

## Adrian Paci

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Adrian Paci's timing has been, unfortunately, good. Long concerned with migration, exile, and nostalgia, his works touch the raw nerves of our day. No one who's seen it is likely to forget, for instance, his video *Centro di permanenza temporanea* (Temporary Shelter Center), 2007, which depicts scores of people stranded on a movable staircase on an airport runway, hoodwinked into waiting for a promised plane that never comes.

Paci's new video installation *Sue proprie mani* (Open by Addressee Only), 2015, a collaboration with Roland Sejko, is based on a chance discovery in the Albanian National Archives. On a recent visit there, a journalist found two jute sacks containing hundreds of undelivered letters dating from between 1945 and 1946—material traces of the presence in Albania of some twenty-four thousand Italians who arrived during the Fascist occupation that began in 1939; after the war, many were unable to return home until 1949, when Italy and Albania finally established diplomatic relations. Filmed in the empty rooms of the former king's palace in Durrës, the five-screen video finds, and loses, a half dozen people; the letters are read in the background, their text subtitled on the screen. We do not always know if the actors are playing the roles the writers or those of the would-be recipients, and often the camera is trained on an empty room.

A second gallery contained vitrines holding facsimiles of the original letters. A fair proportion of them began with the phrase *Cara Mamma*, (Dear Mom). Framed envelopes were hung around the room, each with an address, never reached, clearly marked on the front. In a heavy-handed visual pun, the triangular flaps were unfolded so that each envelope looked like a child's drawing of a house. Also exhibited were paintings of news stills showing migrants waving from trains or swimming from boats. Viewed in isolation, whether they show an exodus or a holiday might be unclear, but in context, their meaning was instantly obvious.

The video *The Guardians*, 2015, begins with a filmic meditation on a cemetery in Paci's home town of Shkodër, Albania. Unused during the Communist period, the cemetery was brought back into service in 1991, but some of its statues have been defaced. Still, it is unmistakably Catholic, one of the few places where religious symbols remained



openly displayed under Communism. The camera lingers over evocative details, the accumulated wealth of ancient iconography that even the most banal cemetery draws on, from cypress trees to entablatures, crucifixes to floral braids, to tell the tale of the interweaving of death and renewal. Eventually some children appear, and with what appears to be an act of spontaneous collective reverence, they clean and weed the overgrown tombs. Like *Sue Proprie Mani*, *The Guardians* refers to a real event, the appearance of groups of children who began to clean the tombs in Shkodër's local graveyard after the fall of the Communist regime.

Paci attempts some restraint in putting across his message. He doesn't focus on the misery of the present—on the aggression, uncertainty, and dissimulation that characterize the current migration crises in Europe. Rather, by focusing his attention on the events of roughly half a century ago, he seems to suggest that his viewers reflect upon the present day from an objective distance. But the attempt at subtlety is a crashing failure. The empty rooms filmed in the Royal Villa of Durrës, the repainted news stills, the reenacted historical events, even the opened envelopes—all of it invokes a contemporary language of Serious Installation Art that seems as predictable, as sanctimonious, and as insufficient in the face of recent events as the latest political directive from Brussels. History, catching up with Paci's melancholy visions, has also utterly overtaken them.

Adrian Paci, *Sue proprie mani* (Open by Addressee Only) (detail), 2015, five-channel HD video (color, sound, 17 minutes 25 seconds), twelve framed envelope facsimiles, three vitrines containing approximately one hundred letter facsimiles. Photo: Sabrina Brunner.