

“I LIVED WITHOUT SEEING THESE ARTWORKS”

(ALBANIAN) SOCIALIST REALISM AND/AGAINST CONTEMPORARY ART

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I lived without seeing these art works. I can now live without them [too]. But again, it was good to see them after so many years. Some of them made me feel blue, some made me laugh. Many thanks

—P.R., RETIRED STATE EMPLOYEE, IN THE COMMENT BOOK FOR THE DUAL EXHIBITIONS SOCIALIST SURREALISM AND HOMO SOCIALISTICUS AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ARTS, TIRANA, ALBANIA, 1999¹

In 2003, a collection of over 40 Socialist Realist sculptures traveled to the Essl Museum, in Vienna, from the National Gallery of Arts in Tirana, Albania. The sculptures—a collection of busts of industrial workers, villagers, Partisan soldiers, and Communist Party leaders—had previously been on display in Tirana as part of the exhibition *Homo Socialisticus*, curated by the gallery’s director at the time, Gëzim Qëndro. *Homo Socialisticus*, which opened in 1999, was devoted to presenting the cultural output of Albania’s socialist period as a project of ideological and social engineering, and its reception engendered indignation from many viewers, including both those who saw it as nostalgia for the communist regime and those who saw it as an affront to the dignity of works produced by dedicated leftist

¹ Quoted in Gëzim Qëndro, “What’s Your Name, Puppet?,” in *Blood & Honey: Future’s in the Balkans*, ed. Harald Szeemann et al. (Vienna: Essl Museum, 2003), 76. Translation by Qëndro.



Installation view of the exhibition *Blood & Honey: The Future's in the Balkans*, Essl Collection, Klosterneuburg/Vienna, 2003. Shown are (middle and right) the installation *Homo Socialisticus*, 2003, and (left) Agim Zajmi, *Raising of the Flag in Dëgë in 1911*, 1978. © the artists. Image courtesy of Private Essl Foundation of Public Utility, Klosterneuburg/Vienna—Archive Essl Museum.

artists.² Placed on rows of compact shelving units in the National Gallery, this assembly of over 250 busts sought to demonstrate—through sheer quantity—the enduring legacy of socialist-era culture in Albania, not only as an art form but as an engineered self-image of community. In Vienna, a portion of this collection was put on view not in a historical survey of postwar figuration, or of socialist-era art, but as part of an exhibition devoted to contemporary art from Southeastern Europe, *Blood & Honey: The Future's in the Balkans*, curated by the renowned Swiss curator Harald Szeemann.³ The busts appeared densely installed on a red wooden shelving unit, looking less like sculptures on display in a museum and more like works placed in perpetual storage, giving the impression of aesthetic and ideological fungibility. The collection of sculptures almost forthrightly refuted the exhibition's exuberant subtitle's declaration that the future lay in the Balkans, instead suggesting the inescapable persistence of the region's socialist past.

Of course, the works of Albanian Socialist Realism presented in

2 The exhibition's reception is detailed by its curator in Qëndro, "Puppet," 76–78.

3 The exhibition was open from May 16 to September 28, 2003.

Blood & Honey were not the only signs of the past present—most notably, the exhibition included the Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s hearse—but more than any other such artistic remnants or symbols, they hovered ambiguously between their ontological status as individual artworks and elements in a broader curatorial or artistic ensemble. The history of the earlier Homo Socialisticus exhibition was detailed in an essay in the new exhibition’s catalog, and the starkly ideological quality of the collection seemed to mesh with Szeemann’s interest in the “new [and] old forms of intensity” that he believed to be manifest in the region’s “subversive” art production.⁴ The presence of these works in Szeemann’s exhibition indicates broader interactions between past and present; between the national, the regional, and the transnational; and between the curatorial and the historical. However, the installation has garnered no sustained treatment in the art historical or critical literature on Balkans-focused exhibitions of contemporary art. The Socialist Realist works on display in Blood & Honey—placed alongside works of (post-socialist) contemporary art—reveal a fraught middle ground: they indicate Szeemann’s notion of art in the Balkans as being defined by “the trauma of war,”⁵ while simultaneously reflecting his penchant for exhibiting historical relics and popular-culture materials in his exhibitions⁶ and his interest in eccentric collections gathered by artists, curators, and nonartists.⁷ The significance of this middle ground extends beyond Blood & Honey’s place in either Szeemann’s oeuvre or the history of Balkan-themed art exhibitions. It reveals how Socialist Realism could (or could not) be allowed to function as part of the “history” of

4 Harald Szeemann, email to Marina Sorbello of the magazine *Tema Celeste*, January 8, 2004, Szeemann Papers, Box 745, Folder 11. Often in his career, Szeemann insisted that “my main criterion is intensity”—see Florian Rötzer, Sara Rogenhofer, and Harald Szeemann, “Objektivität in der Kunst ist das kompromisslos Subjektive,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, October 15, 1988, quoted in Hans-Joachim Müller, *Harald Szeemann: Exhibition Maker* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 145.

5 Patricia Grzonka and Harald Szeemann, “Das halte ich durch, bis es mich legt,” *Profil*, no. 19 (2003), <https://www.basis-wien.at/avdt/htm/219/00058331.htm> (accessed March 20, 2020).

6 While the scope of this article does not allow for a full contextualization in relation to Szeemann’s career, it suffices to point out that while Blood & Honey was by no means as formally or conceptually innovative as many of his earlier curatorial projects, it nonetheless reflects many of his ongoing preoccupations.

7 Glenn Phillips points out that Blood & Honey could be understood as importantly related to Szeemann’s earlier exhibition *Grandfather (A Pioneer Like Us)*, a retracing of his grandfather’s own travels in the region. See Phillips, “Pioneers Like Us,” in *Harald Szeemann: Museum of Obsessions*, ed. Glenn Phillips and Philipp Kaiser (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2018), 341.

contemporary art, as well as the kinds of understandings of Socialist Realism that needed to be suppressed in order to make its historical role amenable to narratives of artistic emancipation and rebellion in the early 21st century.

This article considers the curious position of Albanian Socialist Realism at the nexus of a number of different discourses on art in post-socialist exhibition conditions, using *Blood & Honey* as a case study. How can Socialist Realism (as a national or a global phenomenon) be understood in relation to contemporary art? How did the presence of Albanian Socialist Realism in *Blood & Honey* reflect Szeemann's understanding of the socialist past in relation to the present? To address these questions, I consider the roles (both spatial and ideological) that the inclusion of sculptures from the *Homo Socialisticus* exhibition played in *Blood & Honey*, examining how they were installed and the ways they were discussed by Szeemann and by reviewers of the exhibition. I assess how the sculptures from *Homo Socialisticus* relate to the history of Socialist Realism as an art movement in Albania (indeed, as the dominant art movement in the country for most of the postwar period), and I examine how the inclusion of this body of work from Albania contributed to a broader provincialization of that country's art production, one that continues to this day.

Blood & Honey was one of three geographically focused exhibitions centering on the Balkans that appeared in the early 2000s, the other two being *In Search of Balkania* (curated by Roger Conover, Eda Čufer, and Peter Weibel at the Neue Galerie Graz in 2002)⁸ and *In the Gorges of the Balkans: A Report* (curated by René Block at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel in 2003).⁹ These exhibitions staged a new development in Western Europe's encounter with Eastern Europe, and specifically with the Balkans.¹⁰ Like earlier engagements with the contemporary art of the Eastern Bloc, these shows highlighted trauma as a recurring theme, often presenting art as a form of therapy for dealing

8 Roger Conover, Eda Čufer, and Peter Weibel, eds., *In Search of Balkania* (Graz, Austria: Neue Galerie Graz, 2002).

9 This exhibition was the first part of a trilogy of events that Block planned, which also included a series of projects organized by local curators. See René Block, ed., *The Balkans Trilogy* (Munich: Schreiber, 2006).

10 See Raluca Voinea, "Geographically Defined Exhibitions: The Balkans between Eastern Europe and New Europe," in *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Roxana Marcoci, Ana Janevski, and Ksenia Nouril (New York: MoMA, 2018).

with the recent past and as a source of liberation from conservative traditions.¹¹ In doing so, the exhibitions reified a key trope of the region that had developed under the Western gaze, one recently reinforced after the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Kosovo War: that the Balkans was the “powder-keg” of Europe, a realm of “eternal strife”¹² characterized by primeval hostilities, chronic political instability, and shockingly barbaric violence. In other words, the Balkans persisted—through exhibitions like *Blood & Honey*—as a marked category in the regional matrix of European geographic subdivisions (as opposed to the unmarked categories of “Western Europe” or “Northeastern Europe”), one also defined by its historical existence somewhere *between* the Orient and Western civilization.¹³ These exhibitions were not only about delineating a particular region, however; they were also about the definition of “Europe” itself, and the cultural processes involved in delineating that region have remained relevant since the early 2000s, as the borders of the European Union continue to shape the movements, identities, and cultural opportunities of artists from Southeastern Europe.¹⁴

Of these three exhibitions, Szeemann’s was the one most interested in both regional psychology and mythic, ahistorical narratives. It sought to explore artworks from the region as “documents [of] suffering and the desire for emancipation from rigid rules,”¹⁵ firmly aligning Szeemann’s interpretation of “Balkan” art with prevailing perceptions of the region in the West.¹⁶ Furthermore, Szeemann implied a certain (art) historical naivete in the artists presented by framing *Blood & Honey* in relation to previous curatorial projects of his, such as

11 Anthony Gardner, *Politically Unbecoming: Postsocialist Art against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 19. The language of “therapy” as a mode for the artistic encounter with the postsocialist condition had already become entrenched in 2000, when it shaped the curatorial vision for *Manifesta 3*.

12 Count Hermann Keyserling, quoted in Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* [1997] (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 124.

13 Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 12, 197.

14 The scope of this article does not permit a full comparison of *Blood & Honey* with the other “Balkans”-themed exhibitions of the time, nor with those that have come since. For more on these topics, respectively, see Voinea, “Geographically Defined Exhibitions,” and Maria-Alina Asavei, “Beyond Blood and Honey: Re-Imagining the Balkans through Traveling Exhibitions,” *Études balkaniques* 4 (2018): 706–25.

15 Harald Szeemann, “On the Exhibition,” in Szeemann et al., *Blood & Honey*, 28.

16 This was apparent immediately from the dual extremes of the title of the exhibition, which Szeemann explained was suggested to him by Melentije Pandilovski and which played on the fact that the syllables BAL-KAN could be translated as “blood” and “honey” in Turkish. Szeemann, “On the Exhibition,” 26. On the exotic associations of the title, see Voinea, “Geographically Defined Exhibitions,” 109.

Visionary Switzerland (1992) and Austria in a Lacework of Roses (1996). These had also highlighted (in his words) national cultures that were “a magnetic field of free associations, evok[ing] . . . an ahistoric world.”¹⁷ However, the “ahistoric world” of *Blood & Honey* also wrestled with certain concrete historical relics: the *Homo Socialisticus* installation was one of these, but the most iconic was the hearse of Franz Ferdinand, whose assassination in Sarajevo launched the First World War. The hearse, displayed in the midst of contemporary art (in a museum in Vienna), firmly linked the Balkans not only to the legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire but also to 20th-century conflicts writ large across Europe, but its gesture at political history was eminently related to its museum context. In his survey of Szeemann’s career, critic Hans-Joachim Müller calls *Blood & Honey* the curator’s “most political exhibition,”¹⁸ but contemporary reviews instead read the show (more accurately, I think) as the curator’s attempt to *escape* politics. The Socialist Realist sculptures enabled this escape: viewers were meant to “say goodbye to ‘Homo Socialisticus’” at the outset of the exhibition, and this farewell reinforced Szeemann’s “utopian creed”: “Where politics separates people, art brings them together.”¹⁹

Blood & Honey was not Szeemann’s first foray into former socialist Europe: in 2000 he had curated *Beware of Exiting Your Dreams: You Might Find Yourself in Somebody Else’s*, a show that reflected his continuing interest in national narratives. It focused on contemporary art in Poland, but unlike *Blood & Honey*, it was staged within the country that was its subject (at Zachęta), and it generated more controversy for work Szeemann included by artists from outside Poland: specifically, for Maurizio Cattelan’s *La Nona Ora*, depicting the (Polish) pope struck by a meteor. Szeemann had been interested in the Balkans since his work on the Venice Biennale in 1999–2001, gradually establishing contacts there, and in preparation for *Blood & Honey* he traveled through the region on an “artistic voyage of discovery,” accompanied by Karlheinz Essl, as Essl recounted in his own catalog essay.²⁰ One of the cities Essl visited with Szeemann was Tirana,²¹ and

17 Szeemann, “On the Exhibition,” 26.

18 Müller, *Exhibition Maker*, 142.

19 Gerhard Mack, “Wo Blut und Honig fließen,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, June 8, 2003.

20 Karlheinz Essl, “Editorial,” in Szeemann et al., *Blood & Honey*, 9–11.

21 Szeemann had seen *Homo Socialisticus* earlier, in 2001. See Szeemann’s fax to Abaz Hado (who succeeded Qëndro as director of the National Gallery), July 19, 2002, Szeemann Papers, Box 744, Folder 9.



he singles out the *Homo Socialisticus* display for mention in his short introduction, noting that “one room in [Blood & Honey] will be dedicated to this group of busts together with an exemplary painting from the same period.”²² (The painting was Agim Zajmi’s *The Raising of the Flag in Deçiç in 1911*, 1978, hung on one of the walls across from the shelved busts.) The significance placed on the Albanian Socialist Realist works was reinforced by the fact that *Homo Socialisticus* was the only work (or installation, as it were) to receive its own catalog essay; while the other writings in the catalog were general and historical or conceptual in tone, Gëzim Qëndro’s “What’s Your Name, Puppet?” directly discussed the *Homo Socialisticus* and Socialist Surrealism exhibitions he had curated at the National Gallery of Arts in Tirana, accompanied by photos of the busts installed there. Indeed, as Szeemann explained in an interview, “contemporary art” (in the

Installation view of *Homo Socialisticus* in Blood & Honey, 2003. Essl Collection, Klosterneuburg/Wienna. Szeemann Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California. Image courtesy of the Getty Research Institute.

22 Essl, “Editorial,” 11.

context of Blood & Honey) “began with the ironization of Socialist Realism” (demonstrated by Homo Socialisticus) and continued with neo-avant-garde works by artists such as Marina Abramović and Raša Todosijević.²³

Writing in 2003, Boris Buden called Blood & Honey “a very fine and thoroughly successful misunderstanding.”²⁴ Where later enthusiasts of Szeemann saw the exhibition as a culmination of his attempts to overcome the tyranny of both the art market and the museum (to stage exhibitions full of “names that were hard to remember”²⁵), Buden criticized Szeemann’s uncritical obsession with “subversiveness” and “the theme of taboo-breaking in ‘Balkan’ art”—which, not coincidentally, Szeemann saw as particularly manifest in the works of artists from Albania and Kosovo.²⁶ Indeed, it is the central rhetorical role played by Albania in Szeemann’s narrative that makes attending to *Homo Socialisticus* so essential: the curator began his catalog essay by contextualizing the ethnically Albanian artists included in relation to the *Kanun* (or “canon”), a law code transmitted orally (in various local manifestations) beginning in the early modern period and often associated with Catholic communities in northern Albania. The *Kanun* has indeed served as a staple of cultural identity in many Albanian communities,²⁷ but for Szeemann, it also serves as the repressive patriarchal social structure *par excellence*: it treats women as property and stipulates the need for revenge killings to avenge affronts to masculine honor. Against this “ancient” folk-historical backdrop, Szeemann introduces not only the Albanian and Kosovar artists in Blood & Honey, but in fact the whole of the Balkans.²⁸

Szeemann’s framing rhetoric for the exhibition aimed to return a certain kind of agency to the region through its contemporary artists,

23 Grzonka and Szeemann, “Das halte ich durch.”

24 Boris Buden, “The Madman Is Sleeping with the Lunatic,” *Springerin* 2 (2003), <https://www.springerin.at/en/2003/2/da-bumst-der-wahnsinnige-mit-dem-verwirrten/> (accessed March 16, 2020).

25 Müller, *Exhibition Maker*, 144.

26 Buden, “Madman”; cf. Szeemann, “On the Exhibition,” 26–27. Ethnically Albanian artists in the exhibition included Ornela Vorpsi, Edi Rama, Edi Hila, Sokol Beqiri, and Erzen Shkolli.

27 On the *Kanun* and socialist modernity in Albania, see Stéphane Voell, “The Kanun in Ethnographic Self-Description: Research into Albanian Traditional Law under Socialism,” in *Sociology and Ethnography in East-Central and South-East Europe*, ed. Ulf Brunnbauer et al. (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2011), 227–94.

28 Szeemann, “On the Exhibition,” 26–28.

allowing them to set the tone for the “future” that was to be found in the Balkans. (In one interview he said, “I hope that the West will adapt to Balkan [sic] and not the other way round.”)²⁹ Instead, however, the presentation of the *Homo Socialisticus* sculptures is the most illustrative example of the way this agency was preconstructed, curtailed, and oversimplified, reducing a global art movement to a (nationalized) process of pseudo-psychoanalytical autotherapy. (Albanian) Socialist Realism was reduced from a transnational attempt to resist Western cultural hegemony during the Cold War (with its own complicated geopolitical history³⁰) to an object utilized as part of the collective performance of self-diagnosis.³¹

Homo Socialisticus constituted a dominant spatial force in the exhibition, although not quite to the degree that Karlheinz Essl suggested in his introduction, nor even to the degree that Qëndro’s essay suggests. The work was installed in a room with walls painted bright red (also the color of the shelving unit itself), located directly beyond the museum’s entrance foyer and across from the library, where vitrines housed introductory texts and maps of the region. The shelving unit holding over 40 busts³² stood well over viewers’ heads, and it was placed at an angle so that it occupied an entire corner (or two full walls) of the room. Szeemann had elected to borrow only a portion of the complete installation (which had contained hundreds of busts), opting to include only one unit for reasons of space.³³ The busts varied in size and material, although most of them were plaster, and their stark whiteness contributed to the sense of sterility already conveyed by the neat arrangement of numerous heads.

29 Szeemann, email to Marina Sorbello.

30 Literature on Socialist Realism in Albania remains scant. For three different surveys of the phenomenon, see Fjoralba Satka Mata, “Albanian Alternative Artists vs. Official Art under Communism,” in *History of Communism in Europe, Volume 2*, ed. Cristian Vasile (Bucharest: Zeta, 2011), 79–89; Gëzim Qëndro, *Le surréalisme socialiste: L'autopsie de l'utopie* (Paris: Harmattan, 2014); and Ermir Hoxha, *Realizmi Socialist Shqiptar* (Tirana: Galeria Kombëtare e Arteve, 2017). On the situation of sculpture, in particular, in socialist Albania, see Raino Isto, “The Dictator Visits the Studio: The Vlora Independence Monument and the Politics of Albanian Monumental Sculpture, 1962–1972,” *Third Text* 32, no. 3 (2018): 500–18.

31 This pathologization is also related to the infantilization of postsocialist societies pointed out by Boris Buden in “Children of Postcommunism,” *Radical Philosophy* 159 (January/February 2010): 18–25.

32 The number of busts is noted in the catalog and promotional materials as 43, but it seems this number may also have included two works displayed separately, by Kristaq Rama and Muntas Dhrami (discussed below)—they are also given separate entries in the catalog.

33 Harald Szeemann, email response to Edi Muka, May 23, 2002, Szeemann papers, Box 744, Folder 9.



Displayed directly across the room was a monitor showing Marina Abramović's iconic 1975 performance *Lips of Thomas*, in which (among other actions) she uses a razor to carve an inverted pentagram on her bare stomach. One review of the exhibition pointed out the irony of this juxtaposition: Abramović, the daughter of decorated Yugoslav Partisans, carving the red star into her flesh in full view of a wall of soldiers, workers, peasants, and communist leaders.³⁴ Also opposite the shelving unit bearing the sculptures was Bulgarian artist Luchezar Boyadjev's *Chairs and Symbols (A Project for Peaceful Co-Identification)* (1995–2001), a collection of photographs of red chairs arranged into various readily recognizable symbolic configurations (including a swastika, a hammer and sickle, and a cross). Thus, *Homo Socialisticus* instantly entered into a dialogue on violence, the body, endurance, and symbolic representations of ideology.

The clearest complement to *Homo Socialisticus* in Blood & Honey, conceptually, was a portion of Croatia-based artist Vladimir Dodig-Trokut's *Anti-Museum*, a massive collection of objects of all kinds gathered from everyday life. In Blood & Honey, Szeemann showed a thematic grouping of objects from the *Anti-Museum*: a range of sculptural memorabilia featuring Josip Broz Tito. Displayed in a shallow

34 Gerhard Mack, "Wo Blut und Honig fließen."

alcove, the numerous reliefs, busts, and medallions of Yugoslavia's leader offered a logical counterpoint to the multitude of socialist subjects in the Albanian installation. But the installation drawn from Dodig-Trokut's collection was different in several ways: it was far more explicitly about the leader cult; its objects were overtly anthropological in character (in other words, the conceit of Dodig-Trokut's Anti-Museum was precisely the "mundane"³⁵—as opposed to artistic—quality of the objects included); and finally, it was an *artist* project, as opposed to a curatorial intervention. Nonetheless, viewers would doubtless have drawn connections between these two installations, although there were several historical connections missed by the juxtaposition. There was no mention, for example, of the fact that both Tito and Enver Hoxha, Albania's dictator, had been leaders in the Partisan antifascist resistance, and thus that they had both been participants in bottom-up, guerilla-style liberation movements (something that differentiated Albania and Yugoslavia from virtually all other Socialist Bloc nations, where the Soviet Red Army was largely credited with defeating the fascists). There was no mention of the fact that both Tito and Hoxha had broken with the Soviet Union (in the 40s and 60s, respectively), seeking alternative geopolitical alliances. No effort was made to position these two groups of objects in relation to global political or cultural contexts. At the same time, certain differences in the significance of the objects in these two installations were also ignored: "official" art in the two countries had looked very different, with Albania staying the course of Socialist Realist production and Yugoslavia developing a hybrid socialist modernism, but Szeemann's presentation of the busts gave no hint of this. For Szeemann, the impact of historical socialist objects was their potentially direct emotional appeal (shock at the homogeneity of art produced in dictatorships), not the nuanced narratives they might spark as contemporary artworks themselves.

In addition to the busts in *Homo Socialisticus*, *Blood & Honey* included two other bronze sculptures borrowed from the National Gallery in Tirana, which Szeemann had seen displayed in the institution's garden during his visit. Szeemann clearly felt an immediate connection with these two works, since they were the only sculptures from Tirana that he specifically requested by name.³⁶ They were Kristaq

35 See Dodig-Trokut's description of the project in Szeemann et al., *Blood & Honey*, 152.

36 Szeemann, undated letter to Abaz Hado, Szeemann Papers, Box 744, Folder 9.



Rama's *Zborristja* (*Woman Military Trainee*, 1969) and Muntas Dhrami's *Partizania Liri Gero* (*The Partisan Liri Gero*, 1981). Both artists also had works included in *Homo Socialisticus*, but Szeemann displayed these two sculptures separately, and indeed, Rama's *Zborristja* was used to illustrate several reviews of the exhibition in the Austrian press.³⁷ *Zborristja* established a crucial transition to the next room of the exhibition: as viewers passed through the red room containing *Homo Socialisticus*, they could already see beyond it into a white room, featuring Maja Bajević's 2001 work *Women at Work—Washing Up*. *Washing Up* is a video documenting a group of women washing embroidered pieces of cloth in a hamam in Istanbul; the cloth pieces feature slogans from Tito, which remain legible even as the fabric is washed over and over again. Beyond these, along a far wall transitioning visitors to the next gallery, were images from Sanja Iveković's *Gen XX* (1997–2001) series, in which she captioned photos of glamorous women in magazine advertisements with texts commemorating female martyrs, victims of fascist occupation in Yugoslavia. But before viewers encountered Bajević's and Iveković's work, they were confronted with *Zborristja*, whose red pedestal marked the work's connection with *Homo Socialisticus*.

This transition—from *Homo Socialisticus*'s confrontation with Abramović and other neo-avant-garde artists' challenge to socialist symbolic ideology, to Rama's militant female socialist soldier juxtaposed

37 See "Dort sind wirklich tolle Künstler!," in the *Observer*, and "Kunst am Balkan," in the *Kurier*, May 15, 2003 (Szeemann Papers, Box 746, Folder 17).

against Bajević's and Iveković's different commentaries on gender and socialist propaganda—clearly gestured at the complexities of gender and sexuality, as well as labor and sacrifice, endemic to Socialist Realism. Elsewhere, this emphasis on gender and its entanglement with ideology and history was also evident in the installation of Dhrami's *Partizania Liri Gero*, which gazed in through the windows of the Essl Museum's courtyard facing Braco Dimitrijević's *Heralds of Post-History* (1997), which featured portraits of Kafka, Malevich, Tesla, and Wittgenstein installed behind leaning glass panels. Dimitrijević's work sought to question the ways that some figures (in this case, four white men) received recognition for their contributions only after their deaths. Beyond the windows, Dhrami's *Liri Gero* suffered a similar fate, although it is unlikely that viewers read the installation this way: both the Albanian Partisan legacy (including the role played by women in the movement) and Socialist Realism as an art form were destined for oblivion and anonymity. Based on the reception of *Blood & Honey* in periodicals at the time, it seems that commentators on the exhibition missed these potential complexities, reading the Albanian Socialist Realist works as straightforward representations of violent and empty ideology. Furthermore, there is little evidence that Szeemann sought to go

Installation view of *Partizania Liri Gero* in *Blood & Honey*, 2003.
Essl Collection, Klosterneuburg/Vienna. Szeemann Papers,
Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California.
Image courtesy of the Getty Research Institute.

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deeper: he was interested in how contemporary interventions might ironize these works, but his fascination with them seems to have stopped well short of an interest in the concrete historical or individual motives that drove their creation.

Szeemann had of course engaged with Socialist Realism earlier in his career, including in documenta 5 (1972), the exhibition that solidified his reputation as an eccentric, dynamic auteur curator.³⁸ As Nikolas Drosos points out, Szeemann had intended to include a large display of Socialist Realist works—and a replica of the famous Chinese sculptural ensemble *The Rent Collection Courtyard*—in the exhibition but was unable to secure the loans.³⁹ The inclusion of *Homo Socialisticus* in *Blood & Honey*, then, can be seen as Szeemann recapitulating, in his later career, an encounter he had hoped to stage much earlier, between Socialist Realism as a kind of hegemonic and anonymous world model and more allegedly vibrant (and “subversive”) contemporary art forms. Szeemann clearly did not consider the Socialist Realist artists from Albania to be “included” in the exhibition—promotional materials consistently cited the exhibition as including 73 artists from the region, which only included the “contemporary” artists, not the creators in *Homo Socialisticus*, nor those of the two other sculptures and of the painting Szeemann had also borrowed from Tirana. (The number 73 also, tellingly, did not include Gëzim Qëndro, suggesting that Szeemann really saw the sculptures as a *curatorial* intervention rather than an artistic one.)⁴⁰ None of the artists of the works in *Homo Socialisticus* were brought to the opening of the exhibition.⁴¹ There was no question of their “individual mythologies,” the concept Szeemann had introduced for documenta 5 in order to transcend stylistically narrow interpretations of particular artists.⁴²

38 On Szeemann's curation of documenta 5, including his inclusion of Socialist Realism in the exhibition, see Charles Green and Anthony Gardner, *Biennials, Triennials, and documenta: The Exhibitions That Created Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 21–32.

39 Nikolas Drosos, “Modernism and World Art, 1950–72,” *ARTMargins* 8, no. 2 (2019): 75.

40 Nor did Szeemann include Qëndro's name in the “fountain” graphic of artists' names that he created for the catalog (an adaptation of the visual device he had first used in promotional materials for *Painter-Poets—Poet-Painters* at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen in 1957). See Szeemann et al., *Blood & Honey*, 23.

41 A list of the artist invitees to the opening reception can be found in the Szeemann Papers, Box 743, Folder 7. Qëndro was flown in to attend, as well as the Albanian curator Edi Muka, who had facilitated Szeemann's contacts in Tirana.

42 Szeemann put this concept succinctly: “each [artist] can live his or her own mythology. Style is no longer the important issue.” Carolee Thea, “Here Time Becomes Space: A

Gëzim Qëndro's catalog essay on *Homo Socialisticus* provided both a counterpoint and a reinforcement of Szeemann's use of Albanian Socialist Realism: it offered Qëndro's personal account of the conflict engendered by his staging of a pair of complementary exhibitions—Socialist Surrealism (featuring painting) and *Homo Socialisticus* (featuring sculpture) in Tirana's National Gallery. The essay begins with six quotations from entries in the institution's comment book (one of which serves as the epigraph to this article), each giving a different impression of the shows, ranging from humorous dismissal to appreciation for socialist art to accusations of communist nostalgia. Qëndro explains that *Homo Socialisticus* was the more controversial of the two, both because it incited some communist sympathizers to attempt "to embrace the statue of the former dictator [Hoxha], greeting and speaking to him" and because the display of the sculptures on a mazelike array of shelving units was "offensive for artists and art critics, and unacceptable to the public."⁴³ Yet despite the diversity of responses to the exhibition, to Qëndro the sculptures represented a collective automatism—"automatic belief, automatic volunteer work, automatic love or hate"—that had characterized socialism as a kind of laboratory experiment toward the production of an ideal form of humanity.⁴⁴ While Qëndro's essay acknowledges the global context that had produced the works in *Homo Socialisticus*, his discussion of the works remains fixed on its national significance and on trauma⁴⁵ (and it was probably precisely this framing of national specificity that made the installation appealing to Szeemann's view of the Balkans, which relied on asserting the fundamental unit of the nation, even while failing to elaborate the formation of this concept or its contingency as a basis for identity).

This national focus aligned with a particular—though unsurprising—omission from both Szeemann's statements and the press commentary on the Socialist Realist works. This was the *transnational* character of the *Homo Socialisticus* exhibition, even the limited portion of it that traveled to Vienna. For example, among the sculptures shown were Andrea Mano's *Kooperativiste Kineze* (*Chinese Woman Cooperative*

Conversation with Harald Szeemann," *Sculpture Magazine* 20, no. 5 (June 2001), <https://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag01/june01/bien/bien.shtml> (accessed March 19, 2020).

43 Qëndro, "Puppet," 77–78.

44 Qëndro, "Puppet," 78.

45 Qëndro, "Puppet," 79.

Worker, 1968) and another work by the same artist, *Luftëtare Vietnameze* (*Vietnamese Woman Soldier*, 1967), two figures that clearly indicated a geopolitical context well beyond the Balkans. In fact, these sculptures (as did many others in the installation) dated from the period of the Cultural and Ideological Revolution in the People's Republic of Albania. The country's dictator, Enver Hoxha, declared widespread structural changes in the late 1960s (primarily between 1966 and 1969), as part of Albania's alignment with Mao's Cultural Revolution in China.⁴⁶ After relations with Khrushchev's Soviet Union had been broken off, Albania's connection to China was part of a larger attempt to forge transnational alliances between socialist nations in Asia and Albania (which still followed a staunchly Stalinist model). Thus, far from being isolated from global currents during the Cold War, socialist Albania was in fact highly globalized, engaging in cultural exchanges in which the country both embraced outside influences and left its own mark on the socialist world.⁴⁷ Thus, the busts included in *Homo Socialisticus* (the full version of the installation in Tirana had also included a bust of Mao Tse-tung by Fuat Dushku) were meant to signal—in their original socialist context—not merely a narrow, nationally specific spirit, but a project of transcontinental militantly engaged revolution, an anti-imperialist project paralleling that launched by Yugoslavia with its participation in the Non-Aligned Movement.⁴⁸ They could have been a counternarrative to Szeemann's utopian escape from politics: here, *politics and art together* unified nations as far apart as China and Albania.

Another kind of history missing from the framing of the sculptures involved internal differences: the titles of works such as *Kooperativiste Zadrimore* (*Woman Cooperative Worker from Zadrime*, 1970, by Gori Vëria), *Myzeqarja* (*Woman from Myzeqeja*, 1974, by Valentina Balla), and *Dropullitja* (*Woman from Dropull*, 1976, by Dhimo Gogollari) indicate that subnational regional distinctions were also very much on the

46 See Isa Blumi, "Hoxha's Class War: The Cultural Revolution and State Reformation, 1961–1971," *East European Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (September 1999): 303–26.

47 See Elidor Mëhilli, "Globalized Socialism, Nationalized Time: Soviet Films, Albanian Subjects, and Chinese Audiences across the Sino-Soviet Split," *Slavic Review* 77, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 611–37, and Vivian Li, "Redefining Artistic Value in Communist China: *Rent Collection Courtyard*," *Oxford Art Journal* 39, no. 3 (2016): 394–96.

48 Of course, Albania's alliances were never as ambitious as the Non-Aligned Movement, but Albanian socialist culture nonetheless merits reconsideration along the same lines as recent efforts to recuperate socialist Yugoslavia's official art (see, for instance, Bojana Videkanič, *Nonaligned Modernism: Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945–1985* (Chicago: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2020)).

minds of many socialist-era artists. This should not come as a surprise, considering the importance that Albanian socialist culture attributed to acknowledging the diversity of regional folk cultures in art. Despite the fact that the sculptures dated from throughout a period of 25 years (1964–89), their arrangement was not chronological, and no effort was made to chart their possible connections to the significant political changes that took place during this period: the effects of agricultural collectivization, the rise of urban industrialization, the above-mentioned alliances with Asian communist regimes, or Albania’s increasingly stringent isolation and economic decline in the 80s.⁴⁹ Instead, all of socialism became a single, homogeneous period.

In short, the framing of *Homo Socialisticus*—by both Szeemann and Qëndro—failed to acknowledge either the transnational character of the artworks produced under the aegis of Socialist Realism in Albania or the internal differences that were sometimes elided and sometimes preserved within the collection of busts. Some responses to the exhibition noted the challenges to interpretation issued by *Homo Socialisticus*, but generally these were reduced to noting broad differences between Eastern and Western art histories.⁵⁰ Despite his desire to acknowledge different political contexts across the Balkans, and how they shaped the artworks on view, Szeemann essentially ignored global politics in favor of a focus on regional histories, such as the legacy of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires. (We should, of course, question the degree to which these could be called “regional,” but Szeemann clearly saw them as localized contexts.) The repressive patriarchy of the *Kanun* in Albania was thinkable, in the world presented in *Blood & Honey*. The Sino-Albanian friendship and its lingering cultural effects were not.

A single example suffices to make evident how completely Szeemann avoided raising specific questions about the effects of socialist art on contemporary culture in Albania or in the Balkans more broadly. Among the artists exhibited in *Blood & Honey* was Edi Rama, at the time the mayor of Tirana. Rama had recently achieved notoriety for a project in which he set about painting the facades of many of the

49 For a detailed history of geopolitical change throughout Albania’s socialist period, see Elidor Méhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

50 For example, Sabine Vogel noted, when “exhibited in the West,” the sculptures simply “showed us how little we knew . . . about the similarities and differences” in “cultures and art developments” in the region. See Vogel, “New York, Moskau, Kosovo,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 11, 2003.

socialist-era apartment blocks in Albania's capital city with bright colors, aggressively transforming a gray and (supposedly) monotonous cityscape into a vibrant urban canvas, a project documented in Anri Sala's video work *Dammi i Colori* (2003).⁵¹ Blood & Honey's texts made no mention of the fact that Edi Rama was the son of Kristaq Rama, the creator of *Zborristja* and of several other busts in *Homo Socialisticus*, as well as one of the most successful monumental sculptors of Albania's socialist period. He had frequently collaborated with Muntas Dhrami to create several of the most important works of public commemorative art in modern Albania. The fact that Edi Rama came from a family who were among the cultural elite during socialism, and the fact that he carried on a tradition of ideologically reshaping public space, could easily have fit within Szeemann's curatorial vision—perhaps all too easily (since it would have framed Rama as simply attempting to overcome his father's legacy). But at the same time, it would have required a much more complex view of Albanian Socialist Realism, one in which individual artists followed different trajectories and reacted to specific political circumstances. It would have excised Socialist Realism from the mythical realm of the taboo and returned it to the material realm of history.

As Octavian Esanu has argued, an important element of the transition from socialist art to postsocialist contemporary art involves an increased treatment of the art object as a document.⁵² In a way, this was precisely how Szeemann treated *Homo Socialisticus*: as a document—and indeed (following Qëndro) as documentation of a 45-year project to shape humanity. This was how Albanian Socialist Realism became—in a very limited sense—contemporary art. But as a document, the busts could only play a narrow role in the context of Blood & Honey: they were deployed to make the past look like something simple and universalized, something from which everyone would want to escape, in order that the “future in the Balkans” could be held open as something liberating and desirable. At the same time, they imposed a psychological challenge, not only on Albanian artists, but on contemporary art from the Balkans in general. This challenge was therapeutic, but emphatically *not* hermeneutic, in character: come to terms with socialism and overcome it, but do not understand it historically.

51 On Rama's project, see Anca Pusca, “The Aesthetics of Change: Exploring Post-Communist Spaces,” *Global Society* 22, no. 3 (2008): 369–86.

52 Octavian Eșanu, “What Was Contemporary Art?” *ARTMargins* 1, no. 1 (2012): 16–21.

CODA: DOCUMENTA 14: LEARNING FROM TIRANA?

In 2017, almost fifteen years after *Blood & Honey* closed, a collection of Socialist Realist paintings from the National Gallery in Tirana traveled to Greece to appear in documenta 14: Learning from Athens, curated by Adam Szymczyk. The presence of so many of these paintings—executed in restrained realist styles, with little acknowledgment of developments in postwar abstraction—caused Jason Farago, writing for *The New York Times*, to comment that “Albanian socialist realism, weirdly, gets a major day in the sun” at documenta 14.⁵³ Displayed in multiple locations, there were paintings by Abdurrahim Buza, Foto Stamo, Spiro Kristo, Pandi Mele, and Zef Shoshi, among many other well-known socialist-era artists (many of whom had been included years earlier in Qëndro’s Socialist Surrealism, the partner exhibition to *Homo Socialisticus*). In general, the presence of these works evoked bewilderment on the part of visitors.⁵⁴

This confusion led one of the curators involved in organizing the showing of Albanian works, Dieter Roelstraete, to pen a sort of defense of their inclusion. Roelstraete admitted that the curatorial decision was inscrutable, writing that viewers “might have been forgiven for scratching their heads in bemusement at the sight of so much Albanian painting from the 1960s and 70s.”⁵⁵ The justification for the inclusion of these paintings (and for the lack of contextualization) boiled down—paradoxically—to the notion that they had enabled the art world’s discovery of one Albanian painter in particular: Edi Hila. Hila—Roelstraete was quick to point out—had been noticed at documenta 14 and had gone on to receive a major retrospective exhibition in 2018 at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Hila (whose historical significance is the subject of a much longer discussion than I can offer here) gained notoriety in Albanian art in part because he was persecuted after one of his paintings, *Mbjellja e Pemëve* (*Planting of the Trees*, 1972) was determined to have modernist influences; Hila was sent to work at a poultry farm, where he continued to produce a number of ironic caricatures and sketches that he did not show until after the end of socialism in

53 Jason Farago, “Documenta 14, a German Art Show’s Greek Revival,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2019.

54 Dean Kissick, “The Downward Spiral: documenta 14,” *Spike Art Magazine* (April 2017), <http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/image-article/downward-spiral-documenta-14-dean-kissick> (accessed March 20, 2020).

55 Dieter Roelstraete, “Routine of the Real,” *Artforum* (April 2019), <https://www.artforum.com/print/201904/dieter-roelstraete-on-the-art-of-edi-hila-78968> (accessed March 20, 2020).

Albania in 1991. Since then Hila has continued to paint, and the majority of the works shown in his retrospective exhibition were drawn from his postsocialist oeuvre, largely ignoring the fact that he too had once been a Socialist Realist painter. Hila's art was reclaimed as "capital-R Realism"⁵⁶ by Roelstraete and as "classicism" by the curators of his retrospective,⁵⁷ and Hila has distanced himself from direct political commentary on his historical context.⁵⁸

Harald Szeemann had also included Hila's paintings in *Blood & Honey*, and in many ways it is unsurprising to see him emerge as a protagonist of Albanian postsocialist art now. Hila fits all too neatly (and this neat fit does a disservice to the complexity of his work) into the frame established earlier by Szeemann's deployment of *Homo Socialisticus* in 2003: the artist whose "individual mythology" emerges against the backdrop of a psychologically oppressive, schematically political art. Hila's painting style also readily invites comparison with such globally acclaimed contemporary painters as Gerhard Richter, which surely contributed to the effort to build a "mythology" for Hila. Furthermore, the persistent unwillingness of painters like Richter to be discussed in relation to Socialist Realism—and the unwillingness of modernist art historians to treat Socialist Realism as a credible precursor to their practices—means that any meaningful framing of Hila in reference to that style may have been doomed from the start. Albanian Socialist Realism played nowhere near the key role in *documenta 14* that it did in *Blood & Honey* (the scales of the two exhibitions were vastly different), but its deployment in Athens echoed Szeemann's interpretation of the style. Again (or perhaps still) Albanian Socialist Realism was a bemusing historical oddity, from a provincial nation, and one to which little "history" was added.⁵⁹

Documenta 14 failed to learn from *Blood & Honey*'s "fine and thoroughly successful misunderstanding" (as Buden put it) of the Balkans—a misunderstanding that importantly hinged on its uncritical

56 Roelstraete, "Routine."

57 Joanna Mytkowska, Kathrin Rhomberg, and Erzen Shkololli, "Edi Hila: Painter of Transformation," in *Edi Hila* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), exhibition catalog, 10.

58 Lorina Hoxha, "Edi Hila: I Want to Talk about My Art, Not the Regime," *KOSOVO* 2.0, August 25, 2017, <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/edi-hila-want-talk-art-not-regime/> (accessed March 20, 2020).

59 A fuller consideration of the significance of Albanian Socialist Realism vis-à-vis contemporary art would also take into account exhibitions held in the National Gallery of Arts that have juxtaposed global postsocialist art with the Socialist Realist works in its collection,

and ahistorical deployment of Albanian Socialist Realism. Questions about the movement's contemporaneity, its transnational character, its political relevancy as a militant antifascist art form, were all foreclosed by *Blood & Honey*, and *documenta 14* followed much the same path, using allegedly straightforward official art to highlight, by contrast, individual artists supposedly free from the "heavy-handed figural engineering"⁶⁰ of Socialist Realism. These misunderstandings are not only art historical: they fail to understand the iterative character of Socialist Realism, its replication across so many different regional and national contexts, as a key precursor to the replication of contemporary art across the globe. Socialist Realism, with its curious fusion of modernism's revolutionary temporality with traditional representational paradigms, represented a real "coming together of different but equally 'present' times," the hallmark of the contemporary.⁶¹

The misunderstandings of *documenta 14* were also still explicitly geographic: misunderstandings of "Europe"—for what else was *documenta 14*'s effort to "learn from Athens" than an effort to learn about what Europe has really become, by looking to its conflicted margins?⁶² The treatment of Albanian Socialist Realism in *Blood & Honey* (and beyond) should not simply be understood as the continued marginalization of a particular country whose modern art history follows a quite different arc than art in other countries, including many of its neighboring nations. Nor is it simply a failure of understanding regional art histories in the new era of global contemporary art (a condition that curators like Szeemann did a great deal to bring about). Above all else, the legacy of *Blood & Honey*—what we can learn from it—should be its failure to understand geopolitical contemporaneity as a coming together of different times as well as different spaces, its failure to understand that the art of the present cannot simply overcome the art of the past—for the past has always already been contemporary.

such as Hou Hanru's curatorial contribution to the third Tirana Biennial, *Go Inside* (in 2005); Mihnea Mircan and Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei's exhibition *Workers Leaving the Studio, Looking Away from Socialist Realism* (2015); Adam Szymczyk and Nataša Ilić's rehang of portions of the institution's collection, *Tirana Patience* (2020); and, most recently, the new configuration of the permanent collection, entitled *Open Archive* (2020).

60 Roelstraete, "Routine."

61 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (New York: Verso, 2013), 22.

62 Adam Szymczyk, "Iterability and Otherness: Learning and Working from Athens," in *documenta 14 Reader*, ed. Quinn Latimer and Adam Szymczyk (Kassel: *documenta*, 2017), 23–26.