

“The Red Kiss of the Past That Does Not Pass”: State Socialism in Albanian Visual Art Today

SOFIA KALO

This article examines memory work in recent Albanian visual art. My research has focused on the artwork of a generation of Albanian artists who have only lived their youth through the state socialist period and have now been turning to socialist subjects and symbolism, which they re-present in novel and playful ways. Some of these artists offer nuanced reflections on the socialist past and its legacies, and others use the past to highlight what unsettles them about the present. These artworks further extend and complicate today's state-sanctioned discourses and practices on socialism, thus making an important intervention about how the socialist experience is remembered in the present. [Albania, memory, postsocialism, visual art]

Introduction

During a short visit to Albania in summer 2012, as I was traveling to the southern city of Berat, I noticed the word “NEVER” in massive capital letters on the face of the mountain range on my left.¹ It was a hot day and initially I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. But as the car moved to a different position, I was assured this was no optical illusion. The word NEVER did cross Mount Shpirag, recalling how significant dates, names, and slogans had been written on Albania's landscape during state socialism (1945–1991). Once ubiquitous, many state-sponsored geoglyphs were destroyed in the immediate years of the postsocialist transition by Albanian citizens or the new government to mark a departure from the discredited socialist state. Other geoglyphs have worn off from environmental factors, but continue to be visible, especially to the eye that expects them. Had I seen ENVER, the first name of Enver Hoxha, the First Secretary of Albania's Party of Labor between 1944 and 1985, I would have not been surprised. NEVER, on the other hand, made for a puzzling and bizarre encounter.

After returning to Tirana, Albania's capital, cursory Internet research revealed that the word NEVER had been placed across Mt. Shpirag in 2012 as part of a documentary film project by Armando Lulaj, an Albanian

artist in his early thirties who lives and works between Albania and Italy. Enver's name had been originally placed there in 1968, remaining visible until 1994 when the right-wing government that succeeded the socialist regime used dynamite to remove it. Then, in 1997, Enver's name was back, reportedly commissioned by people sympathetic to his rule. In 2012, some of those who had painted the letters in 1968 and 1997 were commissioned yet again by Lulaj, transforming ENVER into its anagram: NEVER (Figure 1).²

The documentary film that resulted from this process, which Lulaj titled *Never* (2012), is one among a growing body of work by Albanian artists who have recently been turning to symbols, topics, and aesthetics associated with the state socialist period, which in Albania began after World War II in 1945 and ended in 1991 following a large-scale student-led movement. While numerous art producers have engaged with socialist-era subject matter, this essay focuses on the work of those artists for whom socialism has been a dominant theme: Ardian Isufi, Endri Dani, Enkelejd Zonja, Armando Lulaj, and Ledia Kostandini. These artists were born in the middle to late 1970s and early 1980s, coming of age in the first postsocialist decade. The trajectories of their training and institutional affiliations are diverse: except Lulaj, who studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna, Italy, the other artists are graduates of the



FIGURE 1. Armando Lulaj. *Never*. 2012 (video still). Courtesy of the artist.

Academy of Art in Tirana but have also studied and participated in academies and residencies in European countries or the United States. Living and working primarily in Tirana, they are central protagonists in Albania's art world, having exhibited locally and abroad.

In this article, I approach artworks as a platform where a new generation of Albanian artists are researching, critically thinking about, and portraying the socialist past. I argue that while these artists are cognizant of the fetishistic demand for state socialist subject matter in the transnational art world, the commodity potential of their work does not thwart its critical and political potential insofar as it is also employed to complicate mainstream discourses on the socialist experience and the politics of the present in Albania. Drawing on Svetlana Boym's notion of "reflective nostalgia" (2001), I argue that in their ironic and playful forays into the past, some of these artists mobilize a productive form of memory work that allows them and potentially their audiences to reflect on the socialist period and its legacy while also grappling with unsettling aspects of the present. The critical potential of their work is heightened by the novel ways in which they represent the past, which I analyze by deploying Viktor Shklovsky's concept of

"defamiliarization" (2005), arguing that this device allows for their artwork to convey new perspectives on the past and ultimately to intervene on what and how it is remembered in the present. Since these artists were young when socialism ended and have few personal memories from the period, I also apply Marianne Hirsch's rubric of "postmemory" (2008) to critically examine the other resources on which they draw for their work.

In the first part of the article, I situate the work of Albanian artists within a larger context of practices throughout Eastern Europe involving the recuperation, reappropriation, and marketing of socialist products, symbols, and themes. Drawing on the concepts of reflective nostalgia, postmemory, and defamiliarization, I lay out the theoretical framework of my analysis to underscore Albanian artists' critical engagement with a violent past and an unsettling present. In the second section, I deploy these rubrics to examine the artworks and narratives of several artists. This is followed by the final section, where I make a case for the political potential of their work in present-day Albania, especially by emphasizing how their work differs from or complicates state-sanctioned discourses and practices on the socialist period.

Sofia Kalo received her PhD in Sociocultural Anthropology from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 2016 with a dissertation on Albania's fine art world after the end of state socialism in 1991. Her ongoing interests are visual culture, identity in and around borders, and social memory with a focus on postsocialist societies.

Art, [Post]Memory, and Longing

When I began exploratory research in Albania's art world in early 2006, I had expected to encounter playful reminiscences of socialism similar to those that have been documented in the cafes, bars, and art spaces of Eastern European cities as early as the first decade of postsocialist transformation (see Berdahl 1999a, 1999b; Berdahl and Bunzl 2009; Boym 2001; Creed 2010; Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2004). Such practices, which have often involved the recuperation, reproduction, and marketing of socialist products, as well as the "museumification" of socialist everyday life, have been often analyzed by anthropologists within the rubric of postcommunist nostalgia or *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for the East). According to Daphne Berdahl, who has written widely on *Ostalgie*, the culturally specific practices that the phenomenon entails both "reflect and constitute struggles over the control and appropriation of historical knowledge, shared memories, and personal recollections" (2010, 187). Scholars have widely interpreted *Ostalgie* as a response to the disillusionments of the transition—the loss of the humane values, ethics, friendships, and creative possibilities that socialism afforded—as well as a gesture of defiance toward stereotypes about the East as it exists in the Western imagination (Berdahl 1999a, 1999b; Todorova 2010; Yurchak 2006, 8). Most would agree that postcommunist nostalgia is not expressive of a desire for a return to socialism. It is instead an active and strategic response to present-day challenges, with stakes on the politics of the present and of the future (see Boyer 2006).

In her study on the dynamics of memory, Svetlana Boym argues that nostalgia can be prospective in that "the fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future" (2007, 8). For Boym, while nostalgia appears to be a yearning for a different place, it is actually a yearning for a different *time*—the time of childhood, our dreams, and hopes. She proposes a twofold typology of nostalgia to illuminate how individual and collective remembrances interact to construct senses of the past, community, home, and self (Boym 2001, 41; 2007, 13). Distinguishing between nostalgia's "restorative" and "reflective" properties, which she locates in material culture, artistic expression, immigrant homes, and cityscapes, she posits that while the former attempts to reconstruct and reify what has been lost, the latter "thrives on longing" and "shattered fragments of memory" to explore ways of simultaneously inhabiting different places and times (Boym 2007, 13–15). Restorative nostalgia seeks to reinvent the past and "thinks itself as truth and tradition" (Boym 2007, 13). Reflective nostalgia loves details; it is ironic, humorous, ambivalent, and

calls absolute truth into doubt. Importantly, reflective nostalgia is concerned with historical *and* individual time (Boym 2007, 15).

During preliminary research in 2006, I did not encounter any overt instances of postcommunist nostalgia in Albania, restorative or reflective. This did not mean that socialism was absent from public and private discourse. People frequently discussed its legacies, and many even expressed longing for aspects of life during the period—job security, full employment, universal healthcare, and education—but these longings did not take any public or commemorative expression, manifesting a similar kind of reticence to what had been documented in other postsocialist societies, where positive attitudes toward socialism are scorned in public discourse and are thus subject to self-censorship (Todorova 2010). Albanian artists, too, spoke often of their experiences during socialism, about how things were "then" and how they are "now": some better, others worse. Yet, such concerns did not make their way into artistic representation.³

When I returned to Tirana in 2010, I found that a number of artists who were emerging as central protagonists in Albania's art world had been turning their attention precisely to the socialist past. This turn to socialist-era subject matter in Albanian art is not an isolated occurrence: ironic, cynical, and critical appropriations of socialist subjects, aesthetic styles, and iconography have been taken up by artists from Europe to Asia in the past several decades (see Erjavec and Grois 2003; Groys 2008, 2010; Yurchak 2008). By engaging with a trend for which there is already a transnational audience, the work of Albanian artists is inevitably participating in the process of commodifying the socialist past. Nevertheless, as anthropologists Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) have argued in *Ethnicity Inc.*, the commodification of culture, heritage, ethnicity, and identity need not necessarily entail a loss of their meaning. On the contrary, their circulation in the market may help rediscover, reanimate, and regain their social significance for producers and consumers alike (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 20–21). I extend this line of reasoning to my informants' work: while socialist subject matter might be of transnational appeal, this does not thwart the political potential of their works insofar as it also offers little known, critical narratives on the past and the problematics of the present, which is especially relevant for local audiences.

It would be difficult to account conclusively for why socialism has been a concern for this generation of Albanian artists. Anthropologist Alexei Yurchak (2008) has written about a young cohort of cultural producers in Moscow who have recently turned to Soviet topics and aesthetics, positing that the passage of time has made

it easier for them to contemplate socialism in complex ways without stirring too much emotion and without linking it to the oppression, alienation, and boredom that were also part of life during that time. Moscow cultural producers are drawing on and highlighting the aesthetic core of socialist-era art—its idealism, sincerity, and futurism—with the aim of separating it from the political agendas that manipulated it and reincorporating it into the present context of Russian life (Yurchak 2008). Albanian artists have not sought to recover ideals from the socialist era; however, temporal distance is relevant in the context of Albania too. Albania had one of the most repressive socialist regimes in all of Eastern Europe, but, with time, the affective intensity of the symbols associated with the period has steadily tapered, especially for younger generations and those not persecuted during the regime. This is evident in the memory practices of Albanian people from the same generation who are founding bar-cafes populated with socialist-era material and visual culture; widely sharing music or photographs from the socialist era on social media; collecting socialist-era books, posters, and magazines; or taking trips to check out socialist-era monumental culture.

I argue that the memorial practices of this generation of Albanian artists are motivated by reflective nostalgia as theorized by Boym: the irony, ambivalence, questioning, and inconclusiveness that characterize it (Boym 2001, 41). This generation was quite young when socialism collapsed, and, as several of my informants stated, they had not meaningfully thought about the socialist experience or the socialist regime when it was in power. The upheavals of 1991 fragmented their lives and memorial structures, and their research-oriented forays into the past are “attempts to meditate on history and the passage of time” (Boym 2007, 15). Their “looking back” precludes the desire or the possibility for the restoration of socialism. However, it is motivated by the desire to know more about it, something they achieve by moving back and forth between personal memories, the experiential knowledge of older generations, and historical “fact” found in the archive. I therefore suggest that the reflective longing that motivates their works entails specific memory structures, ones that Marianne Hirsch has called postmemorial (Hirsch 2008). For Hirsch, postmemory is the relationship of the second generation to powerful experiences that preceded their births, experiences that can rupture the connection of individuals to their family, the social group, and the historical archive (Hirsch 2008, 103). The second generation can counteract this loss not by *direct* recall, but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation, in the form of novels, artworks, films, performances, or memoirs (Hirsch 2008, 105–7). Postmemory is the “belated memory” of those who never

lived through the powerful events they are recounting, but that were nevertheless powerfully transmitted to them via the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up (Hirsch 2008, 106).

While the artists whose works I discuss are not a second generation as defined by Hirsch—they lived the first decade or so of their lives under socialism—the rubric of postmemory is useful for an analysis of their approaches to dealing with the past. My informants have described their memories of the period as “hazy,” [*të mjegullta*], “fragmented” [*të pjesshme*], or “without orientation” [*pa kompas*], and their “recall” process involves the stories, images, and experiences of others as well as snippets from their own. To return to Hirsch, their work involves processes of “imaginative investment” and “creation” in an effort to recall a past that they may not have experienced directly but that has been powerfully transmitted to them at home, in material and visual culture, in the archive, or in wider discourses within Albanian society. Since 1991, there have been few rigorous efforts to document, analyze, and publicly articulate the socialist experience. The relative absence of such information makes postmemory a necessary and important relationship this particular generation can have with the socialist past.

The process of creative recall that is constitutive of my informants’ works, however, does not make for a straightforward representation of the socialist past. These artists are critically examining and representing it in new and thought-provoking ways, which they often achieve via the device of defamiliarization. The notion of defamiliarization was first developed by the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay “Art as Technique.” According to Shklovsky, defamiliarization entails “making strange” the familiar with an emphasis on cognitive ambivalence and play (Boym 2005, 586). The manipulation and reinvention of forms allow for new perspectives to become possible while also increasing “the difficulty and length of perception” (Shklovsky 1988, 20). By deploying this device, that is, by defamiliarizing aspects of socialism or by juxtaposing them with elements of the present, my informants invite their audiences to engage with new perspectives that are often different from mainstream discourses on the period. Moreover, defamiliarization allows them to directly intervene in what is remembered about the past today.

Socialism in the Work of Albanian Artists

In this section, I present the work of five Albanian artists: Ardan Isufi, Endri Dani, Enkelejd Zonja, Ledia Kostandini, and Armando Lulaj. Their works could be

interpreted from a number of perspectives, including their symbolism, form, media, and content. I have prioritized content-based interpretation, as this is the most revealing dimension of what these artists have to say about the past. My analysis focuses on three major currents that underlie their work. I first discuss those works that revisit little-known aspects of the socialist past. I then turn to the work of those artists who are concerned with the legacies of socialism today. Last, I discuss artwork that uses the past to critically reflect on the present.

Socialism Revisited

All the artists whose work I analyze here seek to expand or anchor their own memories into historical documents (e.g., newspaper articles, books, archival material), visual culture (e.g., paintings, illustrations, photographs), and oral histories (e.g., interviews with relatives) to expose and comment on the past, highlight its legacies today, and offer critiques of the present. But unlike the other artists whom I discuss and who were born in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Ardian Isufi was born in the early 1970s. He has often approached the socialist past from a personal and experiential standpoint, teasing out the mechanisms the socialist regime used to exert power over people. In *Zëri i Popullit* [*The Voice of the People*] (2010), he presented a series of drawings on copies of a 1987 article from the only daily newspaper during socialism, *Zëri i Popullit*, where he is mentioned as an excellent pioneer. The drawings draw attention to how the socialist regime aimed to indoctrinate people often through the meaningless language of authoritarian texts or to control their bodies through the requisite, repetitive morning calisthenics for schoolchildren, and compulsory military service. The drawings, which I saw during the group exhibit *Fjala* [*Word*] at FAB Gallery in Tirana in the winter of 2010, were presided over by a sculpture titled *Hibrid* [*Hybrid*]: a corn cob constructed entirely of prosthetic teeth, standing for the constant surveillance of the socialist system on expression.

Most recently, in an installation titled *Antihomazh* [*Antihomage*] (2015), Isufi has presented Enver Hoxha's death mask (Figure 2), never previously on display, at the end of a long, narrow hall at the National History Museum. According to Isufi, the passage through the hall was intended to provoke a feeling of isolation in the audience, isolation being a main trope through which many interpret the socialist experience. On the other hand, the confrontation with the mask was intended to induce a state of reflection about the "macabre" past.



FIGURE 2. Ardian Isufi. *Antihomazh*. 2015 (installation). Courtesy of the artist. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

Endri Dani is another artist who has considered how the socialist regime exerted power over people, especially through its architecture and material culture.⁴ In *182 cm*, for example, he presented a series of twenty photos taken between 2013 and 2015 in front of the entrances of prefabricated buildings found throughout Albania (Figure 3). The entrances of these buildings are all 182 cm high, which also happened to be Dani's height at the time and what led him to take some of the first photographs. However, upon further research, which included procuring a map of the locations of the buildings and interviewing their architect, he found out that it had been Enver Hoxha who had singlehandedly asked for the entrances of all buildings to be Hoxha's height: also 182 cm. Like Isufi's *Zëri i Popullit*, Dani's *182 cm* also emphasizes how the regime aimed to control people's experiences or insert itself into their daily lives.

Socialism's Legacies in the Present

Enkelejd Zonja told me of his growing interest in Albania's socialist past during our first meeting in his studio.⁵ We were talking about one of his latest exhibits when he brought out a book of photographs of Enver Hoxha published in the late 1980s to commemorate an anniversary of his death. Leafing through, Zonja explained that



FIGURE 3. Endri Dani. 182 cm. 2014 (color photo). Courtesy of the artist. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

it was one of many books, newspapers, and magazines he had been acquiring, in addition to interviewing older members of his family, a research process intended to expand his own limited recall of the socialist period. “I’m *dying* to paint Enver, to see him in my studio,” he said, adding, “I don’t know when, but it’s building up.”

Only a few months after this conversation, Zonja exhibited *Në Venat e Tua* [*In Your Veins*] (Figure 4), which references a painting by Michelangelo da Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of Thomas* (1601–1602), where Thomas is depicted inserting a finger into Christ’s chest to finally quell any doubt of his resurrection. In Zonja’s painting, however, it is Hoxha who appears as Christ, an ironic representation of the former leader considering that he proclaimed Albania an atheist country in 1963. This would be the first example of an artwork in post-socialism that depicts Enver Hoxha in such realistic and yet unfamiliar terms.



FIGURE 4. Enkelejd Zonja. *Në Venat e Tua* [*In Your Veins*]. 2011 (oil on canvas). Courtesy of the artist. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

Zonja is everywhere in this painting. Hoxha’s body is modeled after Zonja’s, whereas the man inserting his finger into Hoxha’s wound is modeled after the artist’s father, representing the generation of Albanians who lived most of their lives during socialism. The younger generation is implicated too. Despite appearing disinterested and sporting a Western aesthetic—earrings, jeans, a Mohawk, Coca-Cola in hand—the younger man, also modeled after the author, stands between Hoxha and his father. “The past has a hold of people, they are a product of it,” said Zonja in response to my observation that Hoxha appears frail but is nevertheless firmly gripping the father’s hand. “We can pretend there has been total rupture, but that’s not the case. That’s why I gave Enver that cunning smile... as if he’s saying: ‘I’m still here, in your veins.’”

Later that year, Zonja produced a series of 70 pencil drawings titled *Teshtima e së Kuqes* [*The Sneeze of Red*], in which the figure of the young pioneer—the symbol of socialist youth, hope, idealism and futurity—is central. Zonja’s pioneer is always a boy who is suffering helplessly. He is an amputee or gets raped by a goat. He commits suicide by hanging in the presence of a wasp with a red stinger (Figure 5). The contradiction embedded in the juxtaposition of simple form with horrendous content in all these drawings defamiliarizes the figure of the pioneer, offering a statement on the pure but failed ideals of the socialist era and the oppression endured by many.

Armando Lulaj also defamiliarizes the past to present it under a new light and make statements about its legacies in the present. For instance, in the video *Jeton në Kujtesë* [*Living in Memory*], Lulaj documents the burning of a large star in one of the hills that surround Tirana. Incinerating the main symbol of communism, according to Lulaj, is a way to purify its history of “suppression and persecution,” recalling Marina Abramovic’s *Rhythm 5* (1974) performance when she also burnt the communist star to purify it before leaping inside it (Feedback89 2009). Despite the ritual of purification, according to Lulaj, the ashes of the burnt star remain, as do the aftereffects of socialism in the present realities of Albanians and the power structures that govern them.

Lulaj’s later work has been more research-oriented: he has engaged with documents and images from the socialist era to highlight aspects of the past that have not been properly assessed. For *Never* (Figure 1), Lulaj spoke to those who had taken part in both placing and removing Enver’s name on Mt. Shpirag, thus shedding light onto its little-known and complicated history. Marked by erasure, revival, and transformation, the trajectory of its existence speaks to the ambivalence with which Albanian citizens and the government



FIGURE 5. Enkelejd Zonja. *Teshtima e së Kuqes* [*The Sneeze of Red*]. 2011 (pencil on paper). Courtesy of the artist. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

have viewed socialism. By bringing back a geoglyph in strangely familiar terms, Lulaj also brings forth the mechanisms through which socialist rule sought to captivate the masses and how this past has been contested by citizens or governments. This is important to know and keep in mind, according to Lulaj, so as to *never* allow authoritarianism to recur, even though Albania's governmental affairs often seem dangerously close to a dictatorship. *Never* thus intervenes in the landscape so as to rediscover the past and point to the problematics of the present and the future.

Ardian Isufi has also engaged with the legacy of the socialist past today, tackling issues such as the contemporary reappropriation of socialist architecture and the chaotic juxtaposition of elements from different time periods in Albania's landscape. In his solo show *Teatri i Hijeve* [*Theater of Shadows*] that I attended in April 2010, the large oil paintings on display presented socialist-era landscapes, symbols, and photographs juxtaposed with contemporary realities: unfinished buildings, churches, mosques, and commercial centers. Other mixed-media artworks based on socialist-era photographs centered on defamiliarizing symbols associated with socialism (e.g., the pick or the shovel) by transforming them into those associated with mass consumption or religious ideology (e.g., product advertisements, the cross, or the

crescent moon), providing a comment on the power and operations of propaganda during socialism and after.

Socialism as a Platform for Critiquing the Present

Several drawings from Zonja's *The Sneeze of Red* series were first exhibited as part of *Rewind/Play/Forward*, a group exhibit organized in spring 2010 by the art organization Tirana Institute of Contemporary Art [TICA] at Zeta Gallery, a private gallery in Tirana. While Zonja's minimalist drawings of the suffering pioneer demanded close-up inspection, the works of Ledia Kostandini, another participating artist, were large and lighthearted, presenting juxtapositions of characters from Albanian socialist-era films with those from Western films such as *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971). Socialist-era characters were painted in black and white, whereas the Western ones were in color, creating the impression of different temporal and spatial realities.

In my interview with Kostandini, I found out that her interest in the socialist past is motivated by reasons similar to those of Zonja: a longing to understand it better but also represent it in terms more complex than those offered by the demonizing rhetoric of the ruling right-wing government.⁶ And similar to Zonja, Kostandini's work is to a large extent postmemorial, referencing images, stories, and documents from the socialist period, as illustrated by *Çlirim* [*Liberation*] (2010) (Figure 6) and *Drejt Evropes* [*Toward Europe*] (2010), two paintings she has based on photographs of major events found in pre-1991 magazines. In both paintings, Kostandini defamiliarizes socialist-era symbols and images by juxtaposing and paralleling them with those from the present.

The year 2010 was a year of political euphoria because the visa regime that Albanian citizens had been subject to since the end of socialism was finally lifted. In celebration, a huge European Union flag was draped on the city center, and blue signposts bearing the names of European cities were scattered everywhere. These sights and events play out prominently in Kostandini's works. In *Çlirim*, a socialist-era photograph of a state-sponsored parade is infused with images from 2010: pioneers are performing in front of the EU flag, whereas the juxtaposition of red and blue, respectively symbolizing socialism and the EU, create a parallel between the socialist past and the so-called democratic present. On the other hand, *Toward Europe* depicts a moving locomotive, headed by an ecstatic male figure that resembles Hoxha. While he is standing below a red star, a symbol of communism, he is also displaying the victory sign, a staple gesture of then-Prime Minister Sali Beri-



FIGURE 6. Ledia Kostandini. *Çlirim [Liberation]*. 2010 (oil on canvas). Courtesy of the artist. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

sha. Euphoric, anonymous figures are cheering on both sides, surrounded by socialist-style banners with contemporary messages.

The spatial, temporal, and ideological layers in these paintings suggest that today's government-sponsored euphoria is not all that different from those in socialist-era demonstrations or parades, with their exaggerated displays of pride, optimism, and achievement. Euphoria *was* and *is* a strategy, according to Kostandini, to deflect attention from poverty, isolation, fear, and censorship. "Despite appearances, the message of these paintings is sad," she emphasized. "Arrows are shooting toward Athens, Prague, Berlin. People are smiling, they are energetic. But the idea of being closer to Europe is an illusion since we continue to be surrounded by the same reality, the same problems."

The issues with which Zonja, Kostandini, Lulaj, and Isufi are grappling are not limited to artistic discourse and practice but exist within a wider arena of discourses and practices focused on remembering state socialism and the fate of its materiality. I now turn to a discussion of more mainstream, official practices of socialist erasure and commemoration. I argue that the work of these artists complicates and challenges selective (official) formulations of the socialist past most often intended to support the status quo of those in power.

The Politics of Reflective Recall in Art

As the trajectory of Hoxha's name on Mt. Shpirag illustrates, after 1991 the citizens and the new govern-

ment of Albania made efforts to purge the material and symbolic culture associated with socialism in order to signal their departure from the discredited system. Other practices of erasure included the destruction of monuments of former leaders and heroes, the removal of street names of people or events, and the erasure of ideologically loaded features of the landscape. Cityscapes were also treated as artistic canvases. In an internationally acclaimed project, Edi Rama, an artist by training who served as Tirana's mayor from 2000 to 2011 and is currently prime minister, painted over the capital's gray building exteriors—an iconic imagery of repression during socialism—with pastel colors so as to give people the impression of a new start.

While many Albanians recall aspects of the socialist period with longing, often to provide a comparative framework for critiquing the social and political situation at present, Albania's official culture of socialist commemoration has tended to emphasize the terrors of the regime, such as its attack on religion, intellectuals, and artists. This is most notably apparent at the Pavilion of Genocide, inaugurated at the National History Museum in 1996. On the other hand, the removal or destruction of socialist-era symbols and materials has often been presented as a means to liberating Albanians from the trauma of the socialist past, an argument that has been elaborated by different political figures at different points in time.

One of the most heated debates on the future of socialist materiality that unfolded during my time in the field concerned *Piramida [The Pyramid]*, a pyramid-shaped structure built in 1986. Initially intended as Hoxha's mausoleum, in the period of postsocialism, parts

of this structure have gone through various stages of repurposing and resignification. *Mumja* [Mummy], one of the first nightclubs in Tirana, was once located on the premises, as were offices of private television channels. By 2011, however, the Pyramid had been closed off to the general public while a state-of-the-art performance hall was being constructed in the premises. Then, suddenly, Prime Minister Sali Berisha announced that the Pyramid would be demolished on January 21, 2012, to give yet another “blow” to the horrific socialist past. This decision was met with immense popular dissent, resulting in protests, where prominent public figures, including artists, stated various reasons for its preservation, such as its importance to Albania’s architectural heritage. Still others argued that the Pyramid’s status as a tourist attraction had the potential to bring in revenue. Most, however, emphasized the civic meanings the structure and surrounding area had for the citizens of the capital for whom it is an important recreational space. Berisha later withdrew this statement, citing extravagant reconstruction costs as the main reason, and ultimately the structure was not demolished.

But how are the works of the artists discussed here positioned within shifting official and popular discourses on socialism, as well as a changing landscape of socialist commemoration? On the one hand, the work of Isufi, Dani, Zonja, Kostandini, and Lulaj does not present a radically different message about the socialist experience than official ones mentioned above. By emphasizing suffering, terror, torture, lack of freedom of speech, and surveillance, these artists are highlighting the ominous aspects of socialism in Albania. Kostandini juxtaposes socialist symbols with contemporary ones to show how propaganda then *and* now capitalizes on euphoria to conceal the daily problems that plague(d) Albanian citizens. Lulaj wishes to burn the communist star to exorcise its past, but its ashes nevertheless remain. “NEVER” is a warning sign that authoritarianism must not return. Zonja’s pioneer is always suffering: between rape, successful suicide attempts, and amputation, he is doomed. Dani highlights the extent to which Hoxha sought to control people’s experiences and extend his reach, including in their homes. Lastly, Isufi is concerned with the surveillance, threat, repetitiveness, and isolation that, according to him, were constitutive of life during socialism.

And yet the work of these artists is also quite different from state-sanctioned discourses and practices on the period. Firstly, their work is motivated by myriad longings, not for the return of socialism, that much is certain, but the longing to know the past better, to reflect on and incorporate themselves in it, to complicate it, and importantly, to provoke their audiences into

further reflection, sometimes in playful and ironic ways. By defamiliarizing the symbols, forms, and aesthetics of socialism, they are not benignly invoking the socialist past. Whereas state-sanctioned discourses and practices on socialism and its material culture focus on erasure as a way to “ease” Albanian people’s road to democratization, these artists are encouraging the opposite, namely, that Albanians must work through undigested aspects of the past, a process that can enable a more critical approach toward the social and political issues they face today. The productive political potential of their work lies precisely in these nuances and critiques.

With the exception of Ledia Kostandini, none of the artists have described their work as nostalgic. Nevertheless, the rubric of reflective nostalgia is a useful one to think about their motivations and their works’ intended effects. The work of all of these artists thrives on longing, so as to understand the past better and to encourage themselves and their audiences to engage in a process of critical reflection. Boym has argued that unlike restorative nostalgia, reflective nostalgia springs not from a desire to reconstruct or return to the past, but from a longing for continuity in a fragmented world. It seems that for these artists in particular, the urgency of their longing to better understand the socialist experience springs from the rupture that 1991 caused in the trajectory of their lives, leading to fragmented memories and narratives, so many of which remain unknown or undigested. Moreover, they are not interested in presenting any historical truths that may be thought absolute; rather, they bring forth the past without reifying it. Thus, their work thrives on ambivalence, research, and questioning, offering meditations on the dreams of the socialist era and its legacies today.

Moreover, some of these artists are not dealing with the socialist past as an end in itself, but are using it to critique what they find troublesome about the contemporary. As Boym has argued, nostalgic longings are often determined by the needs of the present, which can have an impact on the future (Boym 2007, 8). This is particularly the case in the work of Lulaj and Kostandini, who defamiliarize the past to explicitly generate a politics of caution against the repetition of mistakes from the past in the present. In doing so, they are inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones. On the other hand, Kostandini’s playful juxtapositions in *Liberation* or *Toward Europe* narrate a relationship between different temporalities that is as much about revisiting the socialist past as it is about critiquing how Albanian governments, past and present, have deployed euphoria and collective celebration as a means of legitimizing their authority.

During our meeting, Kostandini spoke of an art project she had yet to execute that is motivated by what she described as nostalgia for the experiences of her youth and the material culture to which it is attached. She wanted to photograph socialist-era monuments, landscapes, and buildings, many of which have been actively destroyed or left to decay, and turn them into postcards. Kostandini posited their preservation as necessary for understanding Albania's past, especially for future generations, in a statement that emphasizes what Boym has also noted, that longing for the past and critical thinking are not opposed to one another. In Kostandini's words, "There were good things about our life then. But even the not-so-good-things are part of our history, we shouldn't destroy them. History that belongs to me and to you. We need to think about the reasons why we should not repeat the past and we can't do that if it is not there."

Conclusion

The end of socialism in Albania was followed by massive transformations that greatly affected its art world. No longer subject to state oversight, during the first decade or so in postsocialism, many artists sought to depart from socialist-era styles and topics. In recent years, however, a new generation of Albanian artists has been strategically re-incorporating socialist-era forms, topics, and aesthetics into their work, which they present in novel, ironic, and playful ways. Their artwork is an important lens through which we can see their reflections on socialism and its legacies more than two decades after its collapse, reflections that extend from and also complicate mainstream discourses on the socialist past. Moreover, the work of this new generation makes plain their critical attitudes on an unsettling present. While art that deals with socialist subject matter is highly sought after transnationally, this demand does not thwart the political potential of these artists' work insofar as their content critically assesses the socialist experience and the postsocialist present.

Although most of the material I have discussed here is based on data collected between 2010 and 2011, for many of these artists, socialism continues to be a foremost concern. Isufi's *Antihomage* was exhibited in 2015, the year when Lulaj was selected to represent Albania in the 56th Venice Art Biennale with *Never* and two other videos also dealing with little-known legacies of the socialist past. In summer 2015, I visited Zonja's studio, where we discussed his works in progress, all of which concern socialist symbols and themes, including

the pioneer. As a subject of artistic concern, socialism is a trend that is showing no signs of slowing down.

Beyond the work of these artists, however, some of the processes elaborated here have been gaining momentum after artist-politician Edi Rama was appointed Albania's prime minister in October 2013. Indeed, his electoral victory has marked a decisive change in art's relationship to politics, the government, and the socialist past. During his time as prime minister, Rama has made efforts to treat art as a platform for remembering, preserving, exhibiting, and commodifying socialism by making available to artists and their audiences elite socialist-era spaces previously closed off to the public, including *Piramida*, Hoxha's former villa, and a massive concrete bunker built to house socialist leaders in the event of a nuclear attack. Rama has referred to these spaces as "treasures," simultaneously highlighting their potential to generate revenue and to help Albanians better understand the past.⁷ Thus, this story is still unfolding and will necessitate further ethnographic research to understand how such government efforts are influencing the work of individual artists or how the latter are responding to them. In any case, these efforts indicate that socialism and the arts in Albania have entered a new era, one where they are strongly mediated by the politics of the Rama government as well as by each other.

Acknowledgments

I thank Armando Lulaj, Enkelejd Zonja, Ardian Isufi, Ledia Kostandini, and Endri Dani for their art, for their friendship, and for the information they have granted me. This analysis is indebted to many audiences who have read and commented on earlier versions of the article. I am grateful to my PhD advisers, Julie Hement, Jackie Urla, Betsy Krause, and Jon Olsen, for their critical engagement with and support of my work. Thanks also to Stavri Çifligu, Xhuli Agolli, and Raino Isto, whose questions and comments helped sharpen my analysis. Finally, thanks to two anonymous reviewers and Jenny Chio, co-editor at *Visual Anthropology Review*, for their incisive and productive comments.

Notes

¹ This article is based on 16 months of fieldwork between 2010 and 2011 and six months of exploratory research in 2006, in Tirana, Albania's capital, where I sought to understand the discourses and practices of art production after socialism's demise. During these months in the field, I interviewed 36 art

producers from different generations and conducted participant observation in private and state-funded art spaces. The title “The Red Kiss of the Past That Does Not Pass” references a statement from the dance and theater performance *We Where In* (2012) by Albanian choreographer Gjergj Prevazi.

² Information on *Never* (2012) is partially gathered from a 2014 interview with Armando Lulaj by Department of Eagles, accessed January 2017, <http://departmentofeagles.org/2014/interview-with-armando-lulaj/>.

³ During the early years of the transition, many informants whose careers developed during socialism sought to make a departure from the aesthetic ideologies of the period by employing styles that were previously taboo, such as impressionism and abstractionism; selling their socialist-era artwork; and attempting to erase their signatures from pre-1991 artworks in the archive of the National Art Gallery in Tirana.

⁴ Interview with Endri Dani conducted in June 2014.

⁵ Interview with Enkelejd Zonja conducted in April 2010.

⁶ Interview with Ledia Kostandini conducted in July 2010.

⁷ Rama’s speech given during the inauguration of Bunk’Art. Accessed April 4, 2015, <http://shqiptarja.com/skedat/2724/fjala-e-kryeministrit-edi-rama-254354.html>.

References

- Berdahl, Daphne. 1999a. *Where the World Ended: Re-unification and Identity in the German Borderland*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Berdahl, Daphne. 1999b. “‘(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things.” *Ethnos* 64: 192–211.
- Berdahl, Daphne, and Matti Bunzl, eds. 2009. *On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Boyer, Dominic. 2006. “Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany.” *Public Culture* 18(2): 361–81.
- Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Boym, Svetlana. 2005. “Poetics and Politics of Estrangement: Victor Shklovsky and Hannah Arendt.” *Poetics Today* 26(4): 581–611.
- Boym, Svetlana. 2007. “Nostalgia and Its Discontents.” *Hedgehog Review* 9(2): 7–37.
- Comaroff, John L., and Jean Comaroff. 2009. *Ethnicity, Inc.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Creed, Gerald. 2010. “Strange Bedfellows: Socialist Nostalgia and Neoliberalism in Bulgaria.” In *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, edited by Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Erjavec, Aleš, and Boris Groš. 2003. *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Groys, Boris. 2008. *Art Power*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Groys, Boris. 2010. “*History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism*.” Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hirsch, Marianne. 2008. “The Generation of Postmemory.” *Poetics Today* 29: 103–28.
- Nadkarni, Maya, and Olga Shevchenko. 2004. “The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices.” *Ab Imperio* 2: 487–519.
- Shklovsky, Victor, 1988. “Art as Technique.” In *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, edited by David Lodge. London: Longman.
- Todorova, Maria. 2010. *Introduction*. In *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, edited by Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Yurchak, Alexei. 2006. *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Yurchak, Alexei. 2008. “Post-Post Communist Sincerity: Pioneers, Cosmonauts and Other Soviet Heroes Born Today.” In *What Is Soviet Now*, 257–76. Berlin: Verlag.