

Driant Zeneli

beneath a surface there's just another surface

curated by Martina Angelotti

Prometeogallery di Ida Pisani

Via G. Ventura 6, 20134 Milano, Italy

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Text by Martina Angelotti

The former *Metalurgjik* is strategically located in Elbasan, a town 50 kilometres from Tirana. Already in ancient times, at the time of the birth of the Byzantine Empire, the town was located midway between Rome and Constantinople. Today, the town symbolises the historic choice of political propaganda thought through at the end of the 1960s by Albanian communist leader Enver Hoxha and by Chinese leader Çu En Lai, after the great rupture with Russia. Hoxha's aim was to relaunch economic and industrial policies by building a large metallurgic complex – *Metalurgjik* – to become the most productive enterprise of the country. However, he did not consider the future ecological, environmental and urbanistic consequences.

The next route – that of “mass privatisation” – which followed the political collapse of Eastern Europe in the 1990s with the aim of salvaging the state and restore the economy, slowly deteriorated the conditions in which the space and human rights were exploited, without resolving the principal problems of employment and cheap labour.

Moving from such a scenario of industrial decadence and political failure, which invites to contemplate the dystopic reality of the town, Driant Zeneli operates a true *detournement*, a rerouting applied to the environment. He re-appropriates aesthetic symbols and visions that have shaped the space and integrates them to a frame suspended between real-socialism and a future-city Sci-Fi. Such research lasted over three years, and it rotates around the vulnerable dimensions placed between reality and the realm of possibility. A film and a video installation, resulting from a performative action and born in the context of *Metalurgjik*, represent the central focus, and also give life to sculpture-meteorites, photographs, and drawings. In the exhibition, stones taken from the site are displayed; they have been retrieved and scientifically analysed through X-rays and microscopic tests. Together with other similar traces, just like in the results from a laboratory analysis, these amplify the archaeological scenario, enclosed in a glass case.

The movie titled *It would not be possible to leave the Planet Earth unless Gravity existed* (2017), plays on a double dimension. The main character, Mario, an existing person close to the artist, walks alone, as if he were the only survivor of a celestial catastrophe with yet-to-know consequences. Jumping upon the crates, among stones blackened by the pollution, his silhouette is always shown in a dim yet precisely framed light that conceals the surrounding multitude of smoking chimney stacks and heavy metal (nickel and ferrochrome) processing plants.

The film shows a quasi-terrestrial landscape, which provides the background for a character who

ventures to search remnants, pieces of industrial – or, rather spatial? – archaeology, to reassemble them in order to design an escape route. What is at stake is, on the one hand, Mario's project and realisation of breaking free and travelling to the outer space, and, on the other, the frustration of witnessing the failure of the social and political plan of *Metalurgjik*, of which only ghosts remain.

Two citizens of Elbasan, father and daughter Bujar and Flora, become testimonies and subjects of such desolate piece of land and history in *And then I found some Meteorites in my Room* (2018), a video installation in three channels, resulting from a performance that combines young Flora's love of music (also known as DJ Sulejmani), and her father's burning passion for cosmology and dark matter, which had become a way of escaping the everyday.

Invited by Zeneli, these two generations confront and support each other in imagining their future. Even today, Bujar and Flora pick up coal in this area, once shaped by the ideology of work and expansion. At the same time, their work there represents the possibility of an alternative. They move from place to place in both physical and mental realms, and they invite us to witness, each with their own language, a much larger universe. With Flora's mix of music on the background, the viewer sees Bujar's silhouette, framed from above in a long shot, as he walks through large humps of coal. Through voiceover, as he answers the questions of a journalist, we are able to listen to his theories about the possibilities of extra-terrestrial life, while, on the screen, live images from the International Space Station website are shown, which has been orbiting since 1998, and where a small group of astronauts have been working. The IIS orbits around the earth at a 400-kilometre distance; in this number is concentrated all man's desire to renounce gravity to find a renewed trust in life, even on another planet.

"The planet I love more is Aphrodite, because [it] is near Elbasan, my hometown", says Burja, thus re-designing a trajectory of thought that moves across the Earth and the sky in a unique, long embrace. He adds: "I work here, but my mind is in the Horizon". He says so with the certainty of who turns to science – or fantasy – to find answers on existence.

Through these characters, their nature and aspirations, Zeneli has transformed a piece of land, which is still experiencing the consequences of a certain model of industrial development, in an oasis of cosmic thinking. From the mineral surface of a rugged and abandoned place – a true land of the Anthropocene – the force of human imagination raises.

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