POLITICS OF INSTALLATION AS POLITICS OF THE ARCHIVE: three case studies[1]

JONIDA GASHI

Abstract

In this paper I discuss three recent exhibitions focusing on the communist era archives of the Ministry of Defense (*Bunk'Art I*), the Ministry of Interior Affairs (*Bunk'Art II*), and the Albanian communist regime's secret police, namely, Sigurimi i Shtetit (*House of Leaves*). What is remarkable about the *Bunk'Art I*, *Bunk'Art II*, and *House of Leaves* exhibitions is the way in which they self-consciously appropriate and exploit the "language" or the conventions of contemporary artistic and curatorial installations,

[1] The original version of this text was prepared in the form of a presentation for the "Space, Site, Installation. Philosophy, Art Theory and Art Practice" conference organized by the University of Padua, which was scheduled to take place in late March 2020 but was first postponed and ultimately cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

i.e., embodied perspective, immersion, theatricality, etc., to mediate the relationship between contemporary audiences and the communist past. The question, then, is whether the use of the "language" or conventions of contemporary artistic and curatorial installations in these exhibitions succeeds in making the communist past more readily accessible to contemporary audiences, or whether it makes it even harder to read.

Traditionally discussed in terms of being an especially democratic art form by virtue of opening up the space of the work of art to a community of visitors, more recently critics such as Boris Groys have drawn attention to the nondemocratic, violent act by which the space of the installation is created in the first place, namely, through the symbolic privatization of the public space of the exhibition over which the installation artist exerts absolute control. As such, artistic and curatorial installations reveal "the hidden sovereign dimension of the contemporary democratic order that politics, for the most part, tries to conceal".[2] I will show that the *Bunk'Art I*, *Bunk'Art II*, and *House of Leaves* exhibitions not only reveal the excess of sovereignty that underpins the contemporary Albanian political order, but also a vision of politics as installation art – or contemporary art exhibition – applied to an entire country.

Key words: installation art, contemporary exhibition practice, contemporary democratic order, sovereign power, *Bunk'Art I*, *Bunk'Art II*, *House of Leaves*

[2] Boris Groys, "Politics of Installation", *e-flux Journal*, nr. 2, January 2009: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68504/politics-of-installation/ [Accessed 15 August 2019]

One would be forgiven for thinking that Albania or, rather, the Albanian government is in the grips of a veritable archive fever, or *mal d'archive*, in the words of the late Jacques Derrida: New archives are being created while existing archives are being displaced, divided, renamed, and exhibited on an unprecedented scale. These efforts have been directed predominantly at the communist era state archives. In this paper I will discuss three recent exhibitions focusing on the communist era archives of the Ministry of Defense (*Bunk'Art I*), the Ministry of Interior Affairs (*Bunk'Art II*), and the Albanian communist regime's secret police, namely, Sigurimi i Shtetit (*House of Leaves*). Unlikely as it may seem, these exhibitions represent a unique opportunity to discuss the political value of contemporary artistic and curatorial installations. First, because being State-sponsored exhibitions of state archives they are inherently political. At the very least, their analysis can shed some much needed light on the official politics of memory in present-day Albania, including the less visible but more pervasive – and more pernicious – aspects of that politics mentioned above, i.e., the displacing, dividing, and renaming of archives. Secondly, because these exhibitions self-consciously appropriate and exploit the "language" or the conventions of contemporary art and exhibition practice, specifically as it relates to the installation form. They are thus concrete examples of the usefulness that contemporary art and exhibition practice – again as it relates to the installation form –can have for contemporary politics. This obviously raises the question as to why exactly contemporary art and exhibition practice, in this case as it relates to the installation form, would be appealing to contemporary politics in the first place? Or, to put it another way, is there something inherently ambivalent in contemporary artistic and curatorial

installations that *precedes* their use by contemporary politics? As such, these exhibitions can be a starting point for discussing the politics of installation more generally, a discussion that further illuminates that which makes the *Bunk'Art I*, *Bunk'Art II*, and *House of Leaves* exhibitions, as well as contemporary Albanian politics, so unique.

The *Bunk'Art* exhibitions as well as the exhibition at the *House of Leaves* are essentially artistic-curatorial projects and should be analyzed as such. This is true if you look at the installation design inside each of these exhibitions and, also, if you look at the exhibition space inside each of these museums as a totality. If you look at the installation design inside each of these exhibitions, it is clear that the organization of the space and the framing of the objects on display are designed to "trick" the spectator into thinking that they are inside a contemporary art exhibition (rather than an historical exhibition), and modify their behavior and expectations accordingly. One reason for this is the inclusion in these exhibitions of actual works of art by Albanian contemporary artists. The sheer number of artworks included, especially inside the exhibition at *Bunk'Art I*, the nature of these artworks, all of which can be described as installation art, and the way they have been integrated inside the exhibition space, namely, the fact that there are no clear spatial demarcations between the sections dedicated to the archival/historical display and those dedicated to contemporary art suggests (imposes) a certain continuity of reading; that the archival/historical material and the artworks on show can (should) be understood in terms of the same interpretative framework. (Figs. 1–3)

Another reason is the way in which the archival/historical material itself is displayed. For instance, the enclosure of the

written documents on display at the *House of Leaves* inside LED light-boxes makes the actual text in these documents quite difficult to read, thus encouraging the visitor to look at them as objects of aesthetic contemplation. The fact that these light-boxes are themselves displayed in highly stylized ways – either hung on the walls in a branching pattern or placed on top of tall, white plinths that form clean, geometrical patterns on the floor – reinforces this feeling. (Figs. 4–6) An even more striking example is that of a collage of what look like photographic images but are actually mostly still frames depicting scenes from some of the most high-profile Albanian communist show trials, that has been mounted across two walls in a small, dark room that echoes the *noir*-like sensibility of the images themselves: dark, claustrophobic, and ominous. (Fig. 7) Again, the presentation of these images encourages the visitor to appreciate them first and foremost aesthetically, which is reinforced by the scant amount of information provided about *individual* images, i.e., when and where they were taken, who appears in the frame, what happened to them, etc.

What is also clear is that the exhibitions inside *Bunk'Art I*, *Bunk'Art II*, and the *House of Leaves*, do not look like conventional art exhibitions either. This is how one critic has described the experience of making his way through the *Bunk'Art II* exhibition:

> "The audioscape inside the bunker is a nearly unbearable cacophony. Apart from the many different videos playing in adjacent rooms (all with their doors open), there are recordings of victims' names with ominous background sounds, the national anthem, air raid sirens, pounding heartbeats, radio

> announcements, typsewriter [*sic*] sounds, and sentimental music coming from all directions."[3]

This account will sound familiar to anyone who has ever visited a contemporary art exhibition, where it is not uncommon for, say, performance pieces, film projections, and video installations to all unfolding close proximity to one another. In this context, the choice of venue for each exhibition is important: an anti-atomic bunker hidden inside a mountain on the outskirts of Tirana (*Bunk'Art I*); a secret network of tunnels running under the capital's main square (*Bunk'Art II*); and a "mysterious" building covered by thick foliage – the Sigurimi's former HQ (*House of Leaves*). For obvious reasons, these venues were inaccessible to the general public during the communist period. However, they did not suddenly become accessible to the general public even after the collapse of the communist regime in the early 1990s. Rather, what happened instead is that in the turmoil of those early post-communist years, especially during the civil unrest provoked by the economic collapse of the year 1997, all three venues were ransacked and fell into disuse. The implication here being that the building inside which each exhibition is installed is virtually indistinguishable from the (other) objects on display inside these exhibitions. This effectively transforms the exhibition space inside *Bunk'Art I*, *Bunk'Art II*, and the *House of Leaves* into the space of an installation.

Installation art is notoriously difficult to define, of which the fact that the term itself only entered mainstream use decades

[3] Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, "Bunk'Art 2: A Nuclear Attack on Meaning", *Exit*, 21 November 2016: https://exit.al/en/2016/11/21/bunkart-2-a-nuclear-attack-on-meaning/ [Accessed 30 August 2019]

after some of the most well known works of installation art were produced is perhaps telling.[4] Today installation art is arguably even more difficult to define than in the past. For instance, Claire Bishop laments in the opening pages of *Installation Art: A Critical History* that: "The word 'installation' has now expanded to describe any arrangement of objects in any given space, to the point where it can happily be applied even to a conventional display of paintings on a wall."[5] Generally speaking, however, installation art is distinguishable from other, more traditional media (from painting and sculpture to photography and film) because of the relations it sets up between the work, the space in which the work is installed and all of the elements inside said space, and, most importantly perhaps, the viewer. Namely, the space of the installation and all of the elements inside it are regarded as a singular totality and an integral part of the work, as is the viewer, whose physical presence inside the space of the installation is acknowledged by the work in an explicit way. Because of this, installation art has often been discussed as being an especially democratic art form. As Boris Groys puts it in 'Politics of Installation': "The artist's decision to allow the multitude of visitors to enter the space of the artwork is interpreted as an opening of the closed space of an artwork to democracy. This enclosed space seems to be transformed into a platform for public discussion, democratic practice, communication, networking, education, and so forth."[6]

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[4] Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1999.

[5] Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, London: Tate Publishing, 2005, p. 6.

[6] Boris Groys, "Politics of Installation".

Traditionally, the primary unit of artistic experience was the individual work of art as opposed to the exhibition in which the work was included (including the other works on display, the space of the exhibition itself, etc.). Correspondingly, the appropriate attitude towards the work of art was deemed to be contemplative immersion, which demanded of the viewer to ignore anything and everything extraneous to the work as such. To that end, the space of the white cube was designed to minimize any and all such possible distractions. Today, however, the primary unit of artistic experience is said to be the exhibition (as a whole) rather than the individual work of art.[7] The reasons for this are too complex to outline and discuss here, but the assimilation of installation art in mainstream museums and commercial galleries (as well as in biennials, triennials, and so on), along with the increasing importance and visibility of the curatorial gesture (project)and the rise of the curator-author, the artist-curator, etc., have certainly played a role. The point being that contemporary exhibitions increasingly look and behave, so to speak, like large-scale artistic installations, so that contemporary exhibition practice might be said to generalize the experience of the artistic installation.

According to Groys, one of the productive effects of this development or phenomenon has been to expose the inherently ambivalent politics of installation art. While the act of opening up the space of the artwork to the public, i.e., the visitors to the exhibition, might well be a democratic one, argues Groys, it is actually preceded by the inherently nondemocratic, violent act of constituting the installation space in the first place, namely, through the symbolic privatization of the public space of the

[7] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London and New York: Verso, 2013.

exhibition. The installation artist thus always inevitably presides over the installation space as "legislator" and "sovereign", "even, and maybe especially so, if the law given by the artist to a community of visitors is a democratic one". Another, perhaps even more important, productive effect of this development or phenomenon has been, according to Groys, to reveal "the hidden sovereign dimension of the contemporary democratic order that politics, for the most part, tries to conceal". Criticizing contemporary theories of political sovereignty for generally overlooking the importance of "individual sovereign decisions and actions taking place in private", Groys reminds us that just as the installation artist or curator-author is fundamentally outside of the community he or she engenders, today's political elite is similarly part of a global celebrity culture that is 'extra-democratic, trans-state, external to any democratically organized community, paradigmatically private' and 'structurally mad–insane'.[8]

Jacques Derrida has argued, convincingly enough, that: "There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential condition: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation."[9] Interestingly, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama made a similar point in a speech given during the opening ceremony of the *House of Leaves*, arguing that the perpetual unwillingness of post-socialist Albanian society, and especially the country's political elite, to confront the communist past had been the main obstacle to democracy building

[8] Groys, "Politics of Installation".
[9] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 4.

efforts.[10] But do the exhibitions at *Bunk'Art I*, *Bunk'Art II*, and the *House of Leaves* actually facilitate such a confrontation, as Rama claims, or do they instead represent an attempt by the State to impose 'an official and monolithic narrative of the socialist past'?[11] The very *form* of these exhibitions suggests that it is the latter. Being installation-type displays, *Bunk'Art I*, *Bunk'Art II*, and the *House of Leaves* are certainly designed to attract the greatest possible number of viewer-participants. At the same time, however, *Bunk'Art I*, *Bunk'Art II*, and the *House of Leaves* symbolically (and not only) cut off these so-called 'participants' from the very task that they are called to participate in, namely, the constitution and the interpretation of the archive: The totalizing principle that governs these exhibitions makes it both pointless and futile to question why certain documents, images, objects, etc., have been included while others haven't; why said documents, images, objects, etc., have been placed and displayed in the way that they have, and so on.[12] Indeed, we could go so far as to say

[10] Edi Rama, "*The House with Leaves*, the museum of collective memory in order not to forget the past": https://www.kryeministria.al/en/newsroom/shtepia-me-gjethe-muzeu-i-kujteses-kolektive-per-te-mos-harruar-te-kaluaren/ [Accessed 22 August 2019]

[11] Raino Isto, "An Itinerary of the Creative Imagination: Bunk'Art and the Politics of Art and Tourism in Remembering Albania's Socialist Past", *Cultures of History Forum*, 16 May 2017, DOI: 10.25626/0063.

[12] This is brilliantly captured by van Gerven Oei in his review of *Bunk'Art II*: "Most rooms, in spite of their signs which suggest some form of coherence, are in fact ahistorical collages of often unrelated objects. For example, one room contains 1) information about the National Criminal Forensics Lab from 1946–2000 (why 2000?); 2) a video displaying the student uprisings from 1990 (with large *Bunk'Art 2* logo in the lower left corner); and 3)

that what the exhibitions at *Bunk'Art I*, *Bunk'Art II*, and the *House of Leaves* make possible for the visitor, is the performance of the impossibility of accessing and participating in the constitution and interpretation of the archive; in other words, the performance of the separation from (collective) memory and the past.

Furthermore, if the *Bunk'Art I*, *Bunk'Art II*, and *House of Leaves* exhibitions represent an attempt to impose "an official and monolithic narrative of the socialist past", then Rama's claim that these exhibitions, and by extension his own leadership, symbolize a new era in the post-socialist democratization of Albania, is at best disingenuous. I say 'disingenuous' because, unlike most political leaders, we can assume that Rama is reasonably knowledgeable about both contemporary art and exhibition practice and the discourse on contemporary art and exhibition practice. Not only because he started out as an artist before turning to politics in the late 1990s, or because since ascending to the post of Prime Minister in 2013 Rama's artistic career has experienced a highly questionable resurgence, but mainly because of his longstanding ambition to practice politics aesthetically and to exploit art politically. Rama has asserted this ambition openly on many occasions, including in a speech given during the opening ceremony of *Bunk'Art I*, describing it as 'an opportunity to inspire the creative imagination, because without the slightest doubt, the installations that we saw with the authentic rooms of the old regime chiefs are a meaningful evidence of the possibility that this

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against another wall some undefined radio equipment with a Chinese manual(?) [*sic*] on top of it. Another room features a half-open door behind which a man is whispering a confession, a bunk bed, and table, and a Russian map of Berlin. Where am I?" Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, "Bunk'Art 2: A Nuclear Attack on Meaning".

space creates to create new spaces: *new spaces for imagining, thinking, and living together through the power of art*'.[13] [Emphasis added.] What Rama is articulating here is a vision of politics as installation art – or as contemporary art exhibition – applied to an entire country. It makes sense that such a radical vision of politics would begin precisely by reconfiguring –or at least attempting to reconfigure – society's relationship to the past, which highlights the importance of the exhibitions discussed in this paper.[14]

In this vision of politics as installation art – or as contemporary art exhibition – applied to an entire country Rama himself is, of course, the installation artist or the curator-author *par excellence*. From this point of view, it should not come as a surprise that Rama's tenure as PM in general and his second term in power in particular, has been marked by a deep and disturbing paralysis of the Albanian judiciary system (thanks to the so-called justice "reform" which was initiated in 2016 and is still ongoing) as well as the Albanian legislative system (thanks to the decision of the opposition MPs to rescind their parliamentary mandates in January 2019), concentrating an unprecedented amount of power (during the last thirty years) in the hands of the executive branch.[15]

[13] Edi Rama, '"Bunk'Art', a Treasure of the Collective Memory": https://www.kryeministria.al/en/newsroom/bunkart-nje-thesar-i-kujteses-kolektive/ [Accessed 24 August 2019]

[14] The exhibition space that corresponds to those discussed in this paper, but which is orientated towards the future rather than the past, is the Centre for Openness and Dialogue (COD). For a critical analysis of the Center for Openness and Dialogue see Jonida Gashi, "*These are (not) the things we are fighting for!)*": https://debatikcenter.net/texts/jonida_gashi.

[15] See, for example, Aurela Anastasi, "Challenges for the Constitutional Court and Democracy in Albania", Int'l J. Const. L. Blog, 9 May 2018:

Similarly, it should not come as a surprise that 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, and precisely in order to make way for an urban, i.e., space-making, project.[16]

The case of contemporary Albanian politics, dominated by an artist-politician with a vision of politics as installation art – or contemporary art exhibition – applied to an entire country is, admittedly, exceptional. Nevertheless, the *Bunk'Art I*, *Bunk'Art II*, and *House of Leaves* exhibitions still show how the same conditions that make artistic and curatorial installations useful tools for us to critically examine the relationship between contemporary democracy and political sovereignty, also make them useful tools for contemporary politics to further obfuscate the relationship between contemporary democracy and political sovereignty.

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http://www.iconnectblog.com/2018/05/challenges-for-the-constitutional-court-and-democracy-in-albania [Accessed 1 September 2019]; "Albanian Opposition in Mass Resignation Move to Demand Fresh Elections", *Euronews*, 22 February 2019: https://www.euronews.com/2019/02/22/albanian-opposition-in-mass-resignation-move-to-demand-fresh-elections [Accessed 12 September 2019]; and OSCE-ODHIR, 'Albania, Local Elections, 30 June 2019: Final Report': https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/albania/429230 [Accessed 12 September 2019]

[16] Valentina di Liscia, "Open Letter Condemns the 'Artwashing' of Albanian Prime Minister's Politics", *Hyperallergic*, 19 May 2020: https://hyperallergic.com/565114/open-letter-condemns-artwashing-albania/ [Accessed 19 May 2021]

Fig. 1. Screenshot showing the floor plan of the exhibition at *Bunk'Art I*. The sections marked in yellow represent the museological display. Source: www.bunkart.al/1/virtual_tour.

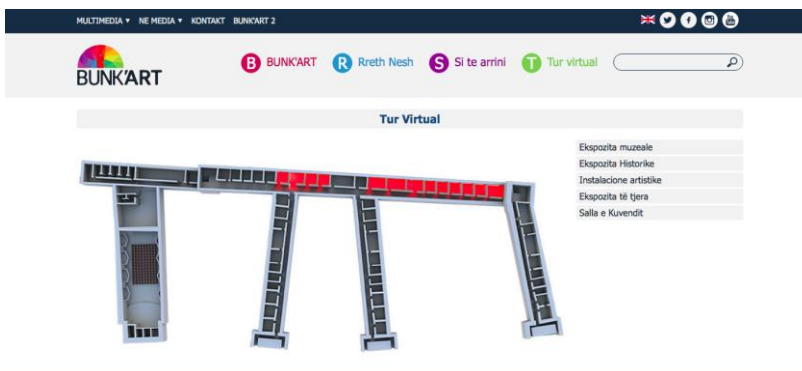

Fig. 2. Screenshot showing the floor plan of the exhibition at *Bunk'Art I*. The sections marked in red represent the historical display. Source: www.bunkart.al/1/virtual_tour.

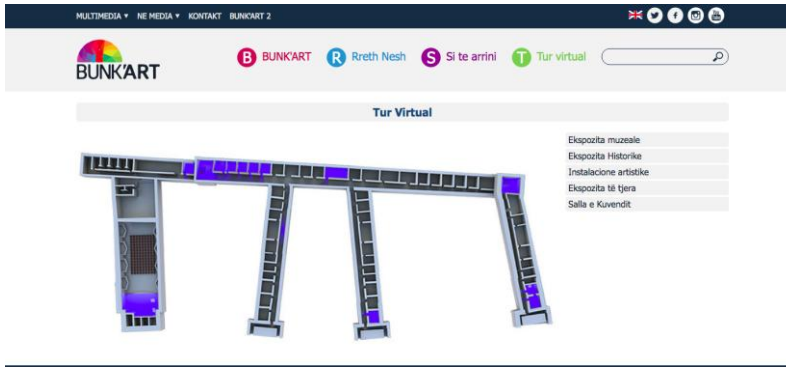

Fig. 3. Screenshot showing the floor plan of the exhibition at *Bunk'Art I*. The sections marked in blue represent the art display. Source: www.bunkart.al/1/virtual_tour.

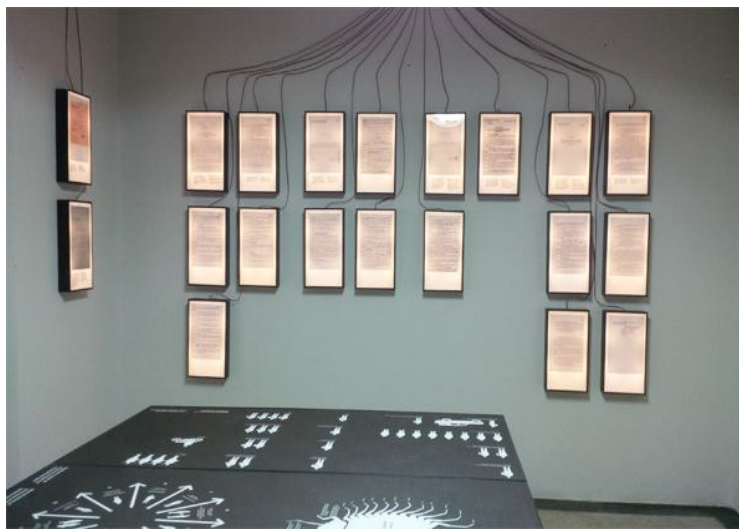

Fig. 4. Installation shot of the exhibition at the *House of Leaves*. Source: www.muzeugjethi.gov.al/galeria-sq/foto-te-muzeut.

Fig. 5. Installation shot of the exhibition at the *House of Leaves*. Source: www.muzeugjethi.gov.al/galeria-sq/foto-te-muzeut.

Fig. 6. Installation shot of the exhibition at the *House of Leaves*. Picture taken by the author.

Fig. 7. Installation shot of the exhibition at the *House of Leaves*. Picture taken by the author.