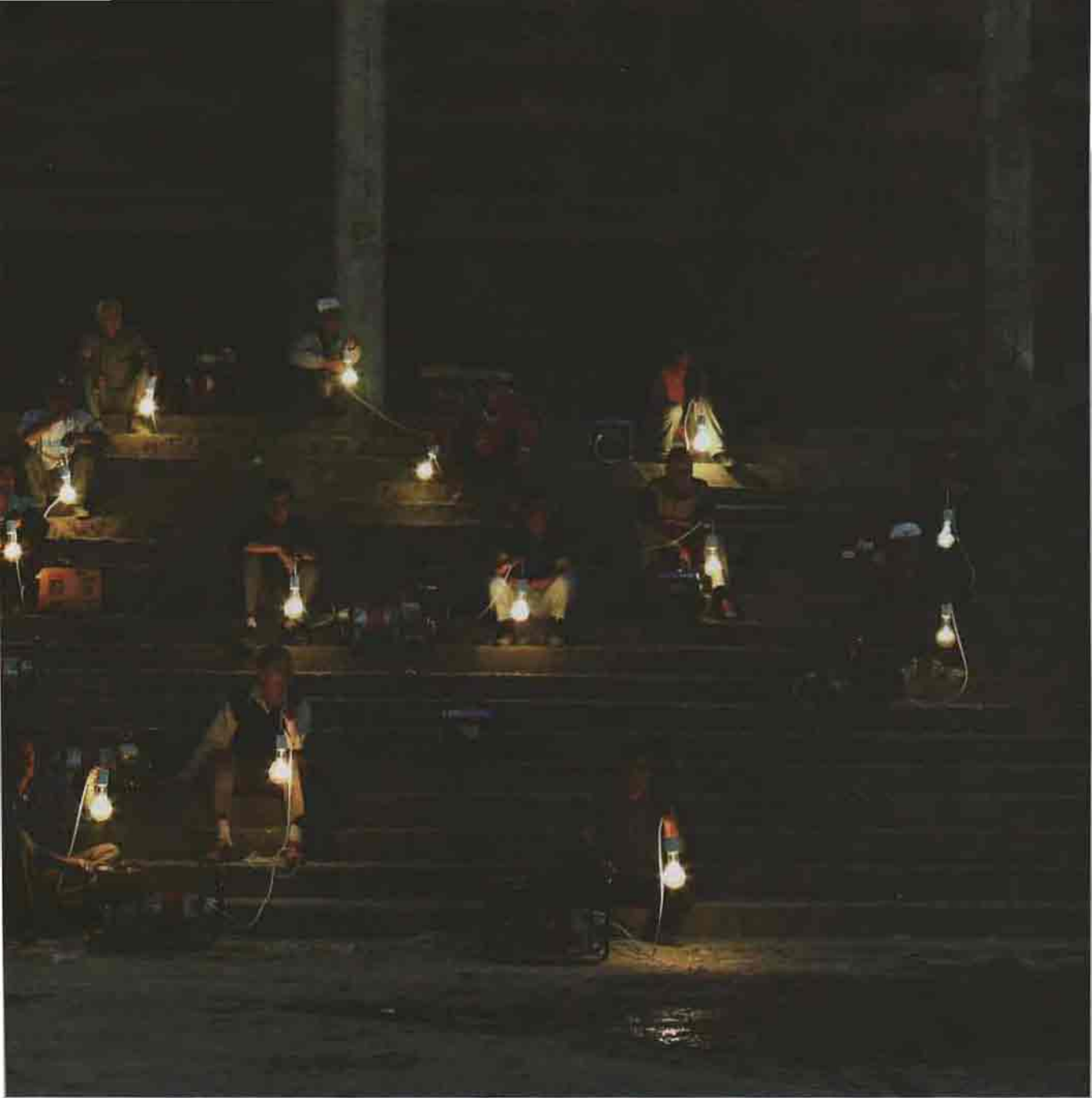


# Strong Current

Adrian Paci explores personal histories, highlighting their construction and re-staging - from filming the unveiling of a Madonna to selling electricity to fellow artists  
*by Dominic Eichler*





In the late 15th century the Ottomans conquered Shkodra, the home town of artist Adrian Paci. Local legend has it that a much venerated *Madonna and Child* that hung in The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Good Counsel was rescued from the clutches of the invaders by angels who whisked the work (but not the population) up into the heavens and out of harm's way. These days we are pretty blasé about art works being transported by air, but as it turned out these watchful spiritual agents may have had earthly connections or designs. Many believe that the fragile painting turned up in a church across the narrow Adriatic in the town of Gennazzano, just outside Rome,

where it still occupies a richly ornamented pride of place. Back in Albania, resilient locals still hope that one day a new miracle will lead to the painting's return.

Paci's video *pilgrIMAGE* (2005) tells the tale of the painting's provenance – part history, part pious fantasy, enriched by a vivid leap of faith and evocative of details irrevocably lost in time. One half of Paci's documentary-style video stages a mediated version of the painting's homecoming to Albania. First he shot the *Madonna* in the Italian church. The camerawork begins by peeking through the high altar's iron gates as the solemn black velvet curtain that normally screens the work

from view is raised – a compelling piece of sacral theatre. Paci then announced a screening of this footage outdoors in Shkodra. A congregation of curious onlookers and devout townsfolk gathered to see the video reproduction of the painting, prompting an outburst of religious feeling sometimes so intense that watching it, whatever your denomination, seems sacrilegious. The video record of this long-awaited visitation was then beamed onto a screen in the empty darkened church in Italy and combined with images of Albanian street life, including a flock of sheep scuttling along a footpath by a busy street. Travelling visually back and forth, the final work is

Turn On  
2004  
Colour  
photograph  
148x190 cm



**Back Home #2**  
2001  
From a series of four  
photographs  
105x125 cm

brought together with frank, hard-cut edits, bridging and enunciating the gaps created by geography, religious belief, intertwined histories, cultures, politics and art.

Paci became known in the European art world through his first video work, *Albanian Stories* (1997), made just a few months after he arrived as a refugee in Milan with his family of four; they had fled the violence in Albania that had erupted at the end of the long, repressive and isolationist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha (1945–85) and his short-lived successor. The 1997 unrest was sparked by a failed pyramid savings scheme that triggered economic collapse and resulted in a state of anarchy in which armed gangs took to the streets. Paci had his own artistic epiphany with the making of this work: he had graduated with a degree in painting from Tirana Art Academy as the dictatorship came to an end, and his father had been an artist under the old regime, which censored most art since Impressionism. It dawned on him that, despite the fact that he could theoretically enjoy the post-dictatorship artistic freedom, 'disputes once considered important, such as figurative versus abstract art, expression versus representation, form versus content, rationality versus spirituality, had suddenly become meaningless, even boring - lacking any vitality'.<sup>1</sup>

This realization was prompted while paying fatherly attention to a fairy-tale invented by his then three-year-old daughter Jolanda, as she was playing with her new

## Narrative in Paci's work is, according to the artist, 'about coming across incredible stories and deciding not to remain indifferent'.

dolls. *Albanian Stories* is a close-up of her retelling the story, in which a cow, a rooster and a family have to flee from 'dark forces' and 'international forces' - a child's poignant coming to terms with the unrest and conflict witnessed by the family. And things in Milan weren't easy either: 'Do you know what I found on the door of the block of flats when I arrived in Milan in 1997? A manifesto of the Lega Nord [Northern League] that said: "One more vote for the League, one less Albanian in Milan." With us there were four more Albanians, and the League lost the election.'<sup>2</sup> The video is an achingly immediate document that is pointedly left as raw and complicated as the experience it reflects. Paci's daughter also happens to be a natural performer and looks like one of the curly-headed cupids at the foot of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* (1513–14). A few years later Jolanda appeared again in the video interview *A Real Game* (2000), where she says that she remembers everything being

easier for her parents before leaving Albania, where her mother worked at a university rather than as a cleaner.

Paci's work gravitates conceptually between the two poles of *pilgrIMAGE* and *Albanian Stories*. On one hand, he is committed to documenting personal histories and narratives. On the other, he also spotlights the pictorial quality, mediation, construction and re-staging of these remembrances. For instance, his videos often reveal a displaced painter's obsession with painterly effects such as *chiaroscuro* and the use of framing devices in order to distance himself and his art from its ostensible subjects. His works are at once simple and emotionally direct, but their representation is also carefully calculated. Video seems the medium of choice because cultural displacement is echoed in the medium's inherent chasm between image and narrative, directness and distance.

One of the highlights of this year's Venice Biennale was Paci's video *Turn On* (2004), a dignified succession of close-ups of some of the jobless Albanian men who regularly hang out in the town square in Shkodra. Their sun-wrinkled faces gaze into the camera, holding light bulbs, while petrol-fuelled electricity generators sit by their sides. One after another, they start them up and the big globes in their hands light up. Paci hired the men for a day's shooting, but it looks as though they are acting in complicity with the artist - like a well-functioning community-based project.





Left:  
*Piktori*  
2002  
Installation and video  
4x3x2m

Below:  
*Vajtoja*  
(Mourner)  
2002  
Film still

The artist believes that 'the greatest simplicity may conceal the most intense things',<sup>3</sup> and it's hard to think of a more powerful and direct metaphor for self-reliance and the human spirit. We can't return the silent men's gaze, but they seem to know we are there. Their generators roar and no one moves, except to blink. (What we can't see is that some locals believed the action to be some kind of political protest against the government and gathered around, some waving flags.) The electricity supply still regularly fails in Albania. In the West simply turning on a video playing to watch this work seems like an ironic statement about what we take for granted.

At the Tirana Biennial, Paci contributed the action *Generator* (2003), which involved selling the electricity produced by a generator to the participating Swedish artists as a way of getting around their funding criteria to redistribute a portion of their controlled budgets to the participating Albanian and Cuban artists. Against this background Paci recently produced *Noise of Light* (2005), an installation consisting of a huge crystal chandelier lit up by ten generators – many more than the fitting requires – in a critical display of petrol power and excess.

Every artist working in Western contemporary art institutions and commercial galleries whose work is perceived as speaking for the position of a periphery, a minority or the culturally exotic seems to face the problem that their work – even if it deals directly with this problem – is subsumed under the weight of a generalized representative function. Often this can even seem like a precondition for interest in their work, and the attention they receive can be brutally short-lived, as concern moves from one post-biennial or regional survey exhibition to another. Paci's work has often both provocatively risen to, and risen above, this cultural political challenge. For instance, he doesn't de-personalize in order to avoid being labelled as an 'Albanian émigré artist'. But when interviewed on the topic, he noted, 'Albania and emigration are perhaps more the context for my work [rather] than its subject matter'.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps his sculpture *Home to Go* (2002), a life-size cast of the artist carrying a ceramic tiled roof strapped to his back, can be read on one level as an illustration of this dilemma.

Paci's work also sets aside the worn notion that contemporary art can be separated clearly into two camps: one political, the other aesthetic. His work makes a dual appeal to our retinas and our capacity for empathy. For example, his works dealing with the experience of Albanian migrants in Italy show aspects of day-to-day difficulties, framed with a conceptually thorough and victoriously

refined sensibility. Not surprisingly, one of Paci's favourite films is Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (1964), an interpretation of the scripture that uses intense close-ups of non-professional actors (including his mother as the aged Virgin Mary), and which emphasizes the filmmaker's unorthodox Marxist perspective by showing Christ as a young revolutionary. Paci's own subject matter recalls by analogy other films of the Italian Neo-Realist school dealing with the fate of southern Italians who migrated *en masse* to the cities and industrial north in the postwar period, such as Pasolini's brutal and tragic *Mamma Roma* (1962) or Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960).

Narrative in Paci's work is not just a way to personalize his art but also about 'coming across incredible stories and deciding not to remain indifferent'.<sup>5</sup> *Apparizione* (Apparition, 2000) is a split-screen video in which his daughter sings a folk-song while smiling relatives in Albania respond. The work evolved in response to the story of an elderly woman who tried to overcome her longing for her absent niece by playing a tape of the girl's voice in the corridor, going into the bedroom and pretending that she was playing next door. 'Back Home' (2001) is a series of photographs of immigrant families posing in front of painted backdrops of houses and interiors they have abandoned in Albania

– a reversal of the photographs of successful new lives that are typically sent back home by migrants everywhere. Much darker are his rather crass photographs 'Exit' (1999), depicting drawn passport control exit stamps on his daughters' pale shoulder blades. When he had these difficult images developed, Paci's local photo lab reported him to the police as a possible Albanian child pornographer. The video *Believe Me I'm an Artist* (2000) is a re-staging of Paci's police interview, in which his visa was potentially at stake. The artist attempts to explain his motivations to an officer who can't or does not want to understand.

Struggling with mediated versions of authenticity, reactivating his own memories as well as those of others, or re-staging the real inevitably leads to a consideration of how images can be made to lie usefully. In two works Paci fakes his own death, but perhaps as a way of finding personal renewal. The installation *Piktori* (2002) is a video interview with an Albanian artist who sets up shop in the market and who can forge anything from official documents to masterpieces. He does so with a dry sense of humour and great stoicism – happily agreeing to forge his colleague's death certificate. Every Albanian apparently has a shroud in a cupboard somewhere that should only be used on the death-bed. In the visually elegant film *Vajtoja* (Mourner, 2002) Paci tries his out prematurely. He performs his own death ritual, only to be resurrected at the end to pay a professional mourner to sing a haunting funeral dirge: 'How can I go on living? I beg thee speak, for my crying needs to cease.'

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1 Adrian Paci interviewed by Roberto Pinto, *Zat Zane Artistebe Temporance* exhibition catalogue, Civica Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Gallarate, May, 2004, p. 8

2 Adrian Paci interviewed by Chiara Parisi, 'Home Sweet Home', *The horse would know, but the horse can't talk*, exhibition catalogue, Charta Editions, 2002, p. 3

3 Op.cit., Pinto p. 7

4 Adrian Paci interviewed by Jan-Erik Lundström, *Tema Celeste International*, December/January 2001-2002, p. 56

5 Op.cit., Pinto p. 8

