeta Gallery, and only available for a visit during its daily two hours of “free” time, the future setting of the painting remains uncertain.

We can assume that the human skull placed under the painting has already turned into a kind of spokesman for its persistence, a fierce character who is seemingly apt at fighting vanity with vanitas. ■ 2024



Personally I remain more interested in the process. We can work to build the process, but others should, and can, take it forward if they think this should be the way.

If in that case we installed (agitated) a piece of something that happened in the past and not far from Albania (but which probably could have happened here too), in other cases we worked differently. For example, we installed *Evergreen* (2022) by Alban Hajdinaj in the park surrounding the lake of Tirana, the only remaining green area of the city, precisely at a place known historically and colloquially as *Gjiri i Kurvave* (“Bay of Whores”), where a new construction plan will be implemented and they will cut down trees to make room for new apartments for the nouveau riche.

In the same area of the Tirana lake but at a different hour we put another billboard, this time a work by Pinar Öğrenci, titled *A New Year's Eve, 30th December, 2015* (2015). A frame from this video work showed a moment after the police attack

this recent history even further.

Another piece, this time chosen by Walid Raad, was Martin Johnson Heade's *Gremlin in the Studio* (1865–1875), a work that not many people recall. This work depicts an American landscape, displayed atop a pair of sawhorses, and a gremlin hidden underneath. We decided to superimpose it on the Albanian landscape, nowadays being “governed” by US rules!

One of the most interesting contributions in my opinion is the new piece from The Question of Funding, titled *A Question* (2023). This is a work that at first glance raises many questions about today's art system, which in its peculiarity reflects one of the cardinal problems we also have in Albania: control and direct financing from a single centralized source. But I think that the question posed also reflects the Middle Eastern question, the genocide of Palestinians and the decisions taken so carelessly by the Western world, toward an issue that concerns humanity itself. In this case, however, we decided to be somewhat

tests, Parreno's piece is full of bulbs that remain lit most of the time, day and night. His piece was installed two years after the so-called rise to power of the Socialist Party in Albania in 2013, at a time when the country seemed to be catapulted into the contemporary. This shift was accomplished with the most powerful artistic propaganda ever seen, including Parreno's work, at precisely the same time that the economic system was going to hell and the mafia entered parliament with this government's blessing. At the time, many people were arrested and imprisoned because they could not pay their electricity bills. In a state of misery five people committed suicide. Meanwhile the lamps of the *Marquee Tirana* were never turned off.

So there were many agitations within this project. Jan Wilson's piece, *Time Spoken* (1982) was shown inside one of the last remaining airplane hangars, built by fascists during the Second World War and now in use for bus repair. Finally, a billboard by Barbad Golshiri on dissidence and martyrs,

subject position. (As in, no single viewer can observe the work in the traditional sense as it existed, distributed in space and time.) Could you talk about the ideal viewer or spectator of the work? Who can view it? Who should? You have referred to the billboards as “ghostly apparitions.” Who are they haunting?

**Jonida Gashi:** For me, the question of the viewer is actually the most important aspect of *Moving Billboard II*. As you say, because *Moving Billboard II* is dispersed in space and time, it implies a spectator that cannot be subsumed within a single subject position. Now, we can read this both negatively and positively. So on the one hand, one could say that the implied spectator of *Moving Billboard II* is an impossible spectator, since the work was realized in such a way that no single viewer could realistically see all 24 billboards in the order in which they appeared. By the same logic, one could say that all of the passersby that caught glimpses of the billboards constitute a group of people that are

if said spectator somehow managed to see all twenty-four billboards in the exact order in which they appeared. Not only that but the act of viewing itself, or, to be more precise, the collective act of viewing, would become an integral part of the work as such. This is not as far fetched as it may sound at first, since typically when we are confronted with artworks that do not lend themselves to being grasped as a totality, we instinctively as viewers wonder not only about what we are missing out on, but also about what other spectators might have seen that we haven't.

I think that this applies to the documentation of the project as well, which is how *Moving Billboard II* was made available to visitors as part of the second chapter of *Eden Eden Eden*. Visitors to the exhibition were provided with a list of the twenty-four billboards, including details about the image (artwork) on each billboard, the artist (or artists) behind the image (artwork), the time and place of the billboard's apparition, and the latter's location on a map of Tirana. The billboards themselves (and the surrounding landscape or the installation site) appeared as “slides” on a monitor, with each “slide” remaining on the screen for exactly one minute, effectively forming a twenty-four minute looped video installation of sorts. At first sight, this surplus of information appears to go against the spirit of the work, projecting a sense of totality upon the work. Similarly, because reading a handout and watching a twenty-four minute video installation is something that is realistically achievable, the viewer is afforded a sense of mastery over the viewing experience.

In practice, however, it is not only quite difficult to watch a looped video installation from “beginning” to “end” but also rather pointless. This is because the repetition of the work adds something new to the work, rendering traditional viewing modalities inadequate. Again, we can look at this both negatively and positively. On the one hand, the introduction of cyclical repetition uncouples the work as such from the sequence of images that is being repeated within the work. In the process, the beginning and ending of the sequence of images that is being repeated becomes secondary, with the return of the sequence as a whole taking primary importance. This, in turn, makes the work harder to grasp as a totality since the temporality of the work seems incommensurate to that of the viewer. On the other hand, we can look at the introduction of cyclical repetition as a device that essentially frees the moving image, or, rather, the reading of the moving image, from the constraints of chronology and duration. In so doing, it effectively opens up the sequence of images that is being repeated to a radical plurality of readings. One can view the images that are part of this sequence in any order whatsoever, and for any length of time whatsoever. In addition, each reading actualizes the work, thus becoming an integral part of it. Like *Moving Billboard II* then, the looped video installation produces so many partial and incomplete readings which, taken individually, appear to make the work slippery, but when taken together construct a compelling picture of the work as a totality that rejects a single viewpoint because it posits a multiple viewpoint. (It is not an accident that the looped video installation was invented to “accommodate” a viewer who is, precisely, dispersed in space and time, namely, the gallery/museum visitor. In the cinema, viewers are confined in space and time, whereas in the gallery/museum viewers come and go in their own time and are constantly moving.)

**RI:** An important aspect of the *Moving Billboard* project is documentation: capturing specific moments in time, dispersed in space. This has a conceptual aspect, but also a practical one: The project required rapid movement across (and beyond) the city of Tirana, contending with constantly changing conditions, the heat of the summer, the wind, varying access to the intended sites... What was it like to try to document this process? How did the process of documentation shape the meaning(s) of the work, which we now see as a series of photographs? How does documentation play a role in *MANIFESTO* as a whole?



The Question of Funding, *A Question* (2023), on a billboard on Bulevardi “Dëshmorët e Kombit,” Tirana, Albania, 2023. Courtesy of the artist. D.C.C.A. Archive.

on the peace march in Diyarbakır on December 30, 2015. We decided to put her billboard in an area where there is a monument that was built by the Turkish government, dedicated to the victims of the failed *coup d'état* in Turkey on July 2016. We put her billboard in the middle of the “Street of the Martyrs of July 15,” which runs through the “Democracy Park of July 15.” Here, 251 trees are planted to commemorate the death of 251 victims – martyrs, according to Erdoğan – to agitate

naive agitators and placed this work in front of the Prime Minister's office, where his private gallery is located, an art center that should, ideally, respond to society's needs for dialogue and openness. This gallery, the COD, functions as a sort of Open Society Foundation art center, a bit of a continuation of what remained in the region of that project. At the entrance of this art center there is also a large work of art, *Marquee Tirana* by Philippe Parreno. Now partially destroyed, damaged by many pro-

which contains a QR code of the same size as the Black Square transporting you to one of Iran's graveyards, was installed near the road leading to the Ashraf 3 camp, in Manzë, where 5,000 Iranian Mojahedin-e-Khalq live.

**RI:** I sense that this isn't just about breaking away from the traditional display of objects in a gallery. It is also (or so I think) about positing a spectatorial viewpoint that is dispersed in space and time, a spectator that cannot be subsumed within a single

just as dispersed in space and time as the work itself. On the other hand, we can conceive of all the possible readings of *Moving Billboard II* – each one of them partial and incomplete – as supplementing each other so as to form a total picture of the work. Furthermore, because in this scenario the number of possible readings of *Moving Billboard II* is incredibly vast, this would produce a much more complex picture of the work than a single spectator could ever hope to realize, even



**Pleurad Xhafa:** *Moving Billboard II* was probably the most challenging project in terms of the realization on-site as well as its photographic documentation. In the span of 24 hours, three teams, each composed of three people coordinated to put up, install, and photograph the billboard at predetermined locations and times. As has already been mentioned, the content of the billboards helped us to determine the location

realized that this unexpected event had opened a gate in time. By converting the photo to black and white, the persons attempting to avoid being in the picture become time travelers, rushing out of the frame of *La Jetée* to engage with the landscape of the present.

I don't think that there is a single answer to your question about how documentation shapes the meanings of the work. But, what I consider

attempting to document something impossible, such as the third chapter of *Eden Eden Eden*, can potentially destroy the work.

I can say that the art scene in Albania has a significant gap in the documentation of exhibitions or events made in the last three decades. It seems as if nothing or very little has happened before. I believe that you yourself, as a historian, have encountered numerous challeng-

projects of the socialist era, the effort to disperse culture, information, and history through ideological networks that extended even to the most remote peripheries of socialist society. It seems to me that one of the functions of both MANIFESTO projects has been to try to return an open discussion about ideology to the context of neoliberal culture. In the post-socialist context, during the transition period, "ideology" was often dismissed as something that belonged only to communist discourse, as if neoliberalism was an escape from ideology. Of course, neoliberalism has its own ideology, something that has become increasingly apparent – but in many contexts (including Albania), people will still dismiss any mention of ideology as if it bears the taint of state socialism. The billboards, it seems to me, are ways of making different ideologies visible – and bringing their clashes and conflicts into the open. Can you talk about how this making-visible of ideology functions in the *Moving Billboard* project, or in the MANIFESTO project more broadly?

some of the old attitudes and behaviors were carried over into the post-socialist period and projected onto a radically different reality. I tend to find this type of analysis shallow and unsatisfactory, though. On the other hand, one could argue that the extreme ideologization of Albanian society during communism, and in a way that was not at all hidden, meant that it was well positioned to recognize the markings of ideology even in a system that claimed to be non- or post-ideological.

From this perspective, the fact that no robust critique of neoliberalism emerged (or was allowed to emerge) in Albania during the post-socialist period, even though the country underwent a near catastrophic economic crash in 1997, which can be directly linked to the shock therapy measures adopted in the early 1990s, does not demonstrate the failure to recognize ideology for what it is. Rather, it demonstrates quite the opposite. It is almost as if Albanian society "conveniently" swapped one ideology for another. (I put "conveniently" in scare quotes because, of course, this process has been and continues to be a violent one.) This is perhaps most evident in the way in which Albanian society embraced wars it had previously denounced and renounced struggles it had previously supported. To give an example, as I write this against the backdrop of Israel's unfolding genocidal campaign in Gaza with the full backing of Western governments (and media), Albania firmly supported the Palestinian struggle throughout the communist period – and for quite some time afterward as well – whereas now it supports Israel. Similarly, once upon a time Albania denounced all US wars whereas now it participates in them. The real issue, for me, is how to understand this "switch," but this is a different discussion. Its consequences are fairly easy to discern, namely, a cynicism or relativism, if you will, that has had the effect of alienating a society from its own past; rendering concepts like justice and injustice essentially meaningless; and destroying the basis on which true, lasting solidarity among different communities and

peoples is made possible. To answer your question, I think that what this edition of MANIFESTO in general and *Moving Billboard II* in particular make visible is not so much the clash of ideologies as the resistance to them, be it Islamic fundamentalism, Zionism, imperialism, liberalism, etc. At the same time, the project lays bare the way in which the co-existence of seemingly incompatible ideologies is part and parcel of the neoliberal world order.

**RI:** The *Moving Billboard* project was the second chapter of the *Eden Eden Eden* exhibition, following *The Deserter*, restored by Sonja Lau. The third phase of the exhibition, *Lighting a Fire on the Bottom of the Ocean*, took place on August 26, 2023: a political exorcism conjured by Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei & Çiçek İlençiz in the "orbital forest" surrounding Tirana, a forest promised by Stefano Boeri's *Tirana 030* project but still unrealized. *The Deserter* – a traditional oil painting, hanging framed in a gallery space, albeit one paved with asphalt, signaled the traditional role of the gallery. *Moving Billboard* moves beyond the gallery walls, treating the city and its margins as an expansive site. The third chapter likewise unfolds far outside the gallery walls. Could you talk about how *Moving Billboard II* fits in as the middle chapter of *Eden Eden Eden*?

**AL:** *The Deserter*, the first chapter of *Eden Eden Eden*, remains an ongoing project, not completed yet – but yes, it deals mostly with past and recent history, copies, archives, and art collections. The idea is that the work we produced will be donated to the main collection of art in the country, to the National Museum of Fine Arts, now under renovation. *The Deserter* will be completed when the beautiful copy of Ilya Repin's painting, reproduced by Zef Shoshi – one of the most important Albanian painters – enters this special collection, which mostly comprises socialist realist art. For the second chapter, *Moving Billboard II*, we wanted to build a sort of X-ray of our present, with the twelve invited artists (Dziga Vertov, for



Chris Marker, *La Jetée* (1962), on a billboard on Rruga e Aeroportit, Rinas, Albania, 2023. Courtesy of the artist. D.C.C.A. Archive.

of the apparition. As a project developed in the outdoors, the interaction with its surroundings and people who live in them, creating the premises for what we might call a "remarkable concurrence of events." The confrontation with these unexpected events (forces) was unavoidable, and has certainly impacted the meanings of some of the works. I can recall here, for example, setting up a billboard with a frame from the film *La Jetée* by Chris Marker, near Rinas Airport at 1:00 PM. According to our plan, my task was to capture a photograph with the billboard and a departing plane. Nevertheless, the relentless strength of the wind made it impossible for the billboard to remain in position. So my colleagues kept holding the billboard, and as soon as the plane entered my camera's lens, they were supposed to release it and step out of the shot. But the plane entered and exited the frame so swiftly that they had no time to exit, while I continued shooting. At that moment, we considered this attempt a failure, but after reviewing the photos, we

important is the fact that only through documentation can these events create the sequence of still images that we see in the video installation at Zeta. Furthermore, *Moving Billboard II* will be available at our website (<https://debatikcenter.net/>), in its chronological structure, creating the possibility for another form of encounter with the work. Different from the first time, in which the viewer unexpectedly faces the apparitions, in this second instantiation the viewer actively looks for them.

It is very important to consider the historical and political context that the work appears in and interacts with. Because documenting an event, performance, installation, or even an object hanging on the wall involves subjective considerations on how you should approach them. As in *MANIFESTO Hijacking* and *MANIFESTO Desertion*, some of the works have been temporary, unpredictable events or performances. On one hand, documentation has been the only means for the works to survive, and in some cases the documentation has become the work itself. On the other,

es in procuring materials and conducting research on these events. That's why today we see a rush of documentation and archiving from all sides. It seems that nothing should be left undocumented and everyone is creating their own personal archives. This is very interesting because at first this looks like a long-awaited process, but here the question must be raised: On what basis are these archives appraised or evaluated? Returning to your question: MANIFESTO, as part of the DCCA platform, deals with topics that (as Armando has said) very few artists and curators in Albania would dare to touch. So, I think that careful and responsible documentation and archiving is a duty, to understand and enter into a dialogue with the present while serving as material for researchers and artists.

**RI:** The billboard as a form references large-scale advertising, but in this case the specifically mobile character of the project (and the fact that you refer to La Société Spectrale's role as an "agitational" one) also recalls mobile propaganda



example) are present together with those who can still produce is significant. The idea of letting each living artist choose a dead artist meant that in some cases the chosen work is more powerful or speaks better to our present even than their own works. Furthermore the idea of a “ghost” or “ghostly apparitions” reflects our attitude in conceiving this project, but also the attitude of our work. We operate like ghosts within the Albanian art scene, precisely because we are not registered as an organization or as a formal collective, and we don’t want to bend to those rules. Most of the time we operate without any budget. I believe, and I do know, that many artists working in the country want to go down this path, but they say they have no other choice. To them I reply: *Desertion from those choices is a possibility!*

The third chapter, *Lighting a Fire on the Bottom of the Ocean*, by contrast, was a very unique project in its kind. Conceived from the outset as a political exorcism in the strict sense, from the beginning it was supposed to be a provocative action. Taking into account what people aspire to, namely the elimination of the political class in power, the provocation through a magical ritual was designed to underline that nothing else seems to work against this political class. We were inspired by performative events both past and present, such as the grandiose performative historical event

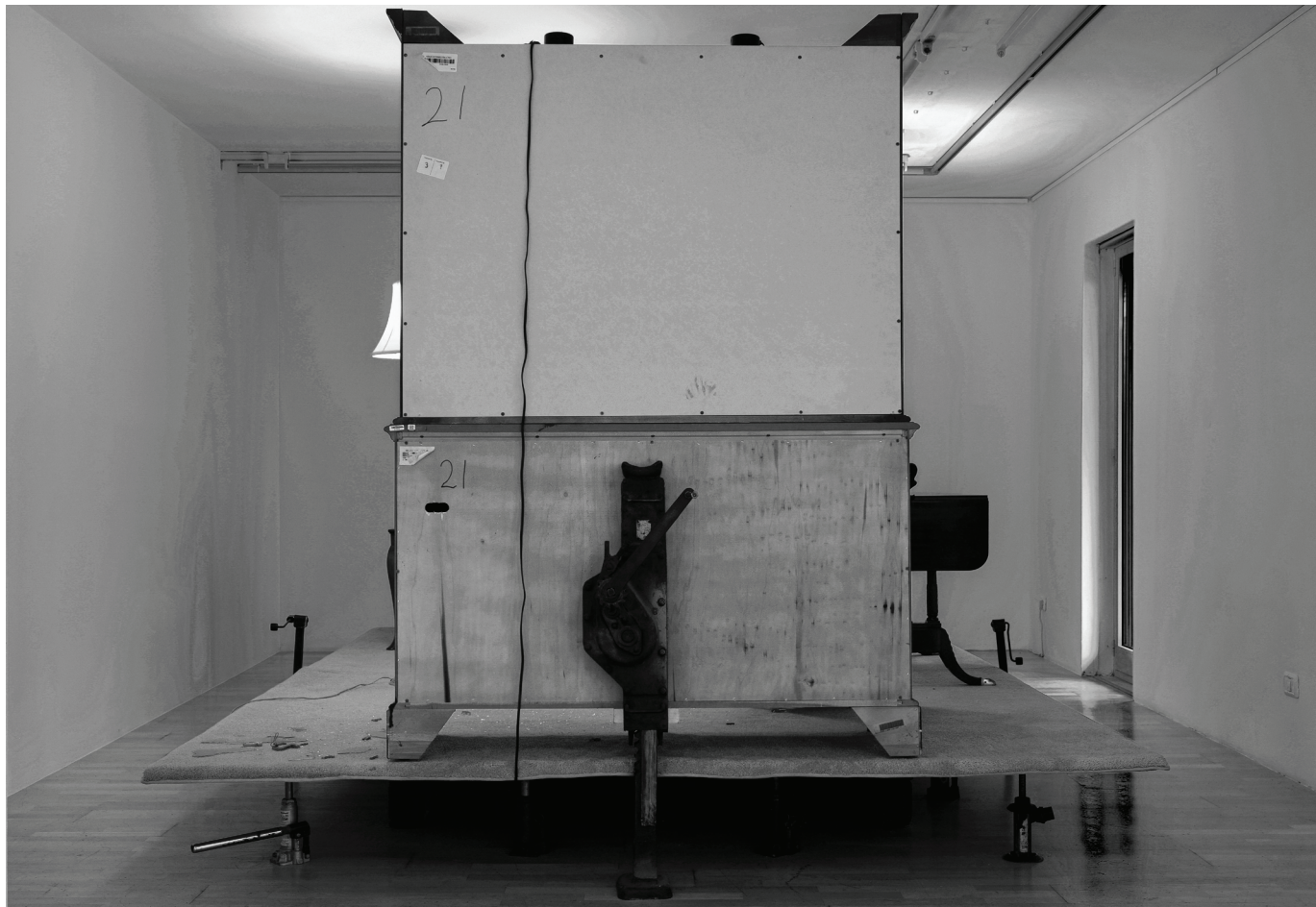
*Levitation of the Pentagon* (1967), but also by the recent journey of Alexander Gabyshev, the shaman arrested by Putin in 2019, who swore to drive him out of the Kremlin with his 8000 km walk. During the four days of walking through the suburbs of Tirana, something else happened, replacing the initial idea of a political exorcism. Building toward a simple idea became more powerful, and we collectively realized that this kind of desertion might come across at a different level. It thus became a desertion toward something else, maybe as old and repetitive as political history, but which embodies (again) the idea of a try to establish a “new politics” – which in this magical performance made possible the imagination of a new political landscape. Aware that this could also be another failure, in a continuous loop of failures, we proceeded once again toward this idea. Inside the *Desertion Archive*, those who have conjured this part of *Eden Eden Eden*, together with the MANIFESTO Collective, decided to display only a large photo taken during the walk. A landscape with some people walking. A significant photo that documents the walkers going in the direction of Surrel, toward the huge estate of the Albanian Prime Minister, a lover about magic and fortune tellers *par excellence*. Then, a rumor began to circulate about magic and the collapse of the government that became

something new, a different work, and this was very interesting and uncontrollable – and impossible to document. All the reflections behind this process – the political exorcism, magic as a provocation that could cause the fall of the political class –

“European” and whether that can include Islamic cultural heritage; we see the efforts of the United States to keep a foothold in the so-called “powderkeg” of Southeastern Europe; we see the effects of shock therapy and the structured imposition of

US politics in the country, and the region more broadly. The violence of this influence is inextricable from contemporary art in Albania, where the country’s prime minister is also an artist—and an artist with close connections to some of very

AL: With *MANIFESTO Hijacking* we covered some topics that no one wants to get involved in – because they are still risky, let’s say – such as the case of the demolition of the National Theater, which is no longer mentioned by any local media, some-



La Société Spectrale, *The House That Woodrow Built (AMBASADA)*, 2020–22. Mixed media installation.

remained unarchivable, but the rumor itself is still in progress. It has yet to be implemented in this new political landscape, or in the other one that we imagined but that cannot be seen yet.

RI: I’d like to pull back a moment to consider the MANIFESTO project as a whole. Last year, from July 4 to September 11, 2022, the DebatikCenter of Contemporary Art and Zeta Contemporary Art Center organized *MANIFESTO Hijacking*, a multifaceted project that looked at the ways oligarchic power has shaped and continue to shape life in Albania. In modern history, Albania is a geopolitical space where we can see the interrelations and machinations of virtually all of the major political actors on a global scale unfolding. We can see the colonial efforts of fascism (in the Italian occupation of the interwar period); the clash between fascism and the Partisans, between the fascists and the Allies; we see the shifts between different state socialist orientations (Stalinist, Maoist, Enverist); we see conflicts over the Ottoman legacy, over what it means to be

neoliberal capitalism; and we see the West’s effort to retain the former socialist bloc as a space for “experimentation,” where economic policies, urban plans, architecture and leisure for the super-rich – where all of this can be “tested out” in the geopolitical periphery. I could go on. Above all else, in Albania, we can see the violence of these events, the force brought to bear on ordinary citizens in the name of progress, change, development, the free market.

*MANIFESTO Hijacking* set itself the goal of – and here I’m quoting the press release – “build[ing] a museum that never stops growing – a museum of neoimperialism and neocolonialism, and at the same time a museum of resistance” (*e-flux* 2022). Part of that museum was visible in the exhibition held in Zeta, *The House That Woodrow Built*, which contained remnants of this same neocolonial violence, including pieces from the demolished National Theater of Albania, but also some of the original furniture from the United States Embassy in Tirana, a reminder of the pervasive legacy of

well-known names in the contemporary art world (Hans Ulrich Obrist, Philippe Parreno, Anri Sala, Rirkrit Tiravanija) at the same time that he has close contacts with major crime syndicates. If we speak about the intertwining of art and politics here, we are not just talking about the legacies of the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art in the post-socialist transition period, or the Open Society Foundation – we are talking about a nexus of art, political power, capital, and crime that is still very much alive.

To return to the *Moving Billboard* iteration that is part of *Eden Eden Eden* and *MANIFESTO Desertion*, my closing question is this: Across many of the artworks on the billboards, we see the marks of violence, implicit and explicit: letters from prisons, accounts of suicide, terrorism, memorials for the dead. What can contemporary art do in the face of systemic violence, a violence that is not just “left over” from the Cold War, but that—in a way—constitutes the continuation of the Cold War across the globe today?

thing that we as DCCA have been dealing with for some time now (Di Liscia 2020); the geopolitical and economic expansions linked to the presence of the United States of America in the region and the shady affairs of their representatives; but also the Kosovo war, and the immense amount of false information produced in that period regarding organ harvesting. The current generation of Albanian artists, which came after those of the 2000s, does not concern itself with these risky topics, but still follows the themes advanced by the previous generation. I think they’ve figured out how to play this game and are trying to protect their work. I try to understand how art can be created with well-known and now substandard recipes, but I can’t grasp it. Even though they have made attempts to enter risky areas, somewhat feignedly like the generation before them, their work still screams, *too scared to go there*. Even journalists find themselves in a difficult position. It is redundant to repeat the same narratives, but if they can already lose their jobs from



La Société Spectrale, *The House That Woodrow Built (AMBASADA)*, 2020–22. Mixed media installation.



talking about the corrupt political system, imagine what happens if they carry out a real in-depth investigation. Therefore, in parallel with going to those territories, we also undertook the path of a political exorcism, as an act that could help this situation through other means.

For instance, the *AMBASADA* project, which was one of the main parts of the exhibition of *MANIFESTO Hijacking*, was built with original objects from the United States Embassy in Tirana, more or less built, that is, dated, starting from the 1930s-but most importantly the 1970s, precisely when the criticism of the Albanian socialist state toward US ideology was at its peak. As a time machine to the past, this work was conceived precisely to break this wall, which is foremost a mental one: to begin to look more rigorously at the US political presence in the country. The making of *AMBASADA* was a process that lasted many years, and is still ongoing. For many years we have been individually collecting auctioned-off furniture and objects belonging to the US Embassy, with the idea of making this large installation. A small portion of this installation was shown during *MANIFESTO Hijacking*, but the entire project remains still a work in progress.

This interest in Western politics, which is represented in our country mainly by the United States, entered gradually into our work, and on different levels – not only personal – for each of us, and here I am referring to our primary education from art to cinema and writing. But it has also become a criticism on a more popular level. I can say that the old Albanian texts concerning imperialism, those from the 1960s and '70s should be reread through this lens. To mention something that I consider very important: Nowadays, we all know that the latest so-called Justice Reform in Albania was designed and supported by the United States, and the way they have implemented it resulted in a dysfunctional structure totally controlled by the current government and the US themselves. And this is slowly being brought to light by many courageous texts that are

similar to the critiques published in the '70s and manage to penetrate the state-controlled media. People have begun to understand that we have slowly become a kind of small satellite state of the West, something we were trying to avoid in the past. History is somehow being repeated. A few years earlier, during the '90s, the question of being a satellite state would have been a privilege and regarded as the only salvation for the Albanian people, but today this is no longer the case. We are trapped in this kind of double bind. So I think we're experiencing for real something that other countries experienced a long time ago, but now we have an advantage; we know how it went for those countries. The failure of the artist figures that you mentioned comes precisely from not taking into account this advantage. So I believe that the real failure is because artists couldn't imagine anything new, something lasting – why not, even something ideological. As far as I know, they don't know, and don't care, what the real situation is like in this country. I would be curious to know their opinions when faced with the systemic violence or criminal connections of this government with organized crime. How can one be a blind supporter? Do these artists support the country or do they support the distorted idea of a politician who can change it? Are they aware that the fusion of organized crime and politics (which they supported) has erased the premature success of art and politics forever? And dear friend, there is no room here for the Rashomon Effect! The idea of an art and politics that could move this society toward emancipation is nowadays just an institution for the blind. Please prove me wrong!

What I find interesting is how this "official history" of art in the country has been more or less accepted by many. This was a big lie. *A Fake Case*. The success of the events that occurred in the 2000s has never been, and still is not, questioned as it should be, by those who seriously deal with art history, politics, historiography, and analysis of the world. It is now obvious that to navigate the sea of global information, being a small

country, you need a gigantic lie. This has happened several times, in fact, using contemporary art as a pretext. I believe that foreign curators who come to work in this country are neither really interested in the country, nor in what could develop here. Not only because nothing is really happening, nothing explosive – not yet – but also because their laziness reflects a marked narrative of deception, reflecting this false narrative that they continue to help build. I also believe that the only way out is to challenge this narrative directly, repeatedly, symphonically – a bit the way Godard challenged Hollywood... and at this moment in time daring becomes a necessity, for all of us.

To get back to your question: *Moving Billboard II* looks at this timeline, at something that will or could happen in the country, but in many cases has already happened. I believe that the main issue is to understand the power of these futures that we have stolen from others, which in many respects were also imposed and implanted upon us due to our lack of imagination. For this I don't just blame key political figures from our recent history. The fault is ours as well, our own corruption, our perennial desire to add grease to the corroded mechanism of power and to always support a political adventurer, like the recent one, who just like the others in our political field will never be able to contribute to the construction or even the imagination of a different society. We were so incapable of building, lazy in imagining, that's why we kept stealing futures – and you see these strange influences even in the work of many Albanian contemporary artists. Therefore, the violence present in *Moving Billboard II* is not simply a reflection that is projected here and originates in other places, not even a testimony of what has happened or is happening there, it is also a violence that now comes from within, that has been produced here, precisely from this imposed future combined with elements of the future that we have stolen (wrong thefts obviously, permanent failures), which are materializing here, now, in a terrible way – and most

of the time we remain helpless, almost always unable to capture this moment in which this act is happening. To address these issues perhaps we should develop or invent a different language, a new wave, and we are still messing around with it. What is certain is that at this moment in time action becomes a necessity, at least that's how it seems to me.

**JG:** I think that the Albanian case, precisely because of the existence of this nexus of (contemporary) art, political power, capital, and crime, is a stark reminder of the ways in which contemporary art on a global scale is deeply embedded in the types of both national and transnational structures exerting the systemic violence that you describe as a "continuation" of the Cold War across the world today. One could say that this is the pedagogical value of the Albanian case, which needs to be studied more closely. On the subject of this violence, I think it is important to distinguish between the violence itself and the framing of the violence, since they represent two distinct – though obviously interconnected – aspects of the problem, and should not be conflated. I am thinking in particular of the portrayal of the Cold War since its early days – and by its chief opponents, i.e., the USA and the USSR – as the final battle between capitalism and communism for the future of humanity. This was a key aspect of its framing for the purposes of our discussion, since

it provided a powerful legitimation for many of the excesses of the Cold War, and not just by the USA and the USSR, until the conflict's formal conclusion. At the same time, however, the capitalist–communist dualism went beyond the rivalry between these two empires, and beyond the Cold War itself, providing a powerful lens through which to read historical development even for small, peripheral countries that were not aligned with either side. For instance, the People's Republic of Albania denounced and renounced first the Yugoslav line, then the Soviet line, and finally the Chinese line, all the while remaining resolutely anti-American, yet still viewed historical development essentially through the framework of a final battle between capitalism and communism.

So I am suspicious of the idea that the "leftover" violence of the Cold War can be understood as a "continuation" of the Cold War in the true sense of the word, because the latter would imply that after the defeat of the socialist bloc at the turn of the 1990s there emerged a radical, global alternative to the neoliberal world order, which clearly hasn't happened. I think that the argument that there is such a continuation relies on a primarily geopolitical understanding of the Cold War, which I find to be reductive. Paradoxically, the left, the Western left in particular, is guilty of this too. Indeed, it is guilty of something even more sinister, namely, of projecting onto this reductive, geopo-

litical framing of the Cold War in the present, the veil of the old capitalist–communist dualism. This is why, time and again, we see the Western left (though not all of it) dividing oppressed and struggling communities and peoples across the world into those who should sacrifice themselves at the hands of local fascists in order to deter US imperialist encroachment (in the Balkans, for instance); and those who should resist their local fascists till the bloody end in order to deal a blow to US imperialist encroachment (in the Middle East, for instance), as if this served some "higher purpose" – which it doesn't. Moreover, apart from the imperialist underpinnings of such "lists" – which not only ascribe martyrdom to oppressed and subjugated communities and peoples in geopolitical fault-lines, but also seek to determine the conditions of this martyrdom – they also inevitably end up reinforcing the dissimilarities as opposed to the commonalities between oppressed communities and peoples caught on opposite sides of geopolitical divisions. To return to the question of contemporary art, I think that it is largely powerless in the face of this systemic violence, in the sense of becoming a leading force against it globally. Of course, this does not mean that more localized efforts do not and cannot have an effect, because we know that they can and they do. ■ 2023



La Société Spectrale, *The House That Woodrow Built (AMBASADA)*, 2020–22. Mixed media installation.



# Art as a Medium of Truth

## The Tirana Conspiracy

■ JONIDA GASHI

The 2001 Tirana Biennial has the symbolic significance of a sort of founding event for the Albanian contemporary art scene. It put Albania on the contemporary art map for one thing, and helped launch the international careers of a generation of Albanian artists that came up mainly in the 1990s. As a rule of thumb, founding events tend to be rather problematic though, so it is not surprising that the 2001 Tirana Biennial is now largely forgotten. The one that people remember instead is the following edition that took place in 2003 and featured the now infamous façades.

In fact, the façade project was also started in 2001 but only gained widespread attention in art circles after being featured in Anri Sala's *Dammi i colori* (*Give Me the Colors*), which was included in Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Utopia Station* at the 2003 Venice Biennial. That same year, Obrist and Sala also curated a section of the 2003 Tirana Biennial for which they invited a number of international artists to participate in the façade project by asking each of them to design the façade of a socialist-era apartment building, which they did and their designs were actually realized.

In brief, this is how it came to be that Tirana was proclaimed the next experimental utopia, and the very first edition of the first biennial exhibition was effectively scrubbed from history as it were. In spite of this, or rather precisely because of it, it is important to revisit such events so as to understand what they can tell us not only about the past but also and especially about the present. I think that Marco Lavagetto's intervention at the 2001 Tirana Biennial represents its problematic kernel, the "truth" that the protagonists of that event would have us all forget. This "truth" has to do with the idea of the hoax and

the figure of the hoaxer, both in relation to art and artistic practice as well as in relation to politics and political practice.

First off, a few words about Lavagetto's intervention at the 2001 exhibition. This consisted of an extremely elaborate hoax that took off in December 2000, so around ten months before the opening of the exhibition in Tirana in September 2001. Impersonating Oliviero Toscani, Lavagetto contacted Giancarlo Politi, who was then editor-in-chief of *Flash Art* and simultaneously director of the 2001 Tirana Biennial, eventually persuading Politi to allow him, "Oliviero Toscani," to curate a section of the upcoming exhibition. Politi was only too happy to oblige and so "Oliviero Toscani" really ended up curating a section of the 2001 exhibition.

Overall, the exhibition featured the work of 38 curators, a fact that Politi would hail as the distinct achievement of the 2001 Tirana Biennial:

"This Biennial is different from the others because of many different aspects. Its most profound 'otherness' is the methodology on which it relies. The Tirana Biennial is, in fact, the first international exhibition in which 38 different curators are invited to select artists. 38 curators of different age, experience, and culture are left completely free to express their opinions, despite certain logistical limitations imposed by the budget" (Politi 2001, 11).

In retrospect, one wonders whether, had there not been so many curators, the organizers of the 2001 Tirana Biennial might perhaps have realized that one of them was actually an impostor?

The section curated by Lavagetto, a.k.a. "Toscani," featured the work of four emerging artists who were obviously all fake, in the sense that they were all inventions of Lavagetto himself. Lavagetto's scandalous creations included:

Dimitri Bioy – a photographer and pedophile who "despite appearances... loves the human species as perhaps only Keats did" (Toscani 2001, 52); Bola Ecu – an African artist and the only woman artist in the lot, who favors the use of the photocopier as artistic medium and is described as an activist fighting against capital punishment in her home country, Nigeria; Carmelo Gavotta – an Italian pornographer who "reminds us with candid simplicity that pornography today can be produced by anyone who possesses an instrument to record images" (53); and, last but not least, Hamid Piccardo – a conceptualist and disciple of Osama bin Laden, who is claimed to have said that Piccardo's work "carries the voice of Jihad into art" (53).

Incredibly, nobody seems to have suspected that something strange was afoot, until the real Oliviero Toscani received a copy of the catalogue of the 2001 Tirana Biennial and the hoax was exposed. This discovery sent shockwaves throughout the Albanian and Italian art scenes. Initially, the disbelief seems to have been mixed with a degree of admiration for the highly sophisticated operation that the artist had managed to pull off. As time passed, though, the mood seems to have turned sour. Lavagetto spent years fighting lawsuits emanating from the 2001 exhibition, and all of the key players in the Tirana Biennial, from Giancarlo Politi to Edi Rama et al. essentially buried the incident, presumably because they thought it made them look bad.

Eventually, the entire affair took on the rather sinister sounding label of a "conspiracy," i.e., "Il Complotto di Tirana" or "The Tirana Conspiracy." The term "conspiracy" is an interesting choice, since there are many ways in which Lavagetto's intervention may be categorized, classified, or defined, i.e., as a joke, a

parody, a prank, a hoax, etc. In a way, it is all of those things. Its designation as a "conspiracy" essentially eclipsed the elements of humor (found in the joke), of irreverence and playfulness (found in the prank), and of mystery and wander (found in the hoax) in his intervention.

In the end, it also eclipsed the artistic dimension of the project, which included many self-referential or self-reflexive elements that drew attention to its hoax-like or prank-like character. To give an example, Lavagetto's curatorial statement as "Oliviero Toscani" is peppered with statements like "contemporary art consists of 99% cloning," "repetition of a concept through plagiarism can also bring us what we want," and "I would like to take this opportunity once again to thank Giancarlo...without whom I wouldn't be here telling you these tales" (52). One of the reasons Politi never suspected (or so it seems) that he was being told so many "tales," is because his communications with Lavagetto took place over the internet, via email to be precise. In his interview with "Oliviero Toscani," Dimitry Bioy (2001, 92) muses that "The web, if you know how to use it, can be used as a smoke-screen which filters out what you don't want to show."

More importantly, Lavagetto's project anticipated the destructive potential of the new audiovisual technologies and the Internet that would become clearer only as the decade unfolded and especially during the following decade (so the 2010s). Dimitry Bioy, for instance, exploits the anonymity afforded by the Internet to share sexually explicit photographs of minors with like-minded individuals, confessing to "Oliviero Toscani" that "lately the best thing has been the world wide web which enabled me to show my work without endangering myself, I slid like oil in a virtual market without fear of finding the pigs at my door." Carmelo Gavotta, on the other hand, is fixated on the potential of the new digital media to transform anybody and everybody into not just a Peeping Tom but also a misogynistic sadist. His screenplay about a man who exploits sexually explicit footage

of a former sexual partner that he has recorded without her consent, to blackmail her into engaging in sexual intercourse with him again, anticipates phenomena such as revenge porn.

The case of Hamid Piccardo deserves special mention. While Piccardo did not manage to unleash a jihad in the art world with his exhibition in Tirana, though one might argue that Lavagetto himself made a valiant attempt to, the inclusion in the 2001 Tirana Biennial of an artist – albeit a fake one (but what does that actually mean?) – who was an Islamic fundamentalist and a disciple of Osama bin Laden no less, assumes a premonitory or prophetic quality in hindsight. This is because, as I mentioned at the outset of my presentation, the 2001 Tirana Biennial opened in September, only four days after the 9/11 attacks in the United States which, of course, birthed the "Global War on Terrorism," giving rise to a devastating wave of islamophobia that is still raging unabated. (Maurizio Cattelan is said to have dropped out of the exhibition in a sign of protest [Ricci, n.d.].)

Given the anticipatory structure of Lavagetto's project, and the speed and efficiency with which it was repressed, I propose to read the hoax at the center of the first edition of the Tirana Biennial by way of analogy, that is, as the primal scene – in the psychoanalytic sense – that structures the birth and development of Albanian contemporary art.

Albanian contemporary art was, of course, not born in 2003. The dominant narrative about Albanian contemporary art did, however, coalesce during and in response to the second edition of the Tirana Biennial that opened in 2003. Albania was proclaimed to be the next experimental utopia, or one of them at least, and the essence of this experimental utopia was proclaimed to reside in the figure of the Artist-Mayor leading the city (and now the Artist-Prime Minister leading the country), onto whom the contemporary art world (or, to be more precise, a certain faction within the contemporary art world that in the late 1990s and early 2000s were mainly associated with relational

aesthetics) projected its fantasies about the fusion of art and politics, though crucially in a radically reduced form by basically equating it to the figure of the Artist-Politician.

At first sight, this seems completely bizarre. Especially since the questions ask themselves. For example, just how avant-garde or radical can a political project modeled on Tony "Third Way" Blair's New Labour and an aesthetic project based on the paradigm of relational aesthetics, or "whatever makes capitalism more beautiful," as Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei (2016) has aptly described it, possibly be? The even more bizarre thing is that those questions have not been and are not being asked. As Sonja Lau, who was the first to present in this series of talks, has pointed out: "Rama's reception in the international art world has been such that while the mere coexistence of these two positions inside of him is continually celebrated, one is actually discouraged from using one position – be it that of the Prime Minister of the artist – to interrogate or scrutinize the other" (Gashi, Lau & Van Gerven Oei 2020).

Upon closer inspection, however, I think that this state of affairs is not so inexplicable after all. That is because the proper significance of the reduction of the project for the fusion of art and politics (or art and life) to the figure of the Artist-Politician has less to do with the specific content of the latter's artistic or political practice and their alignment, than it does with the convergence of artistic sovereignty and political sovereignty. This model of political sovereignty is at heart of the paradigm of the state of emergency or the state of exception, which recent world events have revealed to be the not-so-hidden matrix upon which the modern state is erected.

This account also has the benefit of explaining the trajectory of Rama's tenure as Prime Minister. It is important to note here that long before the Covid-19 pandemic made its way to Europe in early 2020, and even before the disastrous earthquake that struck Albania on November 26, 2019, both of which led to the adoption of wide-ranging emergency measures, the country



had been in a de facto state of exception already for some years due to the so-called justice “reform,” which caused a deep paralysis of the Albanian judiciary system, and the decision of the opposition MPs to rescind their parliamentary mandates in January 2019 caused a similar paralysis in the Albanian legislative system, concentrating an unprecedented amount of power (compared to the last thirty years) in the hands of the executive branch.

It also explains why the sovereign violence wrapped up within this excess of sovereign power was unleashed with the most ferocity, both real and symbolic, on a cultural object, namely, the historical building of the Albanian National Theater, which was brutally and shockingly demolished in the early hours of the May 17, 2020, at the height of Albania’s draconian quarantine measures imposed during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (Di Liscia 2020).

In other words, Rama’s

artistic-political project is essentially a neoliberal dissimulation of the old avant-garde project for the fusion of art and politics (or art and everyday life). So we could think of Rama as something like a hybrid between an artistic and political hoaxer.

Lavagetto’s project is important for us today not only because it anticipates what I have just called the “hoax” that is the myth of the fusion of art and politics in the country (and its corollary, the myth of the artist-politician), but also and primarily because of its attitude of pure rejection which is fundamentally opposed to all the strategies of myth-building that made possible and shaped the dominant narrative about Albanian contemporary art.

The so-called “Tirana Conspiracy” derides the “personalities” that make the art world go round – the curators, the magazine editors, the exhibition directors, the financial and political sponsors, etc., while revealing them

to be active participants in the market logic that underpins professional and power relations in the international art world; and it does not spare the figure of the artist and the status of the artwork either, which are revealed to be so many copies, dupes, and fakes lost in a sea of zeroes and ones. As Tatiana Bazzichelli (2008, 208) has put it in one of the few critical texts on Lavagetto’s project:

“... the real art was the network, the net of relationships (between Giancarlo Politi and Oliviero Toscani; between Oliviero Toscani and Benetton; between Marcelo Gavotta, Olivier Kamping and Giancarlo Politi; between Marcelo Gavotta, Olivier Kamping and the four fake artists), whether horizontal or vertical. The works of the artists (actually nonexistent) were not determining factors for planning the Tirana Biennial, it was the people behind them, the commercial image of Oliviero Toscani and behind him economic support from

Benetton that Giancarlo Politi evidently hoped for.”

At the same time, Lavagetto’s project is very much a part of the other (perhaps even more important) legacy of the historical avant-gardes that still persists in contemporary art, namely, the tradition of negation which, to put it in simple terms, dictates that art’s ability to function critically is contingent upon art’s negative relation to both its own tradition as well as the specific conditions of the society in which it exists (and by that I mean specifically capitalism, imperialism, and now neoliberalism too).

The fact that Lavagetto’s project was swiftly forgotten while Rama’s project continues to fascinate (at least in some quarters), illustrates the limitations of the pursuit of strategies of negation (at least on their own). Coming on the heels of the “Tirana Conspiracy,” Rama’s politicization of art presented itself (successfully, one might add) as the negation of the

negation to Lavagetto’s negation, essentially neutralizing its effects. To my mind, however, this only highlights the importance of the role to be played by utopian art, something that Raino Isto discusses in relation to capitalist realism ▶ p. 21. And by utopian art I mean, of course, a real alternative to neoliberal capitalism and not the neoliberal dissimulation of such an alternative. Similarly, I do not think that art should give up on the pursuit of truth, but rather double down on it.

Nevertheless, as I mentioned earlier, I do think that at this particular juncture, Lavagetto’s attitude of pure rejection and strategies of dissimulation can be useful. The question is, of course, how to go about using such practices? I think that there are definitely more ways than one. One option is to remain within the logic of the hoax.

A recent example of this is the way in which the Italian publishing collective Wu Ming

intervened in the debate surrounding QAnon in the summer of 2018. This was just as QAnon was breaking into the mediatic and political mainstream, and Wu Ming entered the fray by planting (through a series of tweets) the idea that QAnon had actually started off as a hoax or a prank targeting the American alt-right and Donald Trump’s supporters, a prank inspired by the activities of an obscure (in the United States) Italian left-wing “movement” from the 1990s that went by the name of Luther Blissett, of which Wu Ming are an offshoot. (Incidentally, Luther Blissett were among those initially suspected of being behind Lavagetto’s intervention at the 2001 Tirana Biennial before his identity was revealed many years later.)

In that spirit, I declare both the Tirana façade project and its author, the Artist-Mayor turned Artist-Prime Minister, to have been masterminded by Marco Lavagetto in December 2000. ■ 2022

## How to Demolish a Cultural Monument for an Oligarch

■ VINCENT W.J. VAN GERVEN OEI

It was the early morning before the last day of the Covid lockdown, May 17, 2020. A small group of activists of the Alliance for the Protection of the Theater were huddled up in the main hall of the National Theater, trying to get some sleep. Some were outside, keeping an eye on the surroundings. Earlier that evening, dozens of people, including leaders of the opposition parties, had come to the National Theater to protect it from what was thought to be its imminent destruction, voted a few days earlier by the Municipal Council. But now all the politicians had left, circulating the rumor that the threat was over. Around thirty people, all of whom had been engaged for nearly two years with the longest sustained protest in Albanian histo-

ry, as well as a handful of journalists, remained.

Around 4:30, dozens of special forces made their way into the building, taking those inside by surprise. People fled throughout the building under the cover of darkness, trying to hide from the masked and armed intruders. But excavators swiftly followed in their wake, and started to demolish the façade while several people were still hidden in the attic. They feared for their lives as the historical building was collapsing around them. They were only found much later, alive. By noon, the National Theater was no more and with it, most of the historical archives, props, and costumes that had been sheltered inside of it. The National Ombudsman later concluded that the police had used excessive violence and had

endangered the lives of the protestors.

The National Theater opened in 1938 and was located directly behind the Ministry of Interior Affairs, right in the middle of Tirana. A historical landmark commissioned by King Zog and designed and built by Italian artisans, it also happened to be situated on one of the most coveted pieces of real estate in the city. This is a story of the Albanian government’s campaign to destroy this cultural monument, crush the cultural workers and their allies protecting it, and hand it over the area to a government-allied oligarch for private development.

On March 12, 2018, Prime Minister Edi Rama presented a redevelopment plan for the entire area around the National Theater, which would be redesigned by the re-

nown Danish architect Bjarke Ingels. He argued that the current building could not be salvaged by restoration, and that the entire project would be handed out as a concession to a construction company by means of a “special law” that would circumvent the usual expropriation and tender procedures. As it turned out later, this project had come to the government as an “unsolicited proposal” from the unnamed company, which owned “93% of the property that

is adjacent to state property.” As the government had no “public fund available” for redevelopment, a direct concession without procurement procedure was claimed to be the only available option.

Whereas the plot and building of the National Theater were under management of the Ministry of Culture, some adjacent plots and buildings belonged to the Municipality of Tirana. At that time, Rama’s Socialist Party didn’t command a secure majority in the Municipal

Council, due to irregularities around the swearing in of several new council members. The special law would allow the national government to circumvent the local government, joining up both pieces of real estate together for the development of a new theater building and, importantly, a “retail connection” occupying more than half of the public property: several new highrise buildings.

When the draft law was made public, it became clear that it was designed



Documentation of the illegal destruction of the National Theater. Photo by Ataol Kaso, 2020.



to donate the public property of the National Theater directly to a particular construction company, Fusha, which had a long collaboration history with Prime Minister Rama, dating back to his time as mayor of Tirana in the early 2000s. Most recently, they were involved in prestige projects such as the multi-million euro renovation of Skënderbeg Square and the renovation of the Pyramid, both along the monumental axis of Tirana. According to the draft law, the Municipality of Tirana would be expropriated and negotiations for public-private redevelopment of the land were to be held directly, without tender competition, with Fusha. Fusha in turn would commit to hiring Bjarke Ingels as designer.

The draft law “Concerning the determination of the special procedure for the negotiation and signing the contract for ‘the design and realization of the urban project of the new building of the National Theater’” was approved by Parliament on July 5, 2018 through an expedited procedure, despite being at odds with both national and international legal frameworks. With the Constitutional Court without quorum because of the vetting that was part of the ongoing Justice Reform, the law could not be immediately tested on its constitutionality.

In all of this, Ingels played an unsavory role. It was through his company’s website and an interview in a Spanish magazine that it was confirmed that it had been Fusha who had initially commissioned the design for

the National Theater and several highrises behind it that Rama had presented in March 2018. In turn, Ingels claimed that he had won an “international competition.” Yet the Ministry of Culture, which owned the National Theater building, denied the existence of any competition or development plan. When asked about any details, Ingels referred to a non-disclosure agreement with his client, Fusha. And when held to account in his own country, Ingels, whose company publicly made a non-corruption pledge, complained loudly about being “accused of triggering ‘violence and corruption,’” a correct qualification based on the events that would transpire.

After four opposition deputies sent a letter to the European Commission, the internationals were forced to start paying attention. Creating ad-hoc legislation in order to favor a specific construction company without any form of competition is in violation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement that had been signed between the European Union and Albania as part of the EU accession process, and the European Commission formally asked the government for an explanation of the special law. Meanwhile, then President Ilir Meta refused to sign the special law, citing unconstitutionality. He sent it back to Parliament, which indefinitely postponed the discussion of his veto.

In September 2018, the European Commission requested that the explicit mention of Fusha be removed from the law, while

**“There are no towers there. There will be no towers built there. Inside, outside, behind the entire perimeter [...] there are no towers!”**

– Prime Minister Edi Rama, May 21, 2020

it refused to make its report on the special law public. According to the European Commission, releasing the actual report would “compromise the immense efforts achieved to establish quality international relations with Albania” and “might lead to a diplomatic incident.” The government complied, but, as before, it used the institutional vacuum at the Constitutional Court to push through the amended special law, passing it in late October. President Meta subsequently appealed the law at the non-functional Constitutional Court, while the government eventually opened, in violation of the deadlines specified in the special law, a tender for the concession of the redevelopment of the National Theater tailored precisely to Fusha in July 2019.

In response to the threat of expropriation and demolition, the actors of the National Theater and their allies started to organize. The National Theater was occupied by the Alliance for the Protection of the Theater and became a symbol of opposition against the Rama government, bringing together cultural workers, civil society activists, and opposition members in a varied and sometimes tense alliance, right in the middle of Albania’s political heart. From June 2018 until that early morning of May 17, 2020, a collectively curat-

ed program of exhibitions, speeches, theater, and music turned the occupied National Theater into a vibrant cultural space, hosting the longest show of continuous resistance and solidarity against the government Albania had ever seen.

In particular, the Alliance for the Protection of the Theater spearheaded the grassroots aid collection and distribution in the wake of the severe earthquake that hit central Albania on November 26, 2019, channeling aid to many Tirana citizens while the government was slow to respond. Their activism managed to bring the plight of the National Theater to a wider international audience, and their efforts were rewarded when in 2020 the building was listed by Europa Nostra, an EU-funded initiative, as one of the seven most endangered heritage sites in Europe. Also the then EU Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Mariya Gabriel, publicly supported the preservation of the building.

After staying quiet for months, refusing to announce the outcome of the tender procedure that had started in July of the previous year, the Municipality of Tirana announced in February 2020 that the negotiations had failed, due to what Shkëlqim Fusha, Fusha’s owner, qualified as the government’s “expanded

requirements that upset my economic balance.” The National Theater would now be fully redeveloped with public funds instead. With neither tender nor redevelopment plan in place, on May 14, the Municipal Council voted in secret to demolish the National Theater.

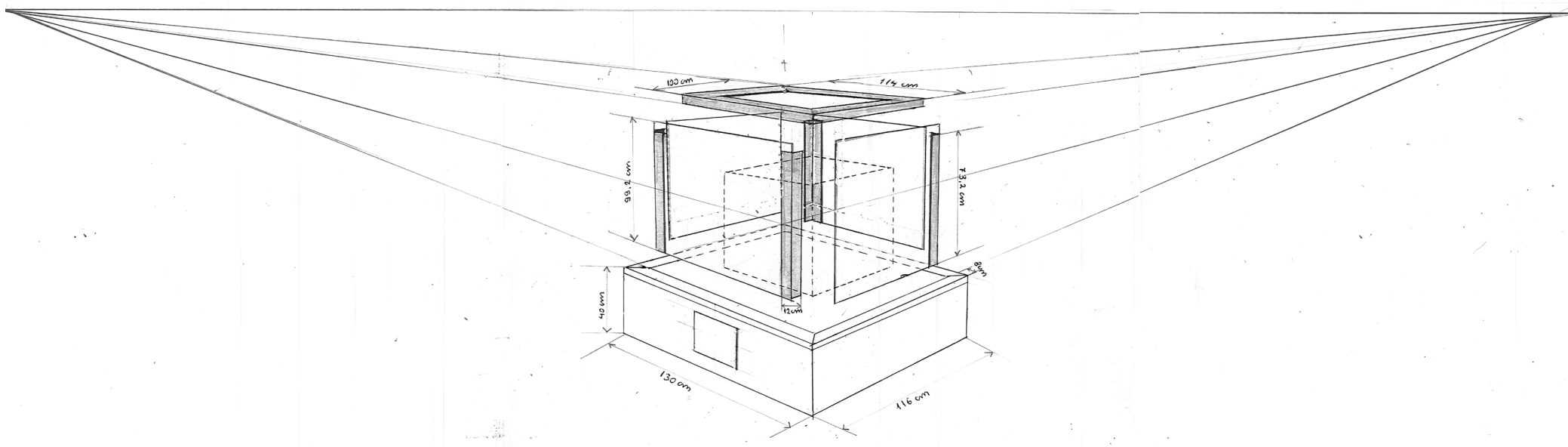
In July 2020, the Municipality of Tirana opened a new tender for the design of the National Theater, priced at €500,000, which was won by A&E Engineering. Despite earlier claims that it had no money for redevelopment, which had been used to justify the concession structure of the special law, the Rama government now transferred €7.3 million to the municipality for the project, even though Mayor Veliaj had previously claimed that the whole project would cost as much as €36 million.

Meanwhile, the Constitutional Court had once again reached its quorum after being decimated by the vetting. On July 2, it reached a verdict on the President’s case against the special law. The Constitutional Court ruled that the special law should be withdrawn, which in practice had already happened. Furthermore, the transfer of the National Theater property from the Ministry of Culture to the Municipality of Tirana was judged illegal, because the Theater had a protected status as monument. But by the end of the month, the government had retransferred the property to the municipality. Mayor Veliaj argued that because the monumental building no longer existed, this new

transfer did not violate the Constitutional Court’s verdict.

On May 5, 2023, the Municipal Council of Tirana decided to grant Fusha the property of 1,266 sq.m. adjacent to the National Theater, in exchange of 50% of the floor space in any future buildings, exactly as Shkëlqim Fusha had suggested already in 2020. In March 2024, it was revealed that Fusha will use the property to build a 23-story highrise, despite repeated assurances of Prime Minister Rama and Mayor Veliaj.

This sequence of events illustrates how the government effectively used the institutional vacuum caused by the Justice Reform to illegally transfer state property and a cultural monument, and then presenting the nation with a simple *fait accompli* of its demolition when the Constitutional Court was reconstituted. It also shows how a construction company with close ties to the government tried, and succeeded, to acquire public property to realize commercial highrises: first through an unsolicited concession proposal, then through (failed) tender negotiations with the Tirana municipality, and finally by being granted the property for free of charge. All of this was given a veneer of respectability by an internationally renowned architect, whose plans miraculously survived this dazzling series political and business maneuvers. ■ 2024



Pleurad Khafa, 200 Million Euro (reference to the 2015 OSCE report on Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama’s offshore account, allegedly accumulated through bribes for construction permits), 2020.



# Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake

## Or, toward an Emancipatory Capitalist Realism

### ■ RAINO ISTO WHENCE CAPITALIST REALISM?

This essay concerns a phenomenon that already seems to belong, definitively, to the past: capitalist realism. The project of the essay is to imagine the contours of a capitalist realism that corresponds to the conditions of capitalism in the present, which are not necessarily the same as those under which this particular form of realism was first imagined. Perhaps, from this investigation, we can even glean something about a capitalist realism for the future. My approach is at least partially a negative one, one that aims to outline the challenges and pitfalls that any realist project necessarily faces in trying to confront or reflect contemporary capitalist actuality in a critical way. But the project is also a hopeful one: it is optimistic about the possibilities of such a critical standpoint as an effective way to enact cultural forms and creative strategies that at least chip away at the foundations of neoliberal capitalism's ubiquitous hold on imagination today.

This text is occasioned by the *MANIFESTO Hijacking* project, and it is appropriate that one particular element of that project – the exhibition *The House That Woodrow Built* – presents itself (at least in part) in the form of a room, a room of empire, reconstructed from its own overdetermined items of domestic consumption. The exhibition offers us a sort of museum that has bought back empire's own objects from the market, and arranged them under the aegis of a magic spell – in the hopes that such a spell could break the hold of empire on the politics of our world. The room as a site is appropriate because capitalist realism began – or at least one of its beginnings was – in rooms, although of course rooms of a different kind.

There are two independent and nearly simultaneous origins for the term “capitalist realism” in the context of postwar visual art. The first is its use in May of 1963 by artists Gerhard Richter, Konrad Lueg, Sigmar Polke, and Manfred Kuttner, who described an exhibition of their works staged in a vacant butcher shop in Düsseldorf as “Pop-Art, Junk-Culture, *imperialistischer* and *kapitalistischer Realismus, neue Gegenständlichkeit*, and *Naturalismus*” (Faris 2015, 4). Later, in October of the same year, Richter and Lueg again famously used the phrase as the subtitled of their happening *Living with Pop – A Demonstration for Capitalist Realism*, in which the artists utilized the model furniture displays within Düsseldorf's Bergen department store, humorously highlighting the potential misuses of the objects displayed therein (in other words, the potential to use them in ways that were confusing, unhelpful, not ergonomic, or that otherwise ruptured the idea of the well-organized and efficient capitalist home). Later, this phrase became more widespread in the German context thanks in part to René Block's use of the term to refer to a more expansive group of artists (Weiner 2015, 86).

Not long after, in February of 1964, the Japanese artist Akasegawa Genpei would use the term in his “Theses on Capitalist Realism,” which looked at the relationship between “models” and “real things” – specifically through the lens of the artist's own production of precisely detailed copies of 1,000-yen notes. Genpei wrote:

“To take down a suspected chief culprit, one must first seize hold of clues left by the henchman. Using a magnifying glass, I analyzed the 1,000-yen note exactly, and copied it onto a panel at 200-times magnifica-

tion. This painting, which I copied down utterly without adding sentiment of any sort, was shit realism – not Socialist Realism, but what we may call capitalist realism. It's not about designing a flag to be hoisted above our destination; instead it's about making a mold of the road on which we are now walking. And it was a kind of torture for this henchman, money” (Genpei 2021, 4).

Genpei published his essay shortly after the artist had been indicted by authorities for counterfeiting currency, and the text responds quite directly to this incident. It emerges, in other words, from Genpei's successful infiltration of the capitalist system of circulation (although he also expressed indignity that the authorities had lumped his work in with ordinary counterfeiting schemes). He proposed that by consistently creating enough copies of his model yen notes, he could eventually empty the monetary system of value entirely (effectively producing inflation through art).

As Jaimey Hamilton Faris (2015, 3) has shown, in its German as well as its Japanese contexts, capitalist realism was a response to both socialist realism and to capitalism's heightened consumer culture. Richter came from a background as a socialist realist painter, and Genpei too had first been trained in realist oil painting, and had developed as an artist at a time (1950s Japan) when working-class realist imagery dominated many major venues. In its relationship to – and efforts to both mirror and overcome – socialist realism, capitalist realism went beyond pop art (to which it was clearly closely related), and (in terms of its conceptual underpinnings) resembled something more like the sots art that emerged in the Soviet Union or the political pop movement of 1980s China.

Capitalist realism fits in, then, to the neo-avant-garde interest in producing a critical form of realism, but these various “realisms” took different approaches: some focused more on the image (and thus on advertising, media culture, and the increasing ubiquity of photography) as was the case with photorealism, for example. Others, like *nouveau réalisme* or Richter and Lueg's *Demonstration for Capitalist Realism* focused more on the object – in this case, the product – and its repercussions in society at the time.

Indeed, we can see a distinction between two related forms of art that adopted the name “realism” in the postwar years. One constellation of practices used “realism” to describe a particular way of working with what they perceived to be “the real” – often creating assemblages or performances that utilized or transformed consumer objects, treating them as one of the most salient signifiers of “reality.” Another constellation of practices, perhaps best exemplified by photorealism (and especially its North American variations) instead proposed to understand “the real” through the *image*, and in particular through the dominant mechanism of its representation, the camera.

For its part, socialist realism represented a different approach to the question of “the real,” and it is telling that socialist realism referred to itself primarily as a “method.” The precise aesthetics of socialist realism varied across time and across the different countries of the socialist world, but generally speaking it was famously united by the principles of Party-mindedness, ideological clarity, class-mindedness, and truthfulness. Despite building upon the frameworks of traditional pictorial realism, with their emphasis on reflecting reality, the socialist realist impetus to elaborate a clear ideological interpretation of the world was intertwined with the avant-garde imperative to transform the world through artistic action. The other major distinction between socialist realism and the various postwar realisms that proliferated primarily on the other side of the Iron Curtain is that socialist

realism's object of critique was external: insofar as it presented a critique, it was a critique aimed at capitalist society (Lukács 1962, 95–96), and its ability to criticize shortcomings and contradictions in socialist society was hampered by its administrative adherence to Party agendas (though of course artists did sometimes critique socialist society through “official” works). But the fact that its critical modes were largely external in character matters because socialist realism, no matter how much it tried to monopolize cultural production within the socialist world, understood that it existed in a world in which other other systems and other cultural forces played a substantial role. Perhaps more significant – or so I will try to argue below – was that despite the supposed dynamism and constant transformation of socialist society, socialist realism held on to a core principle: that it is possible to know reality, and that the artist was able to show this knowledge was within the reach of the masses.

I think we will understand why this assertion that it is possible to *know* reality matters so much if we consider what distinguishes capitalism today from the capitalism of the earlier Cold War years.

### EXTRACTIONS AND DRIVES

What is ultimately most notable about the realist strategies that developed in postwar capitalist societies is that they were critical responses specifically to *Fordist* capitalism, to the massive proliferation of consumer goods, advertising, and the circulation of money that makes possible the corollary practices of consumption. If these practices seem dated to us now, it is because – as Jodi Dean (2013, 145) argues – the neoliberal economy (which is markedly distinct from capitalism in a classical sense) is focused on maintaining inequality, rather than generating the capacity to consume. This is not to suggest that artistic critiques of consumption have no efficacy in today's world; it is simply to say that an artistic critique of neoliberal capitalism cannot credibly proceed without taking into account the shifts in capitalist ideology that have developed since the

end of communism as a viable historical horizon. Of course, critiques of the image and critiques of the product still give us valuable tools to understand capitalism – art still frequently operates within the realm of the visible, after all, and to compete for attention with advertising and design it must develop critiques that challenge the dominance of certain image paradigms.

But today's capitalism, in its neoliberal variant, is no longer characterized by production so much as it is – as Saskia Sassen (2014, 10–12) argues – by *extraction*. This is relevant for many reasons, but primarily because it belies the dominant narrative that has shaped discussions around neoliberal capitalism in the former East: that it contributes to social development and prosperity, and specifically to the growth of democracy. In the context of former Eastern Europe, the ahistorical aspect of discourses about capitalism is inextricable from the discourse of democracy, which also emerged as a master signifier in the region during the immediate postsocialist years. It was democracy that provided the primary moral justification lacking in neoliberal policies, and at the same time it provided the rhetoric of participation that obfuscated the persistence (and indeed institutionalized production) of inequity that took place through and after shock therapy, and during the explicit reshaping of state policies to support neoliberal agendas. The advancement of democracy was treated as transparently dependent upon the introduction of a neoliberal capitalist system.

There is a significance to the way that these debates on democracy and neoliberal capitalism unfold in places like Albania – not in spite of being peripheral, but *because* they are still perceived as peripheral. This has to do with the very theatrical character of the project of shock therapy in the first place: as Anthony Gardner (2018, 45) argues, shock therapy was ultimately enacted as much – and perhaps moreso – *for the West as an audience* as it was for the former East. George Soros himself described the democratization of the former socialist world as an effort to give “the West the inspiration



it has lost" (Gardner 2018, 45). I think this is still true, perhaps even moreso, and nowhere is it more evident than in the way that the artworld has appropriated the "transformations" that artists have supposedly wrought in places like Albania as "inspiration" for new narratives of art's social efficacy.

Meanwhile, as Blendi Kajsia (2014) has argued, neoliberal policies were instituted in Albania through a paradigm that emphasized local corruption as a roadblock to democratization, and that attributed corruption to the state, effectively framing neoliberal privatization as the ideal method to ensure both functional democratic systems and economic growth. Neoliberal capitalism is about more than just instituting a single transition to privatization, however. As Dean (2013, 151) observes, neoliberalism operates through what psychoanalysts describe as drive: a cycle of desire, partial fulfillment, and renewed desire that also involves the displacement of the desiring subject back onto itself. This loop is *not* based on equilibrium – if it were, the circuit would eventually close itself – but instead, on the incomplete character of any fulfillment, and the simultaneous repression and redistribution of desire ensure that there is no equilibrium to the system (140). For Dean, this is also the primary characteristic of neoliberal capitalism, especially in the era of speculative finance, where the complexity of markets can be used to further justify the impossibility of political intervention in their production of inequity.

In the case of the former East, I think that the chronically "incomplete" character of democracy has also continued to provide a justification for interventions that subjugate the state to the market, and for the further privatization of various public services and goods. The importance of "democracy" is sustained through an ongoing emphasis on local corruption, and this in turn is sustained through interrelated systems such as those of Europatriarchy, which currently dominate Albania's efforts to become politically and economically integrated into its surrounding region.

At the same time, the *extractive* character of global neoliberal capitalism no longer actually cares about local development, or even about local or sustainable democratic institutions. And its "extractive" character is not just aimed at natural resources (although those are of course one of its targets, a characteristic that unites contemporary extractive capitalism with empire in the classic sense) (Sassen 2014, 10). Because neoliberalism effectively transforms every element of what would formerly have been considered the sphere of "the human" into an economic factor (Brown 2015, 176), it also sanctions the human as a new site of extraction – perhaps even as the site of extraction *par excellence*.

To justify ongoing inequity produced by the extraction of resources from local contexts, it can utilize both the ongoing moral weight of "democratization" as well as – as I have already mentioned – the idea of global market complexity, which effectively forestalls the moment at which any definitive *knowledge* of the structures of economic injustice could be criticized. As Dean (2013, 146–50) has pointed out, banks and corporations spend huge amounts of money to produce narratives about the complexity of the market, a complexity that supposedly defeats any efforts to predict economic change, and likewise in a single stroke defeats all efforts to critique the system, by proclaiming that the speed and scale at which the market operates prevents any particular market phenomenon from becoming the subject of a specific legal or ethical challenge. (The most current example of this is the effusive character of finance, which drives the market so definitively today, but which resists immediate critique because so much effort is put into declaring the "complexity" of financial interactions, even at national scales.)

#### (CAPITALIST) REALISM AS PESSIMISM OR OPTIMISM?

This produces a situation that the late Mark Fisher called – for reasons that have little relation to the art-historical use of the term – "capitalist realism." Fisher (2009, 2) described capitalist realism

as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it." He famously asserted that capitalist realism functioned "like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (16). For Fisher, this manifests in the end of any kind of credible "shock of the new"; contemporary experience is instead reduced to a series of repetitions of the past – repetitions that have already been forecast within capitalism's own horizon. "Realism," in Fisher's language, refers not to critical evaluation of the relationship between reality (or realities) and their production through ideology, politics, and economics, but rather to the much more prosaic sense understood in the phrase "be realistic." What Fisher diagnoses, in essence, is the way in which contemporary capitalism de-relativizes itself, presenting itself as if it were not only un-ideological, but also without any historical genealogy that might ultimately lead elsewhere.

Fisher was not writing about art when he used the term "capitalist realism," but the influence of his writings on the topic has been felt – especially in the field of cultural studies. As such it's necessary to differentiate Fisher's (ultimately pessimistic) description of a very real phenomenon from the possibility of a critical artistic method that would undo precisely the "pervasive atmosphere" that obscures all possible alternatives to the capitalist system, and particularly to the union of neoliberal economic logic to the waning (but still attractive) discourse of democratic freedoms.

To sum up a bit: the possibility of capitalist realism as a critical realism emerged originally in the context of different historical moments. The capitalism it responded to was one whose dominant character (and ideological aim) was to produce a robust consumer society through the production of goods that were – at least in theory – widely accessi-

ble. At the same time, the capitalism that capitalist realism responded to was *not* the only alternative, and it was indeed the overlapping propaganda of the two competing systems that produced the possibility of capitalist realism in the first place.

A different situation pervades in the period after 1989, especially in the former socialist world. The capitalism that is prevalent now is no longer primarily – and it's important to say "primarily" – a capitalism of production, so much as it is a capitalism of extraction, a capitalism that not only wants to use and exploit, but to reconfigure every potential participant in its purview into something that can be *used up*, can be exhausted. This extractive model, developed through the refinement of empire's historical expansions and appropriations, is coupled with the dominance of neoliberalism as a discursive framework. Neoliberalism simultaneously expands market logic to every element of society and its ecosystems, while asserting that the state must produce regulation in order to support the supposedly "natural" state of the market. A final difference is that following the end of global state socialism as a credible ideological alternative, it is difficult to envision any alternative to current socioeconomic conditions.

It is not alarmist to call this variety of capitalism apocalyptic. Its effects are tremendously violent at a global scale, and it has manifested in a trend toward devastation in both the ecological and the political sense.

There is not, we must admit, much that art can do in the face of apocalypse. But the very apocalyptic character of global neoliberal capitalism also points to certain paths of resistance. First of all – and this is why I think a capitalist realism today has much to learn from Socialist Realism – there is still a role to be played by utopian art, and by an art that – to cite Georg Lukács (1962, 95–96) – is "a possibility rather than an actuality," that aims "to conceive the future *from the inside*." Certainly, we cannot directly follow the historical avant-garde's – and socialist realism's – belief that art will somehow directly bring about a utopian society. But in

this historical moment, criticisms of neoliberal capitalism struggle to muster a coherent alternative vision – and especially they struggle to muster a vision that does more than address the specific *effects* of neoliberal capitalism. From the political perspective, the frameworks of both democracy and individual rights – while they have certainly produced many kinds of emancipation – have failed so far to effectively challenge the framework that has enthroned the market as the single and uncontested site of the "true."

#### WHITHER CAPITALIST REALISM?

In the course of writing and reworking this text, I would inevitably approach the end without any single, concrete proposal – what can it mean for contemporary art to challenge or criticize a system in which that same art is complicit by its very character? Regardless of whether contemporary art generates any significant profit, *as a form* it generates a kind of cultural capital that validates the existing alignment of oligarchs (who control the systems of finance capitalism) with cultural investment. But at the same time, it is art – and specifically a *realist* art – that can assert the constructed and ideological positionality of the current system. Realist art, after all, is the art that declares most emphatically a position that neoliberalism, in its immense efforts to exclude discussions of ideology, has attempted to marginalize and erase: that any direct and effective engagement with or transformation of social reality must necessarily come from an explicitly ideological viewpoint.

If we imagine a new kind of capitalist realism, we are imagining an art that can show the present global configuration to be the system that it is: a system with a history, that came to be through the machinations of waning empires and rising elites, a system that sustains itself through violence and inequity, a system that appropriates cultural discourses not to sustain the generalized consumption of culture but to produce a specialized form of it that is available to elites alone.

There are, I think, many different answers to

what "capitalist realism" for tomorrow might look like. What should unite these endeavors is the sense of themselves as a *method*, the same sense that once united socialist realisms across the globe. But the specific strategies – aesthetic and social – employed by these endeavors may well differ drastically.

Some will adopt the model of the general strike, as authors like T.J. Demos, Stefano Harney, and Fred Moten have advocated – a strike that grinds the cultural apparatus to a halt (Demos 2022, 23–27). Others will foreground artists as laborers, focusing on the economic positionality of the artist in relation to both the state and the private sector (Dimitrakaki 2016). Others will be narrative in character, weaving stories and dredging up uncomfortable memories out of forgotten archives and the detritus of imperialism. Still others will be almost entirely fantastical, proposing science-fictional futures with the aim of drawing us out of the oppressive and ubiquitous reiterations of neoliberalism that characterize the present. Still others will seek to develop alternative social systems and economies, based upon reciprocity and slower models of culture, turning away from the imperative to economize every aspect of human activity and transform it into growth.

Many of these efforts to provide another imaginary of the future will develop in what Gregory Sholette (2011, 1) refers to as the "dark matter" of the contemporary art world, utilizing those "make-shift, amateur, informal, unofficial, autonomous, activist, non-institutional, self-organized practices" that the official artworld refuses to acknowledge and yet upon which it nonetheless depends for its own vitality. Other versions of a capitalist realism for the future may also emerge within the institutions that still hold up that art world: museums, galleries, universities. Rather than abandoning these venues entirely as fundamentally tainted, some cultural workers will seek to occupy, to hijack, and to repurpose these institutions, transforming them into the sites from which (for example) a post-growth future might be imagined.



**CODA: WHENCE  
THE SNAKE OF  
NEOLIBERALISM?**

The snake, as a sign, carries tremendous symbolic potential and multiplicity. Sometimes it is figured as a representation of violence – the snake of fascism, its venomous mouth poised to strike. At other times, the snake is the sign for endless cyclical rebirth – the ouroboros consuming its own tail, representing the totality of the cosmos. The title of this text – which must certainly seem, by this point, quite disjointed from the text itself – takes its impetus from the depiction of a very particular serpent, in a painting by Nicholas Poussin, entitled *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*. Painted sometime around 1648, the scene is set, as so many of Poussin's paintings are, in an idyllic natural setting, with civilization (in the form of the rigid geometries of a city and a citadel) visible in the distance.

In the foreground, we witness a scene of death (Clark 2008). At lower left in the painting, we see the body of a man lying

face down, his prone form partially obscured by the writhing and gleaming black coils of a snake that has wrapped itself around him. Although it is difficult to see in the painting, its colors darkened by time, one of the snake's eyes gazes out at us, ominously. Across a pool of water, at the right side of the painting, a man is running: having encountered this scene of death, his face – which is likewise turned toward us – expresses panicked fear. His left arm is outstretched in a dramatic, but clearly composed, gesture, as he races around the rim of the pool. Close to the center of the painting, in the middle ground, we see a woman with both arms open wide, a pile of laundry before her, as if she has just released it in surprise. She looks in the direction of the running man; the sight of the dead man languishing beneath the snake's coils is obscured from her, but she clearly comprehends the horror of this first witness to the scene of demise. Further in the distance, over a slight rise, we can see a lake with fishermen at work, oblivious to what

is happening in the foreground. Even further into the background, beyond the lake (and on the hill at left), we see a city and a citadel. As many have observed, the action in the painting radiates outward from the traumatic site of death in the foreground: close to us, disturbingly close to our space as viewers, are the writhing coils of the snake; in the distance, we see the calm warmth of the sun settling over the walls of the city and the rolling hills behind.

This painting might have remained entirely remote from the scene of art and politics in Albania, were it not for a curious and rarely observed curatorial gesture: the fact that artist Anri Sala used precisely this painting as a framework in which to contextualize the work of artist-politician Edi Rama, current prime minister of Albania. Anri Sala's curatorial statement from the exhibition *Inversion – Creating Space Where There Appears to Be None* (at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2011) tries to clarify Sala's own artistic interventions upon Rama's famous colorful

drawings from his day planner and other official documents by placing the viewer within the Poussin painting (which Sala describes but strangely never explicitly names in the main curatorial text itself – he calls it simply “a landscape painting” that contains, “in the foreground, [...] the action: a man killed by a snake” (Sala & Rama 2011, 14). This exhibition represents, I think, a quite significant moment in the consolidation of Rama's art-world mythology – coming as it does in the period between the end of his time as mayor of Tirana and before his election as Prime Minister. And the texts in the catalog for the exhibition – which contains a series of conversations between Rama and Michael Fried, Philippe Parreno, Marcus Steinweg, Erion Veliaj, and Anri Sala – already foreshadow the effort to extend Rama's aesthetic ambitions to the national level, and to justify these artistic interventions utilizing the discourse of democracy under development.

I return to this peculiar appropriation of Poussin's *Landscape with a Man*

*Killed By a Snake* not because Sala's interpretation of Rama offers some kind of viable blueprint for capitalist realism – quite the opposite: the texts in the catalogue participate in just the kind of obscurantism outlined by Dean in her critique of neoliberalism and drive. Sala – and Rama, and Veliaj, who also discuss the painting in the concluding essay in the catalog, “The Nightingale's Tune” – steadfastly avoid addressing the violence in the painting. Instead, Sala uses it to justify a kind of endless loop of interpretation, in which political action is enervated by an endless shifting or reverberation between multiple viewpoints. In this shifting back and forth, any kind of cogent critique of the centralization of political power in contemporary Albania dissolves into a much more diffuse discussion of “democracy,” a discussion that in turn approaches the problem of the man killed by the snake as if he were one particular constituent – as if his death were an individual problem to be solved, rather than a moment of horror that might open

up an understanding of the brutality of an entire system.

These musings of the current text – and its project to propose a return of and to capitalist realism – have been inspired by the desire to reject the diffusion and misdirection that characterizes Sala's invocation of *Landscape with a Man Killed By a Snake*. Instead of justifying neoliberalism's logic of circular drive by adapting the open-endedness of aesthetic encounter to forestall any concrete moment of judgment, I propose that capitalist realism offers the possibility of taking a stance, of drawing a line, of embracing the unifying and transformative potential of an articulated ideological position. Until artists, curators, and cultural workers of all kinds are prepared to take such a stance, the snake of neoliberalism will writhe across the bodies of the marginalized and the oppressed, its coils bolstered by an artworld that is interested only in perpetuating its own delusions.

■ 2022



Vincent W.J van Gerven Oei and Çiçek İleğiz, *Lighting a Fire on the Bottom of the Ocean*, 2022.





Pleurad Xhafa (with Sokol Peçi), *Milton Friedman's Head*, 2009–24. Installation, crushed clay, wood, metal wire.

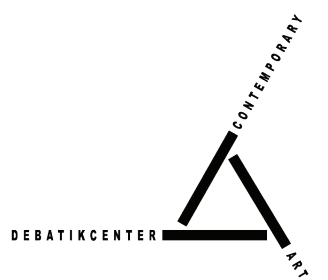
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MANIFESTO Great Wave is a project by DebatikCenter of Contemporary Art and Zeta Contemporary Art Center, developed with the support of the Foundation for Arts Initiatives (FAI) and the Swiss Cultural Fund, a project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), implemented by the Center for Business, Technology and Leadership (CBTL).



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