

adrian paci

jan-erik lundström



Jan-Erik Lundström: Would you tell me about your background and what led to your decision to work as a professional artist?

Adrian Paci: I don't remember there being a specific moment that defined my decision to become an artist. My father was an artist, a painter, whose works followed the conventions of official socialist realism of the time, and maybe his death when I was only six made me follow the same path. I remember frequenting the studios of painters in Albania and staying for hours in my father's, looking in his books and his files.

J-EL: Your work is strongly rooted in your Albanian background and in particular exile experiences. How does this reflect your identity as an artist?

AP: Albania and emigration are perhaps more the context for my work than its subject matter. After having lived through the last decade in Albania, one can't remain indifferent to the marks that such experiences leave on those who have had them. What

interests me is not my identity as an Albanian or emigrant but the transformation of my experiences in moments of reflection for myself and for others.

J-EL: Much of your work touches a biographical or even autobiographical nerve. What are the levels of storytelling, fiction, and realism in your work?

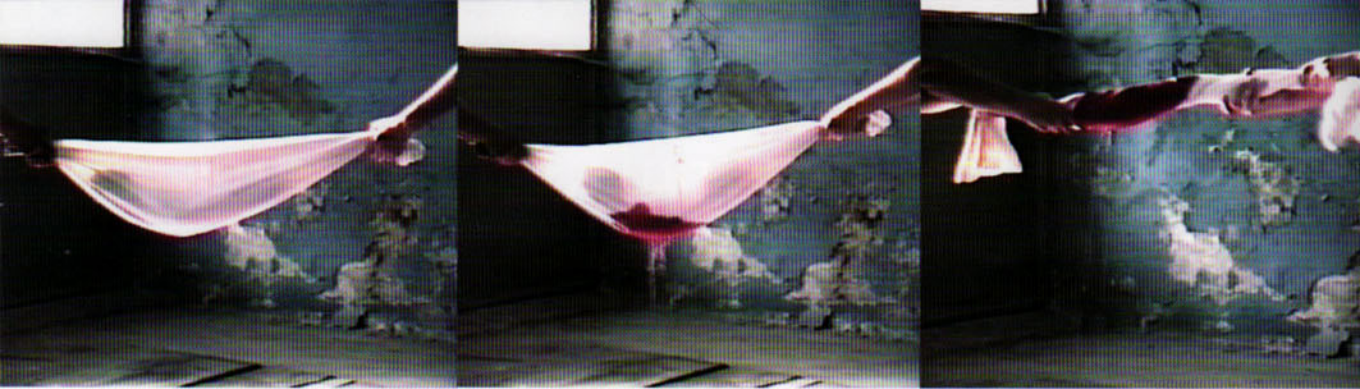
AP: Often in life, reality and fiction are blended. These moments excite me the most. I do not believe that the simple chronicle of facts or the use of autobiographic material is enough to produce a work of art. The real and fiction intertwine to give facts a new dimension. I like to use material that is close to me, so as not to be only a victim of experience. But I approach my lived stories from a certain point of view or a certain distance in order to be able to work with them. *Believe Me, I'm an Artist* is, in a way, both a document of an actual police hearing that I was subjected to and a reconstruction and transformation of this same event.

J-EL: *Albanian Stories* explores, even exploits, a remarkable story told by your daughter; her fairy tale is ingeniously intertwined with a real-life story of war, terror, and escape. What is the role of your daughter here? Does she act? Or is she a witness, a storyteller, a prophet?

AP: Jola's role in *Albanian Stories* is decisive. She at the same time plays, creates, invents, and tells her memories of the "dark forces" and the "international forces." All I had to do was to reproduce this through the simple act of filming her, asking her, "delicately," to share her stories with me. *Albanian Stories* enabled me to shift my attention from abstract reasoning (like being obsessed with the question "what is art?") and obscure ambitions to an art guided or created by the intimate relationships with people. Jola's process of storytelling helped me discover my artistic identity.

J-EL: *After the Wall There Are Some Walls* records a real event, where the police try to stop you from taking water from the Adriatic Sea. In the discussion that follows, your identity as an artist and as an Albanian is questioned (this makes me think of Joseph Beuys' action where he explains concepts of art to a rabbit). Tell me about this incident, which, by the way, also becomes part of the work itself.

AP: In fact it wasn't an accident. It is absolutely normal for a boat in the Otranto Channel to be the object of a police inspection because it is through this channel that many



▲ Adrian Paci *O - O*, 1998, stills from video.

◀ Adrian Paci *Back Home*, 2001, photograph, 105 x 120 cm.

◀◀ Adrian Paci *Home to Go*, photograph, 100 x 100 cm.



clandestine people try to get to Italy. The Otranto Channel has over the last ten years been transformed into an arena of heartbreaking stories filled with hope and tragedy. What was abnormal in this case was to find an Albanian man, me, in the middle of the sea, taking water to fill plastic cans—I was planning to build a real and symbolic wall with this water. I first attempted to carry on a dialogue with the police and explain to them the nature of my project, as my tape shows. But when I gave the police a text to read, he did not look at what was written. Instead he looked at the boat and said, "Hey, it's the boat of Giuseppe"—and then he let us go.

J-EL: One of your most recent works, *Back Home*, also proposes a certain kind of realism; the painted backdrop, representing a house, is real in the sense that it is taken from a photograph. And this is parallel to the way you brought the actual water of the Adriatic Sea into the previous installation, or the way you returned with the video of your daughter singing—*Apparition*—

to your home village, presenting it to your relatives. Is this actual exchange of things—of gifts as it were—important to you?

AP: Absolutely yes. In the same way that a gift has both real and symbolic significance, my actions similarly tend, through actual gestures, to build communication bridges, thus becoming means to establishing human relationships. Human beings tend to lend objects qualities that surpasses pure physical or factual description. The home is a specific object, built by specific materials and furnished in a certain way, but, on the other hand, home is the place of your memories, it is the background of many intimate events that define your life and sense of self. The relationship between the real and the symbolic is reciprocal; the more distant you are from the real, the more present the symbolic is. Therefore, the relationships emigrants have with their homes are never utilitarian—there is always a symbolic side. In *Back Home* I painted the houses of Albanian families living in Italy. Then I invited them to be photographed, with their painted houses in the background. In this way the action is real: The families are in front of the camera, the house is in actuality their house, but it is painted, a dream, a wish.

J-EL: Are you wary of being defined as an Eastern European artist, an Albanian artist? Can the work of art withstand such outside definitions and expectations?

AP: The work of art has many dimensions. One could define someone as a third-world artist, for example, but it would be reductive to ignore other dimensions of the work, like the universe of human emotions. I don't think that the qualities of a work of art have to be separated from the complex reality where they are born, but to see the piece only as a witness of a social or political situation would also be schematic.