

ART, HISTORY AND PUBLIC SPACE IN CONTEMPORARY ALBANIA:

Alessandro Gallicchio in conversation with Alban Hajdinaj
(December 2021)

ALBAN HAJDINAJ DHE ALESSANDRO GALLICCHIO

Alban Hajdinaj is an artist whose work addresses the impact of politics on the monumental context of contemporary Albania. Through different media (objects, photos, videos and paintings), he critically questions the transformations of Albania's capital city, Tirana. In this interview, he speaks with researcher Alessandro Gallicchio, who studies contemporary art in the Balkan countries. They discuss Hajdinaj's practice in relation to the ways power structures affect perceptions and

configurations of public space and historical memory in Albania today. Their conversation explores how art can critically engage with manifestations of power and propose new historical narratives.

Alessandro Gallicchio: Your work is characterized by a certain sensibility towards the relationship between public space and historical representations. Starting in the early 2000s, in some of your video works, it is possible to trace a critical gaze on the great narratives of Albania's political and social history. This is especially true in the famous *Eye to Eye* (2003), which examines the facades painted by international artists for the urban section of the second Tirana Biennial, transformations that were promoted by Tirana Mayor (and artist) Edi Rama in the context of his "colorful revolution". In that video, people living in apartments across from the painted facades express their feeling about these interventions. Your approach reminds me of the significance of micro-history, and the importance of social analysis that looks beyond the great critical palimpsests erected by the discourses of power. Where does your desire to observe what takes place behind the official scenographic apparatuses come from?

Alban Hajdinaj: I think this desire has developed in me since my adolescence and early youth in the late eighties. Living with my grandparents, I was always hearing their stories from the past. These personal stories, based on their memories, were completely empty of heroism and glory, and in this way they contrasted strongly with the official version of history with

which we were constantly attacked.¹ So, I used to distinguish two different positions in the knowledge I was getting. One was taught within the family, and the other one came from outside: at school, on TV, or in most of the literature and art that I encountered. Of course, during this period I considered this ambiguity to be a normality, but soon the changes happened in Albania like everywhere else in the eastern part of Europe and everyone, in his own way, started to analyze and criticize the system we lived in and the way it sold its propaganda as knowledge.

The beginning of the nineties was a time characterized by the rejection of every value that society had forced us to respect until then. History was rejected as well, and for me this was a moment to reflect more deeply on the scenography we were all made to believe was real. This moment was crucial for me because I believe it constituted resistance towards the official narratives as an intellectual necessity. However, I am speaking about the impulses of my youth, which might have led me to approach a kind of micro-history in my work in the 2000s, when I started to use video as a medium. It was part of my general interest in a kind of socio-cultural study that, in my work, I delved into all these different media, ranging from painting to photography and assemblage.

Video can be more direct in a sense because it can involve a narrative, storytelling, oral interpretation, and so forth, and *Eye to Eye* was a shift for me. It put forward the issue of

¹ Hajdinaj is referring here to the period of state socialism in Albania, which ended in 1991, with the first multi-party elections to take place since before the Second World War.

power, its discourse, and the urge to confront and engage with it. The only way to do that was to go beyond it through individual contemplation, poetic language, and fictional articulation. If the nineties were a period of social chaos and unrest in Albania, the 2000s—for me—mark a new beginning in political power's restitution and its discursive articulation. Painting the facades of Tirana was only one of the strategies used as part of that articulation of power. I think that the position of the artist is that of a person who raises questions about these strategies and practices, but doesn't make his work part of them. At least we should have learned a lesson from our past and we shouldn't repeat the mistakes of a previous generation of artists who never really engaged in social analysis, but just used art to produce patterns governing how society should act. So, my video work in the 2000s—*Science* (2005), *Alisa and Sarah* (2006), *Diskovery* (2007), and *Uomo Vogue* (2008)—was deeply interested in individuals, and through their personal life experiences different manifestations of power relations were exposed. Perhaps I wanted to fill a gap in Albania's art history. I think a great deal of my work comes from the need to have a dialogue with this country's history, or art history.

Alessandro Gallicchio: In this dynamic where you engage in the critical analysis of the representative elements of historical memory in Albania, the video work *The Monument of the Man in a Cylinder* (2018) assumes a very important role. This work deals with the statue of the American president Woodrow Wilson in Tirana. Your choice to place the video side

by side with a series of caricature images taken from the socialist-era magazine *Hosteni*² seems to suggest a historical parallel between that period and the more recent democratic turn. Why did you decide to place the sculpture and the caricatures in dialogue across such a wide chronological gap?

Alban Hajdinaj: I have to say that this decision was suggested by the sculpture. When I saw it, it immediately reminded me of the caricatures published in *Hosteni*. I am not saying it is a bad sculpture, I am not interested in judging it at all as a work of art per se. The sculpture's representation of president Wilson, his clothes and particularly his hat, belongs to the era when a popular cartoon called Uncle Sam served as a poster image that was used for political allegories. The image of Uncle Sam, whose origin hovers somewhere between facts and legends deep in the 19th century, represented the government and the politics of the United States. It was used extensively in political cartoons and caricatures during both World Wars and the Cold War, by both the US and its enemies.

After the Second World War, the image of Uncle Sam apparently also arrived on the pages of *Hosteni*. So, the link between Uncle Sam and president Wilson is inevitable, even beyond the clear resemblance between the two images. For about forty years the caricaturized image of the man in a cylinder represented the greatest enemy not only of Albania, but of all humanity. After about twenty years of absence, we finally have a public statue of this image, who comes with the

² *Hosteni* was a satire magazine published in socialist Albania. The title of the magazine refers to a goad, such as that used with livestock.

attributes of the savior, presented as a great friend of this country. I want to be clear that my work *The Monument of the Man in a Cylinder* has little or nothing to do with the historical figure of President Wilson (and I respect his work in favor of Albanian independence). Rather, it's about his image, or let's say his personification—an image that enters in a relationship with the caricatures of *Hosteni* magazine, creating a sort of rhetoric that functions based on image rules. The authorship of both the sculpture and the caricatures is also unimportant. Of course, it is quite interesting to see the irony of a history that denies itself within a few decades and transforms the foe into a friend, but this interpretation is something that I prefer to leave to the viewer. I have decided to place the sculpture in dialogue with the caricatures because for me they are both pieces of “archeology”—they are isolated and separated from each other's historical context so that instead of constructing a historical narrative (as you say there is a wide chronological gap between them), they make evident the rupture or interruption of a linear narrative. This rupture is very significant for me because it is a sort of language I am interested in using quite deliberately. The magazines, a collection of vintage publications, are found objects that function on a different register from the video. Escaping the linear and progressive narrative within the realm of imagery and documents allows me to achieve a critical dialogue between these different periods of Albanian history. I think the past should be an active element in how we perceive our recent reality, and not just a decorative object.

Alessandro Gallicchio: Recently, in the installation *Old Books New Stories* (2019), you exhibited a series of books in which you decided to compare some images of Albanian sculptures from the socialist era (1945-1990) to more recent ones (1990-2019). Why did you choose this format, and what led you to take on the role of a historian of Albanian urban space? Have you ever identified with the figure of the artist-historian, so much discussed in recent years by international museums?

Alban Hajdinaj: *Old Books New Stories* looks like a series of books, but I would consider the piece primarily as a series of collages. The books—which are more or less random books chosen basically for their physical traits such as size, age, etc.—are displayed open, and their visible pages are manipulated by collage. I have used a comparative technique of placing a Socialist Realist public sculpture side by side with a more recent one, one that belongs to the period after the nineties. It is quite interesting for me to put them in dialogue with each other and engage in a critical relation that avoids any progressive narrative. I have decided to use the book format because the work functions as a kind of historic inquiry. Nevertheless, this inquiry, although it implies a lot of research using images and data, does not seek to define a historic period in the arts, or public art specifically. Rather, it traces and distinguishes affinities, discontinuities, methods of operation, transformations of one becoming another, between two epochs. On the other hand, the work involves a deconstructive practice. The informal qualities of collage delegitimize the academic

aspect of the work, especially in the use of captions for each picture of the sculptures.

I don't know if the interest in historical representations, or even urban space, that my work might manifest would define me as historian. It is true that in my work I carry out a lot of research, and documents are very important. But rather than acquiring a status or title, for me this is a basic interest in a certain language that I explore, and I test its outcome and its result in communication. Also—although I think this is an issue that concerns the critics and not me—I don't identify myself with the figure of the artist-historian because despite a lot of common features, my work is not a response to situated artists and their works as such, to their reception by critics or museums. Instead, I'm motivated by an urge to deal with specific topics and debates that are challenging, especially because they affect our identity and intellect.

Alessandro Gallicchio: *New Man and Wolf Man* (2019) is another quite representative example of your artistic research. How did you conceive this work, which includes some fragments of the mosaic of the National Historical Museum of Tirana fallen on the ground? Have you ever considered yourself as an archivist of Albanian public space?

Alban Hajdinaj: This work was conceived slowly and gradually. First, I found the fragments of the mosaic on the ground by coincidence, while I was walking near the National Historical Museum. I picked them up without any clear idea in mind, and reflected later about the pictures I could take of the

places where they were missing. There were a lot of pits and grooves on the surface of the giant mosaic of the National Historical Museum, which had not been restored since its construction in 1980. So, the first idea was to realize a piece that would consist of photographs of the gaps in the mosaic (close ups) and fragments of the stones and mortar that I had collected, as a dialogue between images and real objects that intersect with both the building's history and its function as historical museum. It was a way to deal simultaneously with both the failures of a grand narrative and political system that produced it.

Later I came across a souvenir from Rome, in a flea market in Tirana: a small ashtray figurine in bronze, of *Lupa Capitolina*, the Capitoline Wolf. I decided to incorporate it into the piece I was working as an additional historical element that works both as a past reminiscence and a present consumeristic object. In a way the Capitoline Wolf image connects the Historical Museum to both past and present, to something that is situated either previously or successively in time. As I mentioned earlier, this kind of rupture in the linearity of historical narrative is something I am always searching for. The involvement of the figurine of the Capitoline Wolf expands this inquiry even into the realm of public space because it implies the history of Scanderbeg square, where the museum is situated. There were many demonstrations organized there in the 1940s that included fascist symbols, which the figurine echoes.³ Of course, I delved into some archives and found many pictures of

³ Mussolini often used the Capitoline Wolf as an icon to frame himself as the creator of a new Rome.

these massive gatherings in the square. In my work, the figurine, which stands as a historical fragment of the past, is placed on a concrete column, which serves as a symbol of the recent transformations in Tirana's center, an area of unfinished concrete towers that surround the Historical Museum building.

I am deeply interested in archives, but as in the case of the historian-artist, I don't consider myself an archivist of public space. I tend to pull an archival element out of its context and reuse it for different purposes than what it might stand for to an archivist. I think the artist is not a historian, or an archivist, but I suppose he is someone who has noted that perhaps something is not right with the practices of history as a science, or the practices of archiving, and he is trying to fix this mistake in his own way. Of course, these efforts open a debate about the future of these practices and sciences.

Alessandro Gallicchio: I would like to conclude with a question about a self-destructive act that struck me very much. In all the works we have discussed so far, the critical dimension has always been expressed by actions that tend to preserve the traces of Albania's memory. But in *June 21st* (2018), in which you reflect on your path as an artist, you decided instead to burn all your catalogs from the 1990s. Why erase the traces of your work in this period? How do you situate this work?

Alban Hajdinaj: At first sight it seems like this work goes in the opposite direction from the rest of my practice, but in fact I am compelled to see it as affiliated with that practice. Perhaps this work takes a different path to arrive at the same

conclusions with the other works that we have talked about so far. This act of erasure or cancelation that is represented by the burning of my catalogs tends to seclude personal acts from those of official apparatuses. Although I am dealing with an autobiographical aspect, my interest is driven by the tension between individual and institutional narratives. Canceling, erasing, or obliterating a given piece of evidence or data means voiding a segment of a narrative. In *June 21st* this void is filled by the act of destruction, which now stands in for what is missing. The work thus becomes a substitute piece of data, and the ashes of the burned catalogs are material proof of this transformation.

This work for me raises the question of who controls the narrative. To question this, I have decided to follow a reversive path, that of restaging an act of censorship enacted by official apparatuses. It is an echo of historical events such as the burning of books that reflected an “un-German spirit” on May 10th, 1933, in Nazi Germany, but it reminds me of countless other acts of censorship, even in the Albanian context. So, the work is a way of dealing critically with my own personal history, and bringing it into intersection with a broader perspective. Erasing the nineties works from my own narrative, however, is an isolated effort that remains within the limits of individual freedom because of course I am not destroying data that cannot be found elsewhere, in museum and gallery archives, collections, on the internet, and so on. The action remains strictly personal, and unlike both historical and more recent erasures carried out by official apparatuses, mine does not affect any other subject except myself. I think,

intransigence, in this case, is a sort of resistance towards the power relations and discourses of an official machinery that sooner or later channels everyone's work within its own conductive system.

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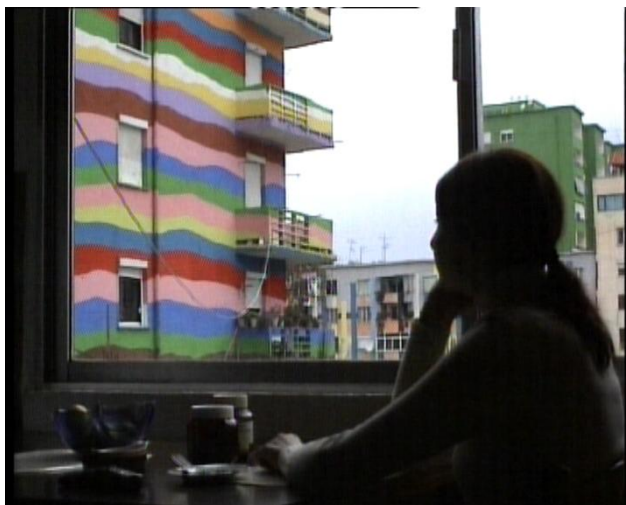


Fig. 1. Alban Hajdinaj, still from *Eye to Eye* (2003). Video. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 2. Alban Hajdinaj, still from *The Monument of the Man in the Cylinder* (2018). Video. Image courtesy of the artist.

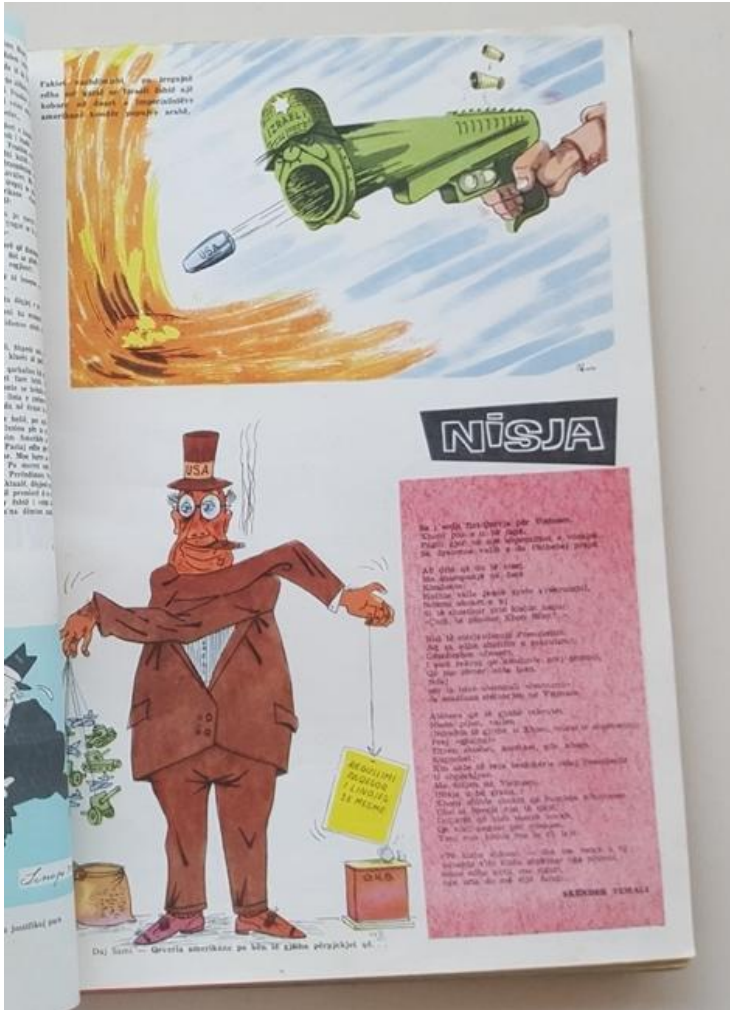


Fig. 3. Alban Hajdinaj, issue of *Hosteni* featured in *The Monument of the Man in the Cylinder* (2018). Video. Image courtesy of the artist.

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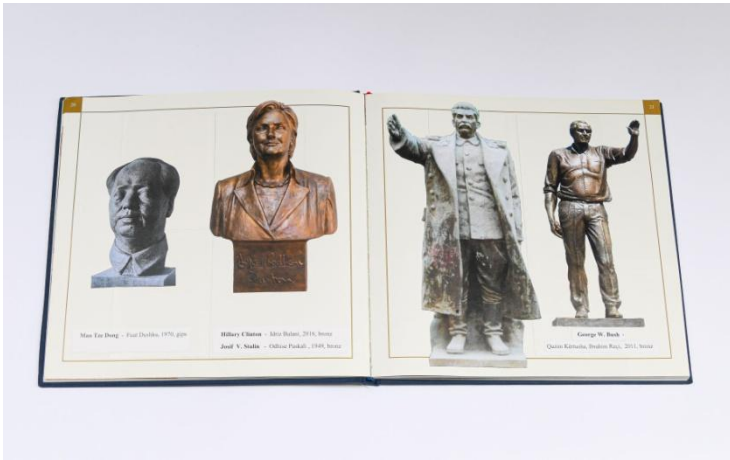


Fig. 4. Alban Hajdinaj, *Old Books New Stories* (2019). Collage. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 5. Photograph of tiles missing from the mosaic on the National Historical Museum, Tirana. Photo by Alban Hajdinaj. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 6. Alban Hajdinaj, *New Man and Wolf Man* (2019). Mixed media. Image courtesy of the artist.

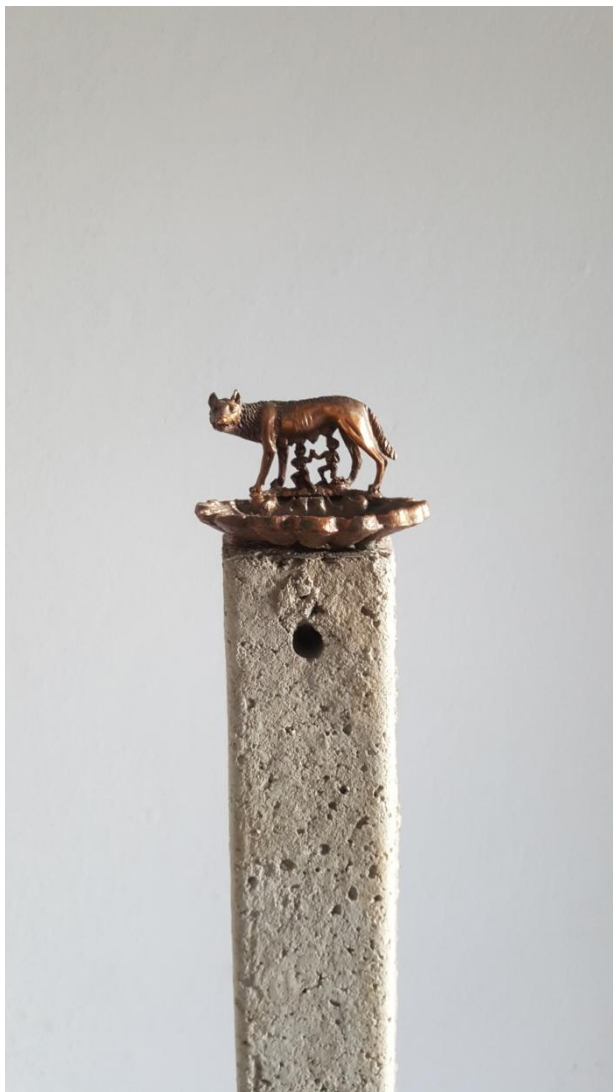


Fig. 7. Alban Hajdinaj, *New Man and Wolf Man* (2019), detail. Mixed media. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 8. Alban Hajdinaj, *New Man and Wolf Man* (2019), detail. Mixed media. Image courtesy of the artist.

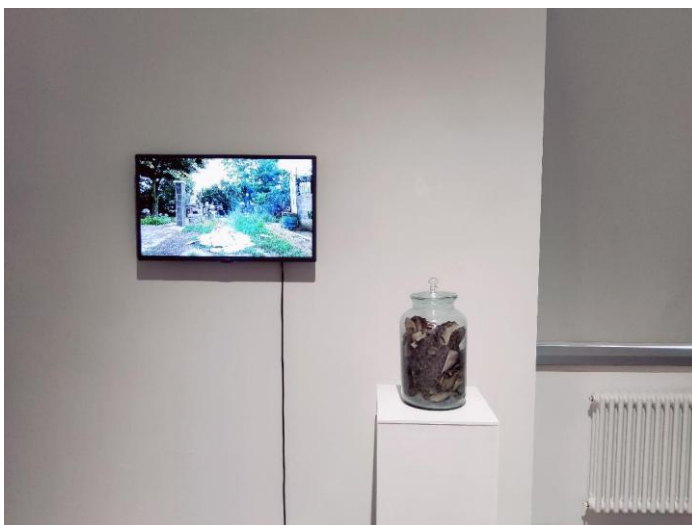


Fig. 9. Alban Hajdinaj, *June 21st* (2018), installation view. Video and remains of burned catalogs. Image courtesy of the artist.

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Fig. 10. Alban Hajdinaj, still from *June 21st* (2018). Video. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 11. Alban Hajdinaj, still from *June 21st* (2018). Video. Image courtesy of the artist.

