

Introduction

The present issue of *Art Studies* focuses on the theme of beginnings, and specifically on three turning points in Albanian modern and contemporary history that paved the way for new beginnings (whether ultimately “good”, “bad”, or false ones – and anything and everything in-between for that matter): the Antifascist National Liberation War, the Ideological and Cultural Revolution, and the collapse of the communist regime in the early 1990s. It is only fitting then that the contributions to this issue of *Art Studies* themselves represent, in more ways than one, new beginnings.

Anxhela Çikopano’s contribution on Albanian partisan theater represents what is perhaps the first attempt to open a new line of inquiry into this important if short-lived cultural phenomenon since this subfield (of theater studies) was created. While partisan theater emerged and developed in the context of World War II, and was a subject of discussion in the immediate postwar period, Ismail Hoxha developed the main historical and theoretical theses on it at the turn of the 1960s decade, coinciding with the peak of the Ideological and Cultural Revolution. This was no accident, since a militant form of amateur theatre that was supposed to have emerged spontaneously in the armed struggle of the Albanian people against fascism and Nazism, clearly

resonated with some of the key tenets of the Ideological and Cultural Revolution era, in particular: the mobilization of the masses in campaigns such as that against bureaucratism in the state apparatus, against religion and backward customs, for the emancipation of women, and for the completion of important industrial and infrastructural projects; as well as the emphasis placed on the production of new narratives of Albanian socialism that were increasingly national and, in a way, nationalistic too. Whereas Hoxha *et al* sought to posit partisan theater as the foundation and origin of Albanian Socialist Realist theater, Çikopano argues that it is best understood as a form of agitprop theater, which in the Soviet Union as well was distinct from and predated the establishment of Socialist Realist theater.

Similarly, Ylber Marku's contribution on the Albanian Ideological and Cultural Revolution represents the first attempt in decades, perhaps since the publication of Nicholas C. Pano's 1974 article "The Albanian Cultural Revolution", to provide a new comprehensive overview of what is undoubtedly one of the key chapters in the history of Albanian communism and modernity more generally. While, for obvious reasons, it has become commonplace to compare Albania's Ideological and Cultural Revolution to the contemporaneous Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, if only to underscore the differences between the two, Marku's comparative analysis also takes into account the experience of the so-called Russian Cultural Revolution during the Soviet Union's First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932). Arguing that the scope of the Russian Cultural Revolution was primarily civilizational and that of the Chinese Great Cultural Revolution was primarily salvational, Marku

posits that the Albanian Cultural Revolution sought instead to maintain the status quo. At first, there appears to be a paradox here, if not an outright contradiction, since ‘revolution’ and ‘status quo’ are diametrically opposed. However, Marku emphasizes that maintaining the status quo involved, among other things, devising new strategies for reaffirming the legitimacy of the ruling party, its leadership, and ideological course – and safeguarding their future continuation and development – which, in turn, created opportunities for the reinvention of tradition, the creation of new forms of artistic expression, and lively cultural debate, even though it was not to last.

In his contribution on the visual arts exhibitions organized in Albania in the late 1960s/early 1970s, Raino Isto proposes an alternative framework to the dominant paradigm that interprets the effects of the Ideological and Cultural Revolution on the visual arts through the lens of the conservative turn following the infamous Fourth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Albanian Party of Labor (APL) in June of 1973. Through a very close reading of the reactions to and critical discussions generated by and surrounding the National Figurative Arts Exhibition of 1971 and the *Pranvera* exhibition of 1972 in particular, Isto argues that the Ideological and Cultural Revolution actually inaugurated a historically important if short-lived period of open debate and modernist experimentation in the visual arts that was partly a response to Albania’s new place in the geopolitical world order, and especially inside of the world socialist movement. Furthermore, Isto challenges the entrenched – but largely historically unfounded – narrative that this “wave”

of debate and experimentation was inherently politically subversive and that it viewed itself as being inimical to Socialist Realism, convincingly showing that it was supported by cultural administrators and that it was primarily orientated towards expanding and transforming Albanian Socialist Realism, specifically by critically incorporating the experience of the earlier European avant-gardes, rather than doing away with Socialist Realism altogether. Zef Shoshi, one of the foremost representatives of Socialist Realist era painting in Albania, provides an intriguing first-person account of this turbulent period in his interview with Agron Mesi.

Finally, in the concluding article to this issue, Valentina Bonizzi attempts to outline the broader context for the emergence of Albania's first (and only) women artists association, Linda, which was created in 1993 and formally founded in 1994. Reading through Bonizzi's interviews with some of the key figures in Albania's nascent sector of independent – i.e., non-state – women's organizations in the early 1990s, including Linda founder Eleni Laperi, paints a complex picture of both the persistence of gender norms in the face of sweeping societal change, and of the transformation of discursive paradigms in the post-socialist period concomitant with the adoption of neoliberal economic and political models. In particular, the channeling of the debate around gender issues through a human rights framework might be interpreted as having paved the way for the rapid NGO-ification of the women's movement – insofar as this term applies – alongside that of the public sphere at large. At the same time, Bonizzi's contribution provides compelling evidence (if it were needed) of the ultimate failure of the Ideological and

Cultural Revolution. One of the stated goals (if not the main one) of the Ideological and Cultural Revolution was to prevent the emergence of a socialist bourgeoisie that would create the conditions for the restoration of capitalism. The case of women's associations (which is by no means an isolated one) shows how members of the dreaded socialist bourgeoisie quickly came to occupy key positions in the post-socialist institutional landscape, chiefly because of their ability to rely on established personal and professional networks.

The next issue of *Art Studies* will focus on the theme of revisionism(s), primarily in Albania and to a lesser extent in China, whose fervent denunciation of Soviet revisionism at the beginning of the 1960s led to the fracturing of the socialist camp. Our approach to this theme will be broader, however, focusing on revisionism as an act or rewriting, and examining both the communist and post-communist contexts.

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