



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

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Visions in Flux: Exploring Visual Art in Transitional Albania

Topic of research

My research explored how visual artistic expression and the institutions that support it have changed after the collapse of socialism in Albania. I also tried to understand the ways in which these changes reflect the social, economic, and political transformations that have been happening in the country since the dissolution of the socialist regime.

Relevance and contribution to field.

Little research has been conducted on/about the visual art scene in post-socialist Albania by native or foreign scholars. Although the nature of my research project was exploratory, I have made extensive observations about the scene and localized several issues of concern that Albanian artists are dealing with.

I feel that my academic career has been hugely influenced by this study. I intend to explore this subject further, perhaps even transition it to a Ph.D. project. I also hope that this study will have ramifications in the works of others; I wish that my observations and my initial conclusions will inspire other scholars' points of departure for further research.

Ultimately, I hope to have shed some light onto the problems that Albanian artists are struggling with at the moment, as well as the systemic relationship between these problems and the current economic, political, and social situation in post-socialist Albania. Most importantly, I

hope that this information will provide the US and Albanian policy community with insights on how to alleviate these problems.

Summary of approach and research methodology/ list of research sites.

I obtained my information via several ethnographic research methods such as: structured and unstructured interviews, life-history interviews, group interviews, archival and historical research, and participant observation. I interviewed visual artists of different generations, most often one-on-one, and, in a few occasions, in a group setting. Some of these interviews, particularly the initial ones, were of the structured model, in that I had prepared a given set of questions to pose prior to beginning the conversation. On the other hand, it was not infrequent for some interviews to take the form of an informal conversation. I conducted extensive archival research on Albanian art history, art theory/criticism during the socialist regime, the lives and works of different artists, published interviews, and documentations of past and recent exhibitions.

My research sites were: the National Art Gallery in Tirana, Albania (state institution); Zenit Art Gallery (private); Galeria e Vogel (private); Art Area Studio (private); Arts Academy (state institution); International Cultural Center (state institution); privately organized artistic events; hotels/bars/coffee houses, in order to get an idea as to the art that is being consumed by the public ("public" meaning the owners of these venues, as well as the clientele that is indirectly consuming this art via frequenting the venues).

A summary of your research findings and preliminary conclusions.

Through the annals of the past...

After spending just a few weeks in Tirana, I came to the conclusion that in order to understand the path that visual artistic production has taken in post-socialist Albania, I had to understand the nature of the artistic production that it was immediately preceded by. I felt that in order to fully understand how art is being made now, the personal experiences of visual artists, and the changes in the institutional infrastructure, I absolutely had to ask questions about how art was being made before the monumental changes of 1991. For that reason, I will commence my paper by briefly presenting what I have gathered to be the premises of socialist realist art as applied in Albania during the fifty year long dictatorship.

During the socialist regime, artistic expression of all media, was constricted by numerous canons which were severely enforced by the "Party Committee for the Arts," a committee that consisted of individuals who were politically affiliated. Even though these canons were not formally documented, all artists were aware of them, as even a minor deviation could have extreme consequences. In fact, according to Maks Velo's work titled *Essays on Communist Dictatorship*, 146 men and women of the arts were persecuted during these fifty years. Their sentences ranged from imprisonment, to internment in work camps, to execution by firing squad.

But what was the "method of socialist realism" that Velo, himself a victim of the regime, and the some hundred other artists, desecrated through their creations? What were the parameters that the socialist state set for the arts?

First and foremost, art had to be "engaged," (the terminology used during the time), in that it had to convey elements of the ideology of the system. In that sense, it served strictly as a conductor of party propaganda. Most of the themes that were treated were ones that portrayed the progress and the optimism that were supposed to have been characteristic of the post-

World War II Albanian socialist state. Prime examples would include the emerging industry, collective work, scenes from the collectives, and portraits of the leaders.

During the Enver Hoxha regime, a great effort was made to remove Albanians from their past, especially the immediate past which meant anything related to the monarchy and the Ottoman reign. The religious values of the Albanian people, that had played an important role in their lives and art up until that point, came to be considered taboo. Depictions of the nude or intimate moments between the sexes were forbidden, because, as many of my informant have stated, it was believed that the socialist being was, first and foremost, a machine of the party, void of individual drives and impulses. There have been instances of paintings where the idea of the couple is suggested, albeit implicitly, as is the case in the theme and title of Vilson Halimi's work: "Comrades in War, Comrades in Life" (1974). The couple, however, is standing in front of the Albanian flag, and they are both in partisan garb. Even birds and animals were not ahistorical or apolitical entities. Skender Mihalcka, artist painter and restaurateur at the Institute of Monuments in Tirana, whom I interviewed several times, both individually and at a group setting, told me of an instance where he created a piece of work depicting a group of goats for acceptance at the "National Exhibition" of 1986. He specified that he thought it imperative to title the work: "The Herd of the Collective," (as opposed to, for instance, "The Herd," or a title void of elements that would politicize the work), otherwise it would not have been accepted at the exhibition.

There were also constraints in the color palate. Darker hues were believed to evoke feelings of pessimism in the masses, which would have been antithetical to the optimism that the state was trying to instill. Red, on the other hand, was used constantly, representing not only the color of the Albanian flag, but also the color most closely associated to communism. Shadows could only be used sparingly, as their existence begged the question: "What's hiding behind them?" speaking to the paranoia of those in power. But most importantly, any image, color, or style that was evocative of the work of a Western artist was categorically forbidden. Such work would have been deemed a "foreign show," and its author would have been likely prosecuted or forced to conduct an "auto-critique" in front of the "League of Writers and Artists," the main organization for the arts. For example, the artist Edison Gjergo was imprisoned for several years because the "Committee for the Arts" decided that, in Gjergo's work titled "The Epic of the Morning Stars," cubist elements and a blue similar to that of Picasso took prominence.

Generally, the existence of these canons leads one to believe that those in power considered art as a propaganda tool to disperse the vision and philosophy of the party. All of the artists that I talked to stated that such constraints had an asphyxiating effect on their creativity. As one of them said: "...following these laws, meant that one could never be themselves, but solely the machine of the state." An artist was thus an instrument and an illustrator, not a creator.

I conducted extensive archival research, including research on the theoretical body of work that was written on the arts during socialism, along with a close interpretation of the works that were produced during the period. It was quite perplexing for me to find out that there are surreal or myth-creating elements within socialist realist art, on the thematic, stylistic, as well as ideological realm. For instance, the female form was frequently depicted as muscular, strong, and masculine, and I believe this tendency to reflect the system's attempt to bride the gap between the sexes in all realms of social existence. The male form was always portrayed with super-human proportions, in the process of doing heroic and sometimes impossible things. A painting by artist Sali Shijaku, produced in the late 70's titled "The Partisan of Peza," depicts the figure of a man with the traditional head dress of the area, dressed in traditional garb, with a gun in his arm. The most poignant part of the painting is that the man is stepping on a huge chunk

of a war airplane, suggesting that the airplane had been destroyed by the villager's gun. This painting was highly praised by the party and was awarded the first prize at a National Exhibition.

The track of the present...

During the three months that I spent in Tirana, I interviewed several visual artists, curators, art students and officials from different art institutions. I also followed closely the activities of art venues such as the National Art Gallery, the International Cultural Center, the Arts Academy, several private galleries in Tirana, and other privately organized artistic events. Among the several issues that I explored in my conversations with the artists, I especially focused on the individual experiences of artists in a post-socialist and transitional context, as well as the changes that have happened at the institutional level in Albania.

Several of the artists that I interviewed have been educated and/or worked and exhibited both in and outside of Albania: in Western Europe or the United States. Others have never gotten out of the country, but desperately desire to. Actually, most of the artists that I talked to stated that they do not live and work in Albania by choice, but because they have to, meaning that given the option to leave, they would. But even those artists, who had not made efforts to immigrate, considered freedom of movement—being able to see and experience other things—as one of the main conductors for creativity. It is extremely difficult for Albanian citizens, artists included, to get VISAS and visit other countries in the absence of the right political affiliations to aid them in this endeavor. In my understanding, this desire to have mobility, and the subsequent inability to (one of my informants compared Albania's VISA policy to the isolation during the communist regime), was vividly expressed in today's art in the country, both implicitly and explicitly. For instance, a painting of one of my informants, Lume Blloshmi, a female artist in her 60-s, depicting a closed, locked door, was titled "Europa." More implicitly, the portrayal of the West as a desired place is expressed through the tendency of many artists to blatantly mimic landmark western artistic genres, styles, and trends, or title their works in the English language. For instance, one of the exhibitions that I attended at Zenit Art Gallery, a privately owned and run art space in Tirana, titled "Red Art Lights" [note: only in English] hosted work by prominent artists: Vladimir Myrtezai, Genc Permeti, Ardian Isufi, Rudina Hyka and Iva Seferi. The titles of the works in display were, without exception, in the English language. Vladimir Myrtezai's photographs and installation were titled "Ketchup" and "Underground," respectively; Iva Seferi's video was titled "The Breakfast." The façade of the building that houses the gallery displays its advertisement only in the English language: "ZENIT ART GALLERY," without an equivalent in Albanian. Generally, in Albania, the knowledge of the English language personifies a high level of cultural/symbolic capital. It is also emblematic of the West, "the better other." Its usage could be interpreted as a conscious attempt at Westernize the work and integrate with within European artistic discourse. In this vein, one should also take into account that Albanian culture is currently being infiltrated by new concepts and ideas at such a fast pace that language change cannot concurrently reflect (e.g. "underground," "ketchup," "red lights"). Such vacancies in the Albanian lexicon seem to be filled in with signifiers from other languages.

At many points during my interviews with artists, I became aware of a sense of uneasiness that they expressed about the lack of originality that is believed to characterize Albanian art at the moment. And even though the idea of what is original and what is not is an eternally debatable one, what I understood them to mean by this concern, is the lack of art that emerges from or is critical of the native social context. My own impressions echoed this concern. The majority of the art that I saw directly resonated to the styles and themes of well-known Western artists, a phenomenon that leads me to conclude that the desire to integrate with Western Europe (W. Europe for most Albanians signifies progress and modernity) is also an effort to leave behind a shameful past and transform a present that is unsatisfactory. To

quote one of my informants: "It's difficult to geographically belong to the European continent, but on all other aspect be an outsider, belong neither to the West, nor to the East. We don't even know who and what we are, and through copying, we are deluding ourselves into thinking that we are getting closer to it."

Another issue that came up as problematic in my conversations and interviews, was the general lack of interest of the Albanian population in the art scene, not only in the form of an audience, but also in the form of a clientele. The same group of people (usually artists) frequented all of the exhibitions that were organized during my research period. Also, most of the artists that I talked to aimed to sell their work to a foreign clientele. I was recurrently told that the Albanian public is, "uncultured and uneducated," "banal, indifferent and often mal-informed," the latter three epithets being quoted verbatim from the pamphlet of Stefan Taci's exhibition: "Return to the City of Constantine," at Zenit Art Gallery. The belief that the Albanian public is incapable of appreciating art was highly prevalent among the artistic groups in Tirana. I do not consider myself informed well enough to agree or disagree with this disclosure, due to several limitations. However, I did become aware of the fact that the art scene in Albania is full of barriers that do not facilitate a transaction with the Albanian public. Firstly, the prices to which paintings are sold are astronomical compared to the wages of a working person in Albania. The prices of the works of painters that I talked to ranged from multiple hundreds to multiple thousands of Euro, where as the average monthly wage of an Albanian person with a university education, is a mere 150 Euro (or even less). Therefore, regardless of one's aptitude to understand or appreciate a particular art piece, the financial situation would not permit the acquisition of the piece. The prices to which paintings are sold may be en current within the European art scene; however, one must take into account that "Europe" is a context with a drastically different economy. I believe the economic factor to be largely responsible--if not the basis--for the lack of interest and involvement of the Albanian public in the art scene.

Thematically and stylistically, I noticed that there is a strong tendency among artist to vastly explore themes that were prohibited during socialism, such as the nude, sex, homosexuality, as well as the so-called "decadent" stylistic genres such as Abstractionism and Impressionism. "Red Art Lights," at Zenit Art Gallery, one of the most widely publicized exhibitions in Tirana in recent times, displayed explicit sexual imagery. This was also one of the sole shows that treated themes that dealt with sexism bigotry, and misogyny, which are prevalent and, unfortunately, accepted tendencies in Albanian society. For instance, one of the videos in the exhibition, titled "Me and Lulu," by female artist Rudina Hyka, portrayed two women who looked very similar to each other (they may have been the same person). One of the women remained still throughout the recording, where as the other, was dressed in a tuxedo suit and tie. The tie she kept loosening at the neck. Her general state appeared to be one of latent distress. I was not able to speak with the artist, however, in a televised interview, she stated that the message that she was trying to convey was the unfortunate and suffocating position that Albanian women find themselves in.

Another observation that I was able to make was that those artists for whom it has been difficult to go out of the country, or establish ties with foreign galleries, rarely treat themes that are directly related to Albania. They mostly treat themes that are recognized as being representative of the West. On the other hand, I have encountered many artists who have worked or studied in other counties, whose art deals largely with Albanian issues. Artist Artan Shabani, for instance, who works and lives both in Italy and Albania and has established himself in the European and Albanian art scene, tends to vastly include elements from Albanian tradition and heritage into his art. Lume Blloshmi's art deals with current issues such as the corruption within the political system in the country, urban growth, and emigration. Generally, it seems that the affirmation or lack-there-of that Albanian artists get from the Western art scene

plays a significant role in the extent to which they accept or shun their national/cultural identity in their art.

I also spoke with several professors who teach at the Arts Academy. Without exception, they stated that there is a general lack of desire to learn and get involved into the art scene from the part of the students. The attitudes of students, they said, are apathetic. Professors regard this lack of interest as a response to the difficulties that Albanians, in general, and Albanian artists, in particular, face with regard to finances. It is extremely difficult to support oneself through one's art, a fact that, according to the professors, has demoralized the student body. Most students at the Arts Academy aspire to become graphic or interior designers, and those that I spoke to, although not disagreeing with the vantage point of the professors, also say that the poor curriculum of the Arts Academy is partially to blame. I did not manage to conduct extensive research on the experiences and work of younger/youngest generation of artists in Albania, mainly because there were not many student oriented art activities during the period that I was there. This may be an interesting topic for future study.

At the institutional level, the most prominent concern is lack of financial support from the government. From my conversation with the director of the International Cultural Center (ICC) Mr. Muje Bucpapaj and the director of the National Art Gallery (NAG) Mr. Nestor Jonusi, I gathered that the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism is putting forth very little financial support to the disposal of these institutions. In fact, ICC, an institution that aims to promote and communicate European and Albanian culture and art in the country, has not received any state support and has been subject to double-taxation since 1991. Both of these buildings are in dire need of restoration and maintenance, especially ICC. The exhibitions that I attended at NAG (averaging on two per month) took place at the lower level which was significantly better unkempt than the upper level, where the permanent collection is located. Most of works in the permanent collection lack signifiers: dating and the author. The lighting is bad and the structure is in a dire need of being painted. In all, most of the building, as well as the collection, is in a state of neglect, especially the socialist realist art section. This institution, which has been in existence since 1954, has reformed its prior mission of propagating state ideology through art, to one that, as I was told by Mr. Jonusi, promotes and displays Albanian artistic heritage to its citizens and the world. Most of the artists that exhibited their work at NAG were artists whose reputations had already been established in the Albanian and/or foreign art scene. However, up-and-coming artists, for whom it is difficult to show in such spaces, have extremely limited options. Smaller private galleries such as Zenit Art Gallery, and particularly Galeria e Vogel, do not receive any state funding, and are sustained with great difficulty via financial support from foreign organizations and NGO-s. Throughout Tirana, there were also a number of privately owned, one-artist, galleries of a purely commercial nature. It was my impression that these galleries were the nexus of transaction between visual art and the Albanian public, a fact that I attribute to the more reasonable prices and the accessibility of the subject/theme of the works.

Suggestions for future research:

Other topics of interest for future research may be:

1. Understanding the role that the art criticism (or its absence) has on art production. There are no active art critics at the moment in Albania. Many of the artists that I talked to believed that part of the reason for the perseverance of the blatant copying in Albanian art, is that there is no one to point it out. Most of the material that is currently being written on or about art is by journalists who do not have the training and the tools to properly understand and/or analyze the situation.
2. In many other post-socialist countries, socialist realist art has become "retro cool." In Albania the contrary is happening: socialist realist art is being neglected and destroyed.

To what extent does coming to terms with one's historical/ideological past necessitates coming to terms with the art that was produced during that period?

3. Questioning the concept of "authenticity" is also one that I find of importance and interest. Can there be "authentic" art in a transitional society?

Recommendations for the US policy community:

I have several suggestions for the U.S. policy community.

1. I have tried to explain in my report that the strict VISA policy for those of Albanian citizenship does not facilitate physical mobility outside the boundaries of Albania. As it has been suggested to me by my subjects of study, mental and creative block is seen as a direct consequence of geographical entrapment. I suggest the US policy community's involvement in the reconsideration of Albania's current VISA policy.

2. The state funding that goes toward the sustenance of art institutions from the Albanian Ministry of Culture is extremely low. The arts are simply not a priority in the state's list of concerns. Support is especially needed by art spaces (such as Galeria e Vogel) that are looking to promote the work of young and up-and-coming artists that do not receive any state financial support. Exchange programs between Albanian art students and American art students would be a great way of fostering artistic communication between the two groups.

3. The art that was produced during the socialist regime is being neglected by the state, the artists, as well as citizens. The art that was created during that period is looked at with disdain, and is seen as inextricably linked to the ideology of the time. I suggest the inception and the support of an institute responsible for the archival, restoration, study, and maintenance of socialist realist art. That part of the Albanian artistic heritage is slowly but surely disappearing.