

C H A R I M

Dorotheergasse

Alban Muja

In spite of everything, there is a wall

One of the usual misunderstandings in thinking about the contemporary art practices of the Balkan countries is to approach them only from the perspective of “the nation.” This results in the dialectics between objective social conditions and the configuration of artistic subjectivities getting mediated and represented predominantly through the dynamics of nationalism¹.

Sezgin Boynik

Working across a wide range of media including drawing, painting, photograph, video installation and performance, Alban Muja (b.1980, Kosovo) investigates through single artistic acts the complex history and the socio-political transformation of his native Kosovo and the surrounding region. In Muja’s work, the thoughts and subjectivities of arts are indiscissable to politics. The exhibition *In spite of everything, there is a wall*, the first presentation of the artist’s work at Charim Gallery, Vienna, includes a selection of recent and older works. Exploring geopolitical, social and economical issues, Muja poetically–sometimes ironically–enquires funding ties between gender, family, territory and ultimately the State. Is art defined by ideology forces maintained by a nation?

The gallery space is divided in half by a thick brick wall, a new installation *Red Wall* (2021) conceived for the exhibition and built by *Gastarbeiters*—a term originated in 1960 in Germany and Austria to describe guest workers— from the Balkan Region. Implicating a viewing gaze and a set of structural relationships, geographical and territorial, Muja, brings attention to the Balkan community in Vienna, traditionally rooted in construction work, and the phenomenon of migrant labour, envisioned as guest citizens hence deprived of social tools of economical and legal security. The strong identitarian connection and troubled division between Albania and Kosovo, is a continuous theme in the artist’s work. The film, *Legendary Dog* (2014) projected in a small room, follows the story of Alba, an *Illyrian Shepherd or Sharri* dog, owned by the pioneering couple Ulay and Marina Abramovic. Ulay, interviewed by Muja, narrates in first person the film project and van journey conducted in 1977 by him and Abramovic across the Yugoslavian border of Kosovo and then-dictatorship-ruled Albania, the dog becoming a symbol of border restrictions and identity.

This connection is also reinforced by the photographic series *My name their city* (2012). Exploring a phenomena amply diffused in the seventies and eighties—Albanias of Kosovo nostalgically naming their children after Albania’s towns—single straight shots portray people holding a postcard-like representational image of an Albanian city. *Berat, Milot, Saranda, Gjirokastra, Shkodran, Butrint, Vlora*, embody the familiar scissions created after the second World War and the nationalist dream of unification of all Albanian territories, an ideological driving force culminating with the independence of Kosovo on the 17th of February 2008.

¹ Sezgin Boynik, *Notes on Contemporary Art in Kosovo*, Sternberg Press, 2018, pag.55.

Employing the house, a nuclear infrastructure, as a signifier of national ideas, Muja explores broader issues and conflicts in the formation of subjectivities. As Marc Augé writes in *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995), ‘The layout of the house, the rules of residence, the zoning of the village, placement of altars, configuration of public open spaces, land distribution, correspond for every individual to a system of possibilities, prescriptions and interdicts whose content is both spatial and social².’

A long line of painted canvases—*Brotherhood* (ongoing)—portrays a series of almost identical brick houses. We observe corresponding facades varying only for small details such as paint colours or roof coverings. The phenomena, amply diffused in rural Kosovo, mimics the patriarchal construction of society, based upon a central male father figure—the *first house, the symbol of the family, the phallus*—and extends only to the brothers—a copy of the house is rebuilt for every male individual in the family. These uncanny architectural clusters, often outstanding for their unusually eclectic exteriors, reflect familiar bonds, misogyny and female exclusion from society. The series of new canvases *Above everyone* (2021), illustrating private residences built on top of public buildings, considers social antagonism and the development of abusive architecture. Signifiers of individual desires of affirmation and rejection of socialist principles in ex-Yugoslavian territories, these houses stand as a declaration of refusal and non-integration.

‘The house, quite obviously, is a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space, provided, of course, that we take it in both its unity and its complexity, and endeavor to integrate all the special values in one fundamental value. For the house furnishes us dispersed images and a body of images at the same time³’ suggests Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1957). For Muja the visual documentation of these architectures is always associated with storytelling and qualitative research, employed as a tool of social and anthropological analysis. An anthropological place functions on a variable scale becoming places of identity, of relations, of history.

With the work *Borders without borders* (2016-2017), the artist enlarges his reflection on monuments and the idea of territorial division. A series of eighteen black and white photographs, aesthetically reminiscent of the clinical approach typical of the Düsseldorf School of Photography, depict abandoned former border-crossing buildings across the Schengen Area. Expressing a dual message of freedom and restraint, the empty buildings assume an eerie feeling, their function neglected, their presence a statement of former division. By drawing attention to these edifices, Muja questions his native Kosovo, where this kind of infrastructure is still operating and freedom of movement restricted, confronting us with the absurdity and violence of political division.

In spite of everything, there is a wall.

Attilia Fattori Franchini

² Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995), Verso London, pag.52.

³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (1957), Beacon Press, 1994, pag.3