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Adrian Paci's Art House in Shkodër: a Common and Shared Space between Cultures and Art

Martina Marolda

Abstract

"La matematica mi confonde. Come misura del mondo è strana./Per quanti conti si facciano qualcosa non torna mai pari./Due finestre fanno una vista? quattro muri sono una casa?"[1] (D'Agostino, 2015).
Art House is Adrian Paci's family home transformed into a common, shared space, open to the ideas and cultural contributions of the art world, open to others and to the encounters within them. The concept of home, always dear to this artist of Albanian origin, finds here meaning and fulfilment here, thanks to an added value: a human element. The "four walls" of the house open up (not so much metaphorically, but above all physically, thanks to a series of large windows) and leave ample leeway to dialogue, to the exchange: "even if Albania is no longer as isolated as it once was, communication with the rest of the world is still difficult", as Paci says, talking about the Art House project, conceived together with his wife Melisa Ballata, in his hometown of Shkodër.

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1.   Mathematics confuses me. As a measure of the world it is strange. / No matter how many accounts you make, something never returns equal. / Do two windows make a view? Are four walls a home? [Translated by the author].

Figure 1. Adrian Paci, *Back Home #2*, 2001. Series of four photographs, 110 x 120 cm. Ed. Of 5. Courtesy of the artist, kaufmann repetto, Milano/New York and Peter Kilchmann gallery, Zurich.

1. Foreword

Home and its relative lack, displacement, uprooting from one's own country and from affections, the loss and consequent search for identity, physical as well as intellectual nomadism: they have always been central themes in the work and poetry of Adrian Paci, an artist of Albanian origin, born in 1969. For example, the relationship with one's roots was investigated by Paci in 2001, with two projects, among others, entitled *Back Home* and *Home to go*.

The first one consists of a series of four photographs/paintings representing families of foreigners who emigrated to Italy: they are immortalised in front of the images of their homes, left in their own countries of origin. As Paci says:

> more than photos it is a process that begins with the request made to families to let me enter their homes, the journey to photograph these houses, the painting of images taken in the form of scenographic backdrops and then the invitation to the families to come to my office to take a picture in front of their home (Vettese, Paci, 2006).

This is an operation of reversal of the immigrant's habit of being photographed in front of the new house, to then send the shots to the relatives left at home. Here Paci puts his actors in front of the image of their abandoned house, fundamentally lowering them within their memory, outlined on a large sheet as if it were the identikit of a scenography: this is formulated not so much following their indications, but literary entering in their homes to take photos as a model, in a

real transcription and formalisation of their own luggage, of their own portable memory. Paci continues:

> reconstructing a communication channel, even if fictitious, through the painting of the house was the reason for that series of photos. Obviously this presence does nothing but to emphasise the real lack; apart from this I was interested in the idea of making a painting not to express a pictorial concept or a particular sensibility, but simply to reconstruct a reality to which individuals and groups of people were deeply tied (Vettese, Paci, 2006).

These personalised backdrops are painted almost as monochrome and this directly evokes a bygone, faded era, proposing a different way of perceiving those "little things" that in daily life are continually escaping our attention. In one of these photographs the artist blocks even himself with his young family in front of his home in Shkodër, thus manifesting all the implicit disappointment and disillusionment of the hopes contained in emigration, focusing attention on the ambiguity of his present existence.

As Edi Muka says, Paci wonders about the meaning of the house but above all about its lack, clashing "with the concepts of personal and collective identity, reproducing the impact of a precarious and not yet defined situation on the reconstruction of identities", and therefore "desecrate the private sphere and offer it to the public eye" (Muka, 2001).

The second project is *Home to go* and it consists of a series of nine large photographs and a plaster sculpture in which the

artist portrays himself as suffering as a new and increasingly human Christ bent under the weight of a cross due to the fatigue of wandering and to the abandonment of one's home.

Paci looks like a modern nomadic Icarus, an Atlas, a Titan revisited in a postmodern key, an angel fallen down due to too much weight, for the burden that he carries with him: but the mythical dimension is once again subjected to a translation and it offers a secular version.

Figure 2. Adrian Paci, *Home to go*, 2001. Plaster, marble, dust, tiles, rope, 165 × 90 × 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist, kaufmann repetto, Milano/New York and Peter Kilchmann gallery, Zurich.

The artist himself, in his underpants, is now engaged in the effort to lift a roof of wood and tiles turned upside down, physically overturned, now trying to lie down, now wearing it as if it were some sort of backpack or wings, in uncomfortable, painful positions.

The figure of a man-home, the *homme-escargot* who brings with him by necessity his own domestic refugee nest, like a shell on his shoulders, wherever he goes, leaves room for a more disturbing image, determined by the fact that the roof placed upside down it does not seem to protect, but rather to constitute a bundle tied and pulled with ropes all around the bust.

Years later, in a performance Paci then breaks his resin cast of *Home to go*, in a gesture that is both liberating and pacifying regarding a certain condition and a period of his life. An action also aimed at freeing itself from the weight of that condition and from the tightness of the ropes that held it.

2. Art House project and "the desire to build a beautiful house in one's home town"

Paci's reflection on the theme of "home" evolves over the years, arriving at a discussion not only about lack and distancing, but also about presence and return.

Today Paci, who has lived permanently in Milan since 1997, experiences to his bones the sense of travel, of moving and then returning to a place, thanks above all to his work as one of the most successful artists in the world. But today he has also physically changed the link with his family home and his origins through the Art House project:

Perhaps – Paci says, jokingly – behind the idea of Art House lies the most classic desire of the expatriate, which is to build a beautiful house in his home town. […] I didn't want a holiday home. Not living in Scutari permanently, I wanted to be "forced" to return. Besides, in Albania – as is the case in Italy – one senses a lack of situations in which art can be experienced as action in a dimension of profound daily interaction without losing public motivation, a dimension which is related neither to the market or to institutions (Paci, 2019a).

So, this project is anything but a cliché. It is rather a generous work, as is Paci himself, for whom, as Gabi Scardi says:

his era, place and community of origin have always been active reference points that he holds close in life and in art. Not as situations to return to, but as filters through which to decipher the world and construct a future. In the same way, this house is seen not as a place of nostalgia, but as a projection, a wide-ranging long-term project which has a tangible impact on the territory (Scardi, 2019).

The project developed over time, gaining speed, a few years ago, due to large-scale real estate speculation in that area of the historic centre of Shkodër – a place not far from the Adriatic coast and the cradle of Albanian culture – which has led to the indiscriminate demolition of traditional architecture in favour of anonymous and commercial buildings. Melisa Ballata, Paci's wife, co-creator and founder of the Art House, tells us about the origins of this particular project:

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Art House was inaugurated on 13 September 2014, but the idea was born some years before and more precisely around 2010. After the fall of the regime, Albania went through a phase of wild construction, outside all the rules and criteria. That is how, in front of our family home, in a street of the old town consisting of houses that did not exceed two floors, a 9-floor building was erected. At this point we had no choice and we decided that the best civil response to this mess would be to build a new house instead of our old one: a place that would have combined a living and an exhibition and public space. In this way the house would be open to the Albanian public, as well as to the world of art (Ballata, 2019).

And Paci adds:

From one day to the next, my family home changed completely. The fact that they wanted to demolish it, to build one of the many skyscrapers in its place, pushed me to oppose it firmly: I loved my family home and I wanted to protect it. So, I decided to keep it, restructure it so that it would become a place of exchange, open to the whole community, even in spite of a surrender to the idea of passively giving in to real estate speculation, which I dislike (Paci, 2019b).

The challenge was to rebuild a private building on a centuries-old land, without losing the spirit and function of the original house and respecting the traditional architectural canons of the area, creating a new space that would fit perfectly between the other buildings: a place of decompression from the indiscreet and bulky modern towers that surrounded it. So, Art House was born: basically a new house set on the foundations of an old building.

Figure 3. The Art House construction site, 2014.

But above all, the project derives from the desire to contribute to the cultural activity of the country and the city. Paci aims to transform his family home in a space for encounter – another central theme in his work, just thinking about his well-known performance in Scicli, Sicily, called *The Encounter* (2011) –, for thought and knowledge; an open and welcoming place for dialogue, in which the Albanian art world can meet the most important figures from the international art scene. Paci grew up in Albania in a period of isolation during the Communist regime: no relationship with the external scene was allowed and everything was centralised and happened in Tirana.

Other cities, such as Shkodër, also have a past and a present to bring to light. So, being able to bring international experiences and guests there seemed to Paci the right way to fill the cultural and artistic gap, responding to the needs of his past but also to the present ones.

Furthermore, Art House is definitely a place that can involve not only Albanian citizens but also passing international guests, who determine the *trait d'union* with the other shore of the Mediterranean: in this, the relationship with Italy remains, Paci and Ballata's second-home.

Thus, in 2013, the idea materialises: the renovations are entrusted to the architect Filippo Taidelli (winner of the Big See Architecture Award 2019, recently nominated for the Mies Van Der Rohe Award and for the Aga Khan Award), who can perfectly interpret the needs for becoming a home of art.

Art House is a happy meeting point between art and design: the artist-client in close contact with the architect to redevelop and enhance an important piece of traditional urban landscape, giving this new life and a different perception by all the community.

As Ballata tells us:

> Filippo Taidelli before being the architect of our house was and is a friend. When we decided to entrust the Art House project to him, we were convinced that it would be the best choice. Before starting the project, Filippo came to Albania to understand and to look closely at both the urban and the human context.

Art House incorporates many building elements that were already used in the old-time buildings of Shkodër such as wood, the stones of the river and the tiles that are even those of the old house. An important element is the enhancement of the facade of Paci's old family house in Ottoman style, built in the 1800s overlooking the Art House courtyard. Certainly the dialogue between the two houses is an important point of Art House. In all this there is also the imprint of Filippo's style such as the use of glass, a linear and clean style that distinguishes the whole house, the play of light and other elements characterising his architecture (Ballata, 2019).

This new space is rational but adaptable to any use and function. The large house looks out over a courtyard it shares with the building in front: this is an intimate space that holds the memory of Adrian's father, Ferdinand Paci (1940-1975), an artist who lived here and died prematurely, when his son was only six. As Paci says:

Even as a child, my home was both a habitat and a place dedicated to art. It was the location of my father's studio. I remember there was a constant need for maintenance, repair, "touch-ups". I have always felt there was a need to do something radical. I also really wanted my father's work, above all his drawings, his portfolios, to have an appropriate and healthy space (Paci, 2019a).

Ferdinand Paci's works are shaped by a contrasting context and belong to a completely different period in Albanian history. Bringing these works to light and showing them to the public also means keeping a historical memory alive, the memory of a country's social and political transformations.

Figure 4. Adrian Paci and Filippo Taidelli at Art House.

Figure 5. Art House, front elevation. © Andrea Martiradonna.

Figure 6. Art House, courtyard. © Andrea Martiradonna.

Figure 7. Adrian Paci inside Art House. © Andrea Martiradonna.

Figure 8. Art House, view from inside. © Andrea Martiradonna.

However, the original space of the house has changed a little because of the building that has been constructed opposite: this rendered Paci's original courtyard particularly exposed.

> Therefore – Paci tells us – we kept the central courtyard, but we have rotated the house, which now faces away from the street, and we have created a form of protection from the outside, with a wall made from river stone specific to the area and topped with another typical element which was identified by Taidelli during his various surveys, a long space in which jasmine grows. Inside, large windows open onto the garden (Paci, 2019a).

Art House is therefore a horseshoe shaped building with two floors. Facing south, the building offers pleasant views of the adjoining historic construction and the interiors boast great balance and brightness through the alternation of negatives and positives generated by the terraces. The balconies and the large glass windows that surround a small interior garden offer privacy and continuity with the internal environment.

3. Current activities and projects: the international nature of Art House

This is a centre where the Paci family opens up to the community of this small city, allowing it to grow, through contributions, exchanges and direct and friendly interactions, without filters, with the international art world. Adrian Paci's house has a double purpose: on the one hand, to appeal to institutions to look carefully at the Albanian art scene, trying to understand its directions and intercept its needs; on the other, to encourage Albanian artists, to take possession of the avail-

able spaces, to remove the power of art from the State power, to revive the debate.

As stated by Paci himself, there have been many projects since 2015:

> we try to maintain the right balance between continuity and improvisation. We follow a basic structure, but at the same time with freedom, proceeding with gradual "adjustments", trying not to repeat ourselves. I think it is important to continuously modify the way we relate to the space and to others (Paci, 2019a).

Since the very beginning of the Art House activities there have been numerous events, exhibitions and guests. They are all figures who have varying roles in the art world: critics, curators, museum directors, artists, gallerists, musicians, from Marta Gili to Adam Budak and Charles Esche; from Angela Vettese to Martin Engler; artists such as Anri Sala and Yael Bartana, but also Michelangelo Pistoletto and Vinicio Capossela. Naturally there is a close relationship with Italy, Paci's adopted homeland.

The impact of the Art House project on the territory is tangible: the events are attended and welcomed by professionals but also by citizens who are open to novelty and the encounter with international contemporary art.
Every discussion – Paci says – represents "an opportunity for encounter between international guests and Albanian artists, above all those from the younger generations, for whom we try to help to access the international scene" (Paci, 2019a).
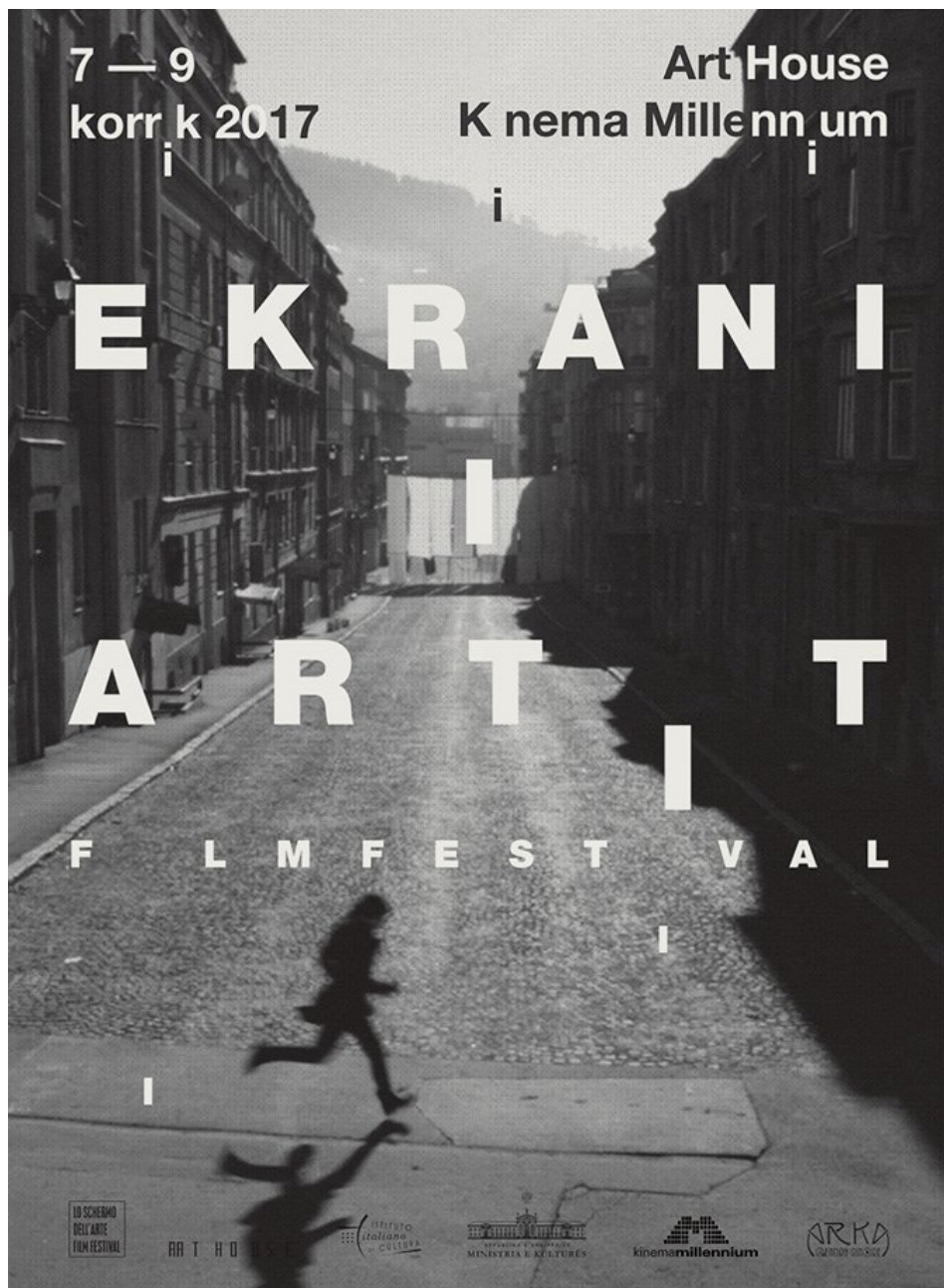
Figure 9. *Ekrani I Artit Film Festival*, poster of 1st edition, 2017.

Each guest is able to bring his gaze and experience to the art world as a whole: an effective and necessary exchange for young Albanian artists and Albania in general. A land that has suffered the diaspora and isolation, which today deserves internationality.

The young Albanian artists, participating in meetings with international figures with multiple experiences in the curatorial, historical, managerial and artistic fields, have the opportunity to be trained, to learn about other cultural realities and the work of other artists: through the exchange of ideas, young Albanians can find different ways and practices from their own artistic training but above all they can experience a broader reference horizon.

Art House is the place where you can meet important guests but also unique collaborations with well-established organisations, such as the Van Abbemuseum or *Lo Schermo dell'Arte*, an international film festival which has been organised in Florence since 2008 in collaboration with institutions, art centres, schools of art and universities in Italy and abroad. Since 2017, the festival has also been organised in Shkodër with a selection of films shown in Florence in the recent years: a screening program that brought works and insights about Anri Sala, Damien Hirst, Olafur Eliasson, Meret Oppenheim and William Kentridge, among the others. This project, called *Ekrani I Artit* aims to promote the relationship between contemporary art and cinema through different films, documentaries about contemporary art, video installations, artist talks, residencies for international artists as well as the production and distribution of artists' films. In 2019, now in

its third edition, *Ekrani I Artit* has opened to the fusion between documentary film, art, experimental film and video art, bringing together a diverse selection of films from: the *International Short Film Festival Oberhausen*; *Lo schermo dell'arte*; Van Abbemuseum collection of video and film; Albanian video art from recent years; short films by German director Sylvia Schedelbauer as well as a longer film by Albanian artist Pleurad Xhafa. In addition, the distribution of the projects goes beyond Art House's "four walls", entering into different courtyards in public and private spaces, turning them into traditional and contemporary atmosphere.

"But one of the more florid initiatives – Paci tells us – is without a doubt the *Art House School*, with the participation of ten artists. Again in this case, the modality varies slightly each time" (Paci, 2019a).

The project is now in its third edition (2019) and it maintains its original vocation as a creative platform and exchange among artists where friendly predisposition cohabits with the critical debate, the respect for others' way of thinking with the exigency for truth as a horizon of research. The four week structure of the *Art House School* is shaped by the participants through the presentation of their works, discussions about projects and initial intuition about future works, readings and screenings, reflections and debates, in order to create a space for individual research and studio work. In 2017, when it was born, a group of ten young artists that have contributed to the Albanian art scene in recent years (Silva Agostini, Bora Baboçi, Fatlum Doçi, Lek M. Gjeloshi, Jetmir Idrizi, Iva Lulashi, Alket

Frashëri, Remijon Pronja, Alketa Ramaj and Stefano Romano) were invited to participate in a process of sharing knowledge, practices and mutual experiences about art, in dialogue with a group of curators and international artists such as Adam Budak, curator director of the National Gallery of Arts in Prague, Rischa Paterlini, curator of the Iannaccone collection in Milan, artists Yael Bartana and Emily Jacir. The two mentors of the *Art House School* were Zef Paci and Adrian Paci and the program was coordinated by Tea Çuni. The importance of exchange and dialogue, the generosity of artistic work are the focus of the *Art House School*: an inclusive educational experience and a real breath of internationality in Shkodër.

Who cares about art? was the title of the second edition, focused on the relationship between the existing artistic standards and the constant need to redefine them under the influence of society, social pressures and the demands that the artist endures. The participants were Lori Lako, Haveit, Edson Luli, Doruntina Kastrati, Ergys Vela, Marina Sula and Pleurad Xhafa, with a group of curators such as Johan Pousette, Helene Larsson Pousette, Rein Wolfs and Martin Engler. The last edition, *Beyond the Image* focused on the close relationship between the author and the images along with the complex possibilities activated by this: from photography to video-art or cinema, the artist's position has never been exhausted in the mere act of creation, but has encouraged the dimension of the reading of the image and the problematisation of its territory. The participants were Abi Shehu, Bib Frrokaj, Erjola Zhuka, Elton Gllava, Erdiola Mustafaj, Marlin Dedaj, Mirjana Mecaj, Orestia Kapidani, with Zef Paci and Lek M. Gjeloshi as mentors.
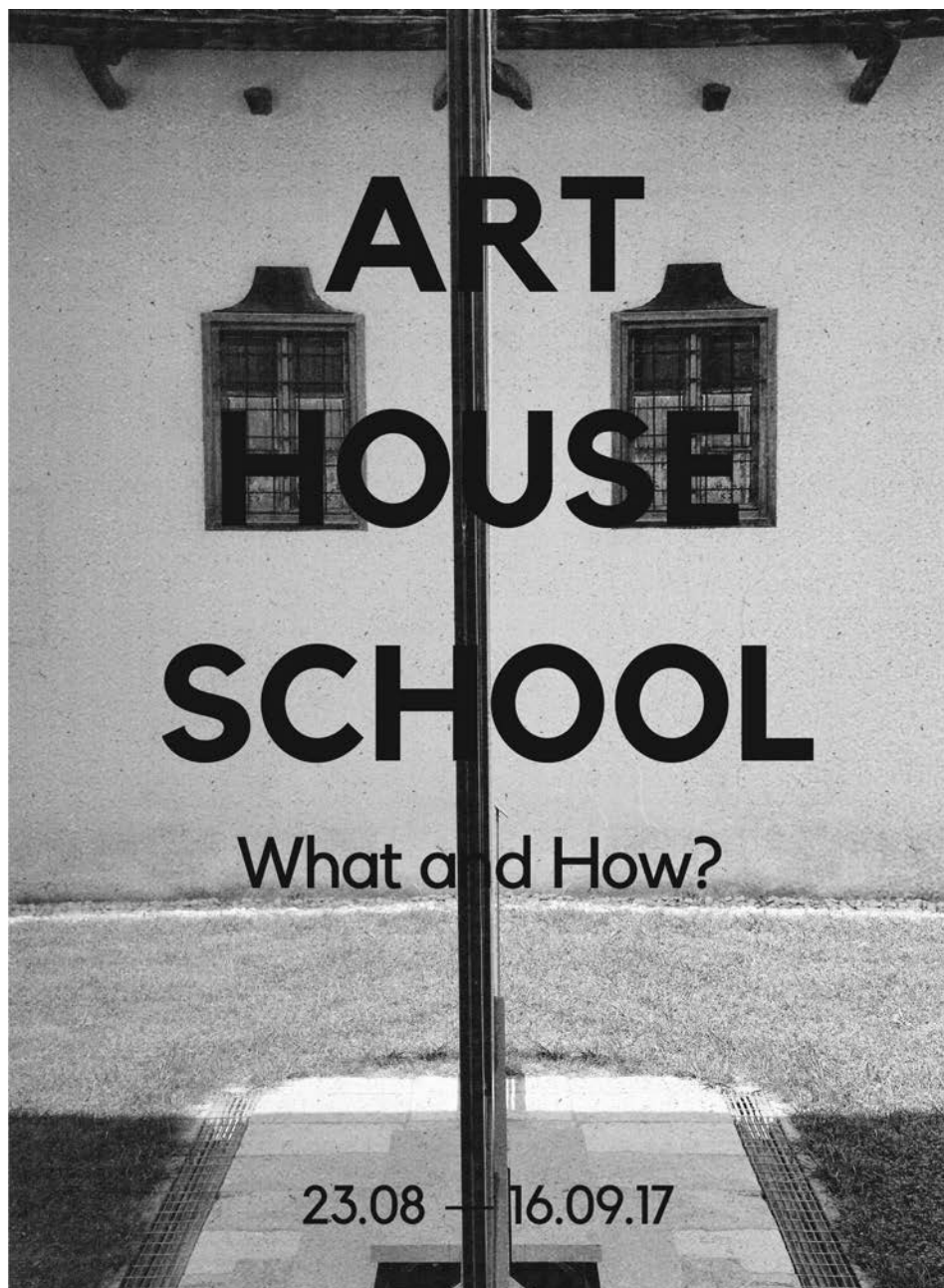
Figure 10. *Art House School*, poster of 1st edition, 2017.

This third edition, organised in collaboration with the Marubi National Museum of Photography, resulted in an exhibition related to the topic of "the image" which opened both at the Marubi Museum and the Art House: *Seven Albanian photographers. A residency,* curated by François Cheval, with the works of the participants in the residency program of the third Art House School.

So, on the one hand, Art House forge has succeeded in promoting collaborations with national institutions, such as the Marubi National Museum of Photography in Shkodër; on the other hand, this project is demonstrating the pivotal role of being a bridge between the two shores of the Adriatic, at an international level.

In 2019 alone, there have been many opportunities to promote the young Albanian artists in residence at Art House abroad, involving Italy in particular: Lori Lako was in residence at Terzopiano Arte Contemporanea in Lucca, then brought back the results of her research in the *Still Life* exhibition (02/03-14/04); Fatlum Doçi was selected by the Siena Art Institute Onlus and the Sienese Museums Foundation for a residency and exhibition project in Siena (12/10-31/12); Lek M. Gjeloshi has exhibited in the Florentine space of TOAST Project Space, in the solo show *Huracàn* curated by Stefano Giuri (22/11/2019-12/01/2020). These are just some examples of how the idea of Paci and Ballata go in the right direction and find sustainability and recognition over time.

And what about the future of the Art House project? Melisa Ballata says:

Art House has tried in all these years to bring back to Shkodër the high level contributions from the contemporary art world and to become a point of synergy between the Albanian and non-Albanian artists, the public and the different Albanian and Shkodër's institutions operating in the world of art and culture. All this was allowed to happen through talks, presentations, workshops, conferences, exhibitions, the *Art House School* and the *Ekrani I Artit* festival. For the next year, the two main projects will remain the *Art House School* which, unlike the previous years focussing as it did on young Albanian artists, we plan to open it to young artists from the Balkans. And then there will always be the *Ekrani I Artit* whose programming we are working on in these days (Ballata, 2019).

4. Conclusions

In short, Art House represents a new place, in the heart of the Mediterranean, connected to contemporary culture – or rather cultures –, whose development is made possible by the daily encounter of art and design, of humanity, tradition and modernity.

Art House is conceived as a meeting point, bringing together friends, the curious minded and art insiders: a house, clearly open to everyone, but above all to those who are not looking for a show, for worldliness; a space where art is challenged and ideas in circulation; an intimate place where people can share time and space, experience art, as a human need to shape and to articulate personal experiences. It is an open centre for the community of the small town of Shkodër, where everyone can grow thanks to contributions and interactions with the international art world; a place where cultural ex-

change can enhance and expand human relations, where art is not worshiped on walls, but a tireless laboratory where art is instead always questioned.

This characteristic makes Art House not a luxurious villa or a temple of power but an accessible place where vital thinking and artistic visions take form: a think tank where everyone can experience art as a daily human exercise.
Without any presumptions, Art House undoubtedly places itself with the strength of a new idea: not to care about collecting crowds, but caring about people.

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BIOGRAPHIES

About the authors

Matteo Aimini
He is currently assistant professor of landscape architecture at the University of Trento, in the past he has carried out teaching and research activities at Iuav and POLIMI. PhD in Landscape Architecture, over the years he has been dealing with the interaction between the shapes of built environment and landscape in Italy and abroad, particularly in South East Asia.
matteo.aimini@unitn.it

Alberto Bassi
Historian and design critic, Alberto Bassi is full professor at Università Iuav di Venezia; he published essays and books, including *La luce italiana* (Electa, 2004), *Design anonimo in Italia. Oggetti comuni e progetto incognito* (Electa, 2007); *Food design in Italia. Il progetto del prodotto alimentare* (Electa, 2015), awarded with Compasso d'oro ADI 2108; *Design contemporaneo. Istruzioni per l'uso* (Il Mulino, 2017).
bassi@iuav.it

Marco Borsotti
Architect and PhD in "Interior Architecture and Exhibition Design". Associate Professor at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of Politecnico di Milano. He is member of AIMAC Interior Architecture, Museums, Built Environment, permanent research group. He takes part in several research activities and international conferences on the topic of Exhibition, Contemporary Living and Contemporary Sacred Architecture.
marco.borsotti@polimi.it

Giuliana Califano
Product designer, teacher of technology and technical drowing in secondary school of Rome, 2019/20. Research fellow in Design at Università Iuav di Venezia. Starship-Health Innovation fellow at the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT). Material experience researcher at the Polymer, Composite and Biomaterials Institute (IPCB) of CNR of Pozzuoli. Specialized in digital manufacturing at the D.RE.A.M. Academy of Città della Scienza of Napoli. Master degree in Design at the University of Firenze.
gcalifano@iuav.it

Lucilla Calogero
PhD in Design Sciences, currently she is a research fellow at Università Iuav di Venezia in the department Culture del Progetto. She is adjunct professor in Interaction Design at Iuav and in Graphics for Multimedia at Università degli Studi di Verona. Her research interests concern the design of interactive digital systems in the field of visual communication with a focus on information design and data visualization.
lcalogero@iuav.it

Vincenzo Cristallo
Architect, PhD in Architecture and Environmental Technology, postgraduate specialization in Industrial Design. Associate Professor in Industrial Design at "La Sapienza" University of Rome. He has taught design at the University of Genoa, the Politecnico di Milano and the University of Naples "Federico II". The books and essays published document a research activity oriented to the study of the contemporary phenomenology of design sciences and the analysis of the relationship between design and territory in the relation product and system-product. Editorial board of the international magazine *diid Design Industrial/Industrial Design.*
vincenzo.cristallo@uniroma1.it

Miguel Georgieff
Member of Coloco, an independent collective born in 1999. Since 2006 it formally constitutes a landscape firm that brings together landscape architects, urban planners, botanists, gardeners, artists who collaborate with a vast network of experts, from botanical activism to ecological engineering. Over time, the experience has led to discussions with professionals, local authorities, associations or singular personalities with the aim of creating and supporting integrated projects, bringing together public services, associations, activists and volunteers to explore new relationships in reflection and collective construction. Coloco also plays an important role in broadcasting and teaching in the form of seminars,

or both academic and informal public conferences. Exploration, strategy, activation, construction, transmission are the phases of Coloco's projects in order to support the relationship between people and the places where they live, all unique and all together. Situations and requests vary indefinitely, but commitment is the same: creating places whose quality is measured by their ability to accommodate the enormous diversity of life.
https://www.coloco.org/

Tommaso Listo
Master degree in Philosophical Sciences at the University of Milan. Specialized in Digital Humanities at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Research fellow in Design at Iuav University of Venice. From 2019/2020 PhD in Architecture, History and Project at Polytechnic of Turin.
tlisto@iuav.it

Michele Loiacono
Scuola del Terzo Luogo was born and developed during several editions of Incontri del Terzo Luogo, moments of research on the "undecided" spaces of the city, spaces in which not everything is totally chaotic and wild, but where not everything is already planned. Starting in the fall of 2012, an informal group of people started a journey within these spaces that has facilitated comparison, actions on public space, experimentation, relations with the context and various forms of life with special regard to the topic of the garden. The reference place that gave life to this path, supporting it with its own resources, is Manifatture Knos, an undecided space in the city of Lecce, that has been recovered after a long period of abandonment and returned to the city as an independent cultural center. Scuola del Terzo Luogo wants to deal with new forms of pedagogy by challenging conventional teaching models, where giving political dignity to indecision becomes the modality of intervention on the common good, or the practice through which we take care of places.
www.manifattureknos.org

Miriam Mariani
PhD candidate in Planning, Design and Technology of Architecture at PDTA Department, "La Sapienza", University of Rome.
miriam.mariani@uniroma1.it

Martina Marolda
She is currently working on the correspondence and on the publication of the sculptor Vico Consorti (1902-1979) at the University of Siena, following the assignment for the research project *Siena anni Trenta: ipotesi per una mostra* (2017). In 2016 she joined the national project *Diffondere la cultura visiva: l'arte contemporanea tra riviste, archivi e illustrazioni* (Progetto Nazionale FIRB 2012). In March 2016 she received her PhD at the University of Florence with a thesis titled *Le immagini al potere, le immagini del potere. La rappresentazione fotografica dell'architettura contemporanea nelle riviste italiane di settore (1928-1943)*. Graduated in Contemporary Art History at the University of Siena in 2011 with the thesis *Adrian Paci. Da Albanian Stories (1997) a The Encounter (2011)*, she is also specialized in video art. She is interested in the architecture of the Sixties in Italy and Europe, a theme that she has treated in her research *L'architettura pneumatica. Ricerche negli anni Sessanta tra avanguardia e utopia* (2007). Her recent research interests include new media in relation to visual arts, with special reference to architectural communication in Italian, French and German magazines in the Twenties and Thirties and in relation to power and totalitarianism.
martina.marolda@hotmail.com

Matilde Marzotto
She is an art historian. In 2007 she published "Arte Open Air. A Guide to Contemporary Art Parks in Italy". She curated lectures and workshops focusing on the relationship between aesthetics, art and landscape, in collaboration with FAI Fondo Ambiente Italiano, Fondazione La Raia and Orticola di Lombardia. In 2014 she founded 'lookaroundart', an entrepreneurial initiative aimed at bringing a wider audience closer to contemporary art. Currently, together with the management of the 'lookaroundart' project, she continues her teaching activity in public and private institutions such as IED-Istituto Europeo del Design and Politecnico of Milan.
mmarzotto@fastwebnet.it

About the authors

Graça Magalhães
Artist and assistant professor of the University of Aveiro (UA). She teaches Drawing in the Design degree and Graphic and Plastic Expression in the master course in Contemporary Art Creation. Currently she is director of the master course in the same university. She got a Ph.D. thesis in Design from the same UA. She is also integrated member of the ID+ Research Institute for Design, Media and Culture, UA and collaborative researcher of i2ADS Research Institute in Art, Design and Society, University of Oporto. She usually participates in national and international congress and projects, academic publications about drawing and image and commissions and boards. As part of your academic background she got several scholarships from Portuguese institutions (Portugal Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation) and also foreign institutions (Monbusho - Ministry of Education of Japan). She worked as artist in Portugal and other countries. She lives in Portugal since 1993.
gracamag@ua.pt

Anna Mazzanti
Assistant Professor in History of Contemporary Art, at Politecnico di Milano – Department of Design. She is responsible since 2017 for the group of research D.E.SY (Designing Enhancement Strategies and Exhibit SYstems for the Italian House Museums and Studios). She deals with museology, environmental art, history and art criticism of the 20th century. Board member of the Foundation Hic Terminus Haeret - Il Giardino di Daniel Spoerri and expert involved by several projects about environmental art in Tuscany.
anna.mazzanti@polimi.it

Giovanna Costanza Meli
PhD candidate in Art History at "La Sapienza", University of Rome.

Paola Menzardi
Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Architecture and Design at Politecnico di Torino, she previously obtained a M.Sc. in Systemic Design. As part of the doctorate she spent a period as visiting researcher at i-DAT, Institute of Digital Art and Technology at University of Plymouth (UK). Her research field is Design for Territories through which she wants to investigate strategies and design activities aimed at triggering effective development and valorization processes to revitalize inner areas and minor territories. Her interests turn to practices of participated cartography, to co-designed modalities of representation and narration of territorial specificities and local identities. She is currently working on the post stages of community maps in order to identify potentialities to make them proceed into integrated actions for territorial development and promotion of sustainable tourism.
paola.menzardi@polito.it

Pier Paolo Peruccio
Ph.D. in History of Architecture and Urban Planning; Architect and Associate Professor in Design at Politecnico di Torino. Peruccio is Vice Head of the Design School at Politecnico di Torino, director of the SYDERE (Systemic Design Research and Education) Center in Lyon, France and Coordinator of the II Level Specializing Master in Design for Arts (http://www.design4arts.polito.it). He is currently working on several research projects concerning the history of sustainable design, systems thinking and innovation in design education. He is co-editor of book series (Umberto Allemandi and Electa Mondadori publishing houses), author of several books on design history and more than 100 articles on industrial and visual design published in international magazines. He has taught courses and workshops in Europe, USA, Latin America and Asia.
pierpaolo.peruccio@polito.it

Sonia Pistidda
Architect and PhD in Architecture, Urban Design, Conservation of Housing and Landscape. Researcher at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of Politecnico di Milano. She is involved in teaching and research activities in the field of preservation, protection and enhancement of cultural heritage, participating in important cultural activities and international projects. Since 2019 she is co-director of the Master Design for Development. Architecture, Urban planning and heritage in the Global South, promoted by the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies.
sonia.pistidda@polimi.it

About the authors

Sergio Sanna
Member of Ground Action, a collective of experts in the field of architecture, landscape and art, which is inspired by all those collective, active and participatory practices of space making such as, for example, the international experiences of the operational workshops. Its activity is configured as an on-site and open air research atelier, aimed at triggering or accelerating the re-evaluation processes for peculiar places, claiming the performative value of the action in the public space and in the landscape. It promotes sustainable design by using recycled materials and the direct and concrete realization of the installations using impromptu ways and forms. According to its method, Ground Action helps to create the opportunity for a dialogue with administrations, other local institutions and all those subjects active in the area capable of providing specific support and knowledge.
https://www.groundaction.eu/

Raffaella Trocchianesi
Architect and Associate Professor at Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano, she teaches Interior Design Studio at the School of Design and Design Research Context and Resources at the PhD Programme in Design.Director of the specialization Master IDEA_Exhibition Design, she mainly deals with Design for Cultural Heritage in terms of museography and exhibition design, communication and enhancement of local areas, new models and narratives of cultural experiences, the relationship between design, humanities and arts.
raffaella.trocchianesi@polimi.it

eeestudio.it (typeface: favorit by Dinamo)

Progetto grafico is an international graphic design magazine founded in 2003 and published by Aiap, the Italian association of visual communication design. A point of reference for such design in Italy from its start, it has also been fully translated into English since 2012. • In December 2017, Jonathan Pierini and Gianluca Camillini became the current editors. • The new *Progetto grafico* offers a critical look at graphics and visuals through a narrative broken up into fragments. Its aim is to offer articles connected in different ways so as to foster a series of transdisciplinary, historical and contemporary considerations. This multiple viewpoint, ranging from very distant to very close, seeks to look at the real both in the broadest terms as well as in a more specialist context. Our belief is that observation, whether of artifacts or representations, as well as production of visuals or graphics can add to today's cultural debate. • Contributions can include visual material, essays and interviews. Each issue intends to explore the storytelling opportunities of the journal.
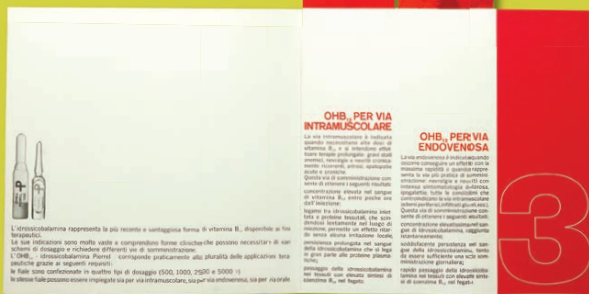
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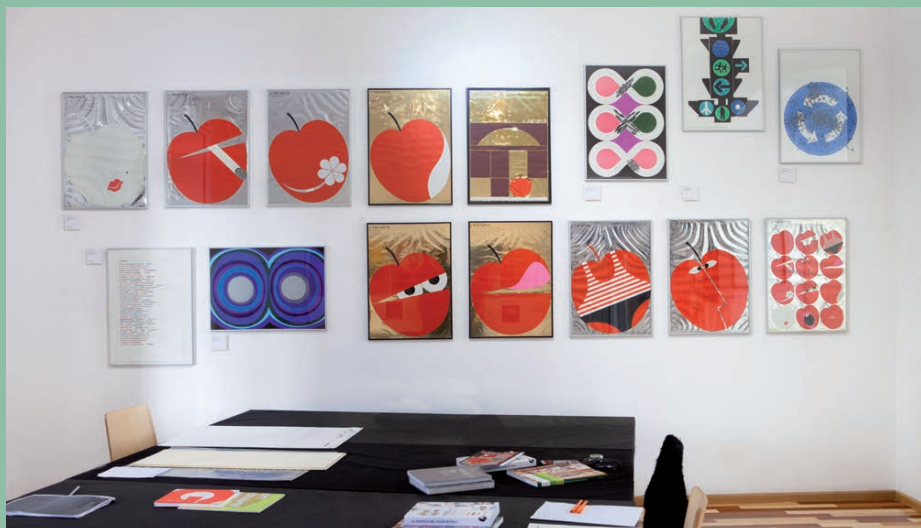# TI SENTI POCO BENE? AIAP HA TUTTE LE SOLUZIONI PER TE. SCOPRILE.

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via A. Ponchielli, 3, Milano
aiap.it — aiap.it/cdpg
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