

IT'S RAINING IN TIRANA

A photographic work in progress

When I traveled for the first time to Albania, it was raining in Tirana, no, it was pouring, it was flowing. We had to wait on the plane for more than half an hour. I stared into the rain, trying to catch a first glimpse, but you could barely distinguish the wingtips, Albania was not visible. I was completely soaked when I could finally get into the car I had rented. "Isha shumë i lagur" one would say in Albanian, but I only know that now, four years later. Actually, I wanted to travel to Japan, but after having read a text by the Polish writer Andrzej Stasiuk about Albania, I did change my plans, the small country in the Balkans seemed more mysterious and exciting to me.

A few years have gone by since then and that initial tourist trip has turned into a long-term project, "Endërr! - or about the attempt to become Albanian". The present exhibition "It's raining in Tirana" is an intermediate stand, a work in progress of this larger project, which is expected to reach its conclusion in 2023. For the time being, only pictures from the capital Tirana, this contradictory and sprawling head of Albania, are on display.

After the first trip, I wrote in my diary: "Stasiuk is right, in Albania you can think of nothing else but Albania." Meanwhile, I can't think of anything else either; the small country in the southwest of the Balkans has become an obsession. For some time now I am learning Albanian. I want to put on the costume of this difficult-to-access language, to disguise myself, and to become a bit of an Albanian, so that I'm no longer merely a tourist in the country, but a traveler - like Lord Byron in those days, who had himself painted as Albanian on his journey. But I am not a romantic. I am swimming against a strong current of migration: more Albanians live in the diaspora than in their country of origin, and of those who remained, almost the half dream of emigrating as well; hardly anyone wants to return to Albania. Yes, it rains in Tirana, actually it never stopped raining in this sunny country.

When traveling, one hopes to gain a picture of the country. But you already have one before you get there. And we only succeed slowly in dissolving the exotic character of these ideas, and just through persistent immersion in the flowing reality of a country, we make room for new images. Travelling is a process. And travelers only change when their ideas change. And yet, images always get in the way and obstruct our view. That is the process I am trying to describe, the alteration of the way we see. But how does one describe such a change photographically, with a medium that can only show that which is there, in front of the camera? How do you put a question mark to an image?

During the first journeys, I mainly removed the clichés and ideas from my mind to make room for a new, unintentional view - if such a view exists. Yet my start into the Albanian reality has not been easy. First an illness blocked me, then I had to cut short my stay because of an earthquake and now it is the pandemic that makes traveling more difficult. So I am only halfway through my search for images and my attempt to "become Albanian". The difficulties of giving my gaze a new direction seem almost insurmountable at times. - This "Work in Progress" talks about that, too, and thus is probably more of a description of the road. The foreign language has also become a mountain for me - although the first steps in the foreign terrain seemed so easy. But meanwhile the ascent has become steeper and the higher I get, the more unreachable the summit seems to

me. Where previously paths could be discerned, craggy cliffs rise into the air: tenses, modes, vowel compounds, the aorist, the optative, the admirative, and even nouns that change gender as plurals. "Becoming Albanian," to change perspective, is more difficult than I thought. However, at least sometimes I dream in Albanian, with a very limited vocabulary though. In one of these dreams, all the streets of Zurich have been renamed and got Albanian names. I had the impression in that dream that I was now getting along much better in Zurich - after all.

So I struggle with language on two levels: on one hand with the words and forms of Albanian, on the other with that of photographic representation. How can one represent what is not yet known, what is foreign? Does an appropriate pictorial foreign language exist? Can I find it? I sometimes feel as if I were in a dream, where I have a clearly defined image in front of my eyes that disappears again seconds later and transforms into something else. What remains behind is the presentiment of this constant change, and even though one prepares oneself for the next transformation, something unexpected appears again...

But one thing I know, despite all my efforts, I will always remain a stranger, my history differs completely from that of the people of Albania. And the past is present everywhere in this country, all the more so because it is pushed far aside. That's why I'm interested in the present relations to the past and the future.

Shi bie në Tiranë. It is raining in Tirana. It rained every time I arrived in Tirana. I never expected it, and I never had an umbrella with me - but that will change.

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