

PETRIT HALILAJ

PRESS SELECTION

FLIGHT FANTASIES

MARK GODFREY ON THE ART OF PETRIT HALILAJ

Below: Petrit Halilaj, *The history of a hug*, 2020, steel, fabric, feathers, leather, wood from Kosovo, silicone, paint, hair. Installation view, Palacio de Cristal, Parque de El Retir, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. Photo: ImagenSubliminal (Miguel de Guzmán and Rocío Romero).

Opposite page: View of "Petrit Halilaj: To a raven and hurricanes that from unknown places bring back smells of humans in love," 2020-21, Palacio de Cristal, Parque de El Retir, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. Photo: ImagenSubliminal (Miguel de Guzmán and Rocío Romero).

IN FEBRUARY 2020, a transparent envelope arrived through my letter box. There was no paper inside, just some tiny seeds. Stamped on the outside were the names Petrit Halilaj and Alvaro Urbano and a date: 26.03.20. It was an invitation to the couple's wedding celebration, hosted within Halilaj's installation in the Palacio de Cristal in Madrid's Parque de El Retiro. The seeds hinted at what guests would find in the Palacio: monumental cloth flowers, lilies, tulips, poppies, carnations, and cherry blossoms, hung from the high glass ceiling to form a canopy. Each sculpture, made collaboratively by Halilaj and Urbano, was based on a flower the lovers had given each other during their courtship. Brass bird's claws were planted in the middle of the space, huge thin legs stretching up toward the sky. Halilaj had assembled thickets of branches within the light-filled conservatory; in among these were brass bird feeders filled with seeds. The windows were open so that birds would come in from the park, feast, and fly off to perch on the outsize cloth petals.

As magical as it sounds, the project was actually incomplete, because the wedding celebration could never take place. Covid made the festivities impossible in Madrid. Pandemic notwithstanding, it would have been unthinkable in Halilaj's home country, Kosovo, where same-sex marriage





is illegal. Halilaj and Urbano had been planning to dress as animals for their union, and one element of the ceremony remained in the installation, which opened to the public, after delays, in mid-July 2020: Wandering the space was a hired performer dressed as a white raven and clutching a branch. This was the same branch Halilaj's grandfather had held decades earlier when he was told, while working in the fields, that his wife had given birth. Men were not supposed to express their feelings, according to the mores of the time, but the new father could not contain his joy and randomly embraced this stick. He later gave it to his grandson, perhaps recognizing that the stigmatization of male emotional expression would have to end if the traumatic past were to be confronted.

Since the early 2010s, Halilaj, born in 1986 in a rural village near the town of Runik, has emerged as one of the most interesting artists in Europe, with solo shows at museums and kunsthallen in Berlin, Milan, Brussels, Bonn, Cologne, Turin, and Venice and with important outings in Los Angeles and New York too. The Madrid show was characteristic. He creates fantastical scenarios drawn from personal and cultural histories in order to dream of new possibilities, and he does so with extraordinary material and spatial sensitivity. For Halilaj, as a Kosovar who lived through civil war and who was only able to express his sexuality when he was well into adulthood,

imagination serves as a critical tool rather than as a means of escapism or self-mythologizing. He does not express nostalgia for an idyllic past he knows never existed, nor idealize a homeland in which LGBTQIA+ people still struggle for acceptance.

In 1998, when Serbian forces began to persecute Albanian Kosovars after a decade of flouting Kosovo's independent status, Halilaj's family fled along with thousands of others, winding up in the Kukës II refugee camp in Albania. Halilaj was seen as a kind of child prodigy in the camp thanks to his remarkable ambidexterity and his ability to draw two different pictures simultaneously. He was noticed by an Italian psychologist, Giacomo "Angelo" Poli, who supplied him with felt-tip pens and paper and to whom he gave many of his sketches. After some months, Halilaj returned with his parents and four siblings to Runik, but at the age of eighteen he traveled to Italy to live with Poli, whose family fostered him. They lived near Milan, and Halilaj was able to enroll in the Brera Academy, an art school in the city. His work is clearly influenced by postwar Italian art: Pino Pascali's blue spider and cleaning-brush-bristle worms; Mario Merz's sculptures modeling nomadic dwellings; Giuseppe Penone's environments of branches, leaves, and cast-metal forms; Alighiero e Boetti's turn to "feminine" traditions of embroidery. Land art also seems to have made an impression.

This page: View of "Petrit Halilaj: She, fully turning around, became terrestrial," 2015, Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn. Photo: Thekla Meusel.

Opposite page: Petrit Halilaj, *Abetare*, 2015, steel, desks from Shotë Galica school. Installation view, Fondazione Merz, Turin. Photo: Renato Ghiazza.





Most visitors to Halilaj's exhibitions are unfamiliar with the history of Kosovo, but they can viscerally feel the resonances of that history through his work.

Halilaj moved to Berlin in 2008. I first saw his work when Danh Vo selected him for a summer show at New York's Marian Goodman Gallery in 2014. Like Vo, who also became a refugee as a child, Halilaj reflects on questions of displacement, on the intersections of personal and global histories, on income inequality and queer identities. But where Vo often repurposes objects with extraordinary provenances, Halilaj works from situations that he discovers, and his installations are almost like stage sets—the viewer becomes a kind of protagonist within the environment and explores the story physically and imaginatively. Most visitors to Halilaj's exhibitions are unfamiliar with the history of Kosovo, but they can viscerally feel the resonances of that history through his work.

The first of Halilaj's projects to gain attention was his contribution to the 2010 Berlin Biennale. Given funds for a sculpture, Halilaj turned the money over to his parents, who had dreamed of moving from the countryside to Pristina and of building a larger house. The house was duly erected, and Halilaj retained the wooden slats that had been used to cast its concrete frame. These slats were trucked to Berlin and attached to the ceiling on the ground floor of the KW Institute for Contemporary Art to create a ghostly upside-down echo of the Pristina residence. Chickens meandered about under the slats, as they had done next to Halilaj's house when he was a child. Without striking an accusatory tone, the artist pointed to the economic disparities between Germany and Kosovo. A year later, he realized another displacement: Digging a rectangular hole near his childhood home, he created a kind of negative sculpture à la Michael Heizer. The dimensions of the hole were keyed to those of his Berlin gallery's booth at Art Basel. The earth was trucked to Switzerland, so a little patch of Kosovo occupied the pristine space of the art fair.

Living abroad, Halilaj gained a perspective on Kosovo that enabled him to explore histories whose ramifications might not be so easily legible to those living in the country. One of these stories concerned the fate of the extraordinary collection of taxidermied animals once proudly displayed in the Natural History Museum of Pristina. The collection had been moved into a warm, damp storage room right after the war ended in 1999, when the museum was repurposed to bolster a nascent sense of Kosovar identity and its galleries given over to traditional costumes and folkloric artifacts. A skeptic of all forms of nationalism, the artist was worried by this development. On one of his visits to Pristina, he asked to see the taxidermy collection. He found the stuffed animals rotting in the darkness. In response to this terrible sight, he re-created each specimen, sculpting the beasts and birds with a mixture of mud and animal dung. He acquired a number of the museum's original vitrines and created an installation, first shown at Wiels Contemporary Art Centre in Brussels in 2013 and reprised two years later in Bonn at the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. The vitrines were open and empty; the animals appeared to have escaped. Some seemed to roam around the floor; others were perched on beautifully crafted stands Halilaj had sculpted in brass, a material to which he has repeatedly turned for its lustrous appearance as well as for its fragility and susceptibility to tarnishing. Entire exhibitions have been devoted to the ways in which artists have deconstructed vitrines and the other apparatuses of museum presentations, but this installation felt incredibly fresh, mainly because of the wonderful contrast between the rough corporeality of the sculpted animals and the smooth golden-hued metal. The material juxtaposition elegantly captured the collision of a depressing present-day reality and Halilaj's poignant vision of resurrection and escape.

The Brussels and Bonn projects were also animated by the formal contrast of the heavy cases and the elegant brass structures elevating some of the animals, and this sculptural dynamic of groundedness and flight similarly inspired the artist's next major installation, first realized at the Kölner Kunstverein in Cologne 2015 and reprised for the Mario Merz Prize in Turin in 2018. Again, these arose from a situation that Halilaj encountered in Kosovo. On one trip back to Runik, he passed by his old school and came upon a group of desks that were about to be destroyed. They were covered in teenagers' graffiti: classroom jokes, hearts and the names of crushes, erect cocks, EMINEM and MESSI, but also with drawings specific to the location and to the experiences of young people growing up in the wake of a civil war. There were insignia of local political parties, depictions of military equipment, slogans in both Albanian and Serbian.

Halilaj rendered some of the graffiti as huge black wire sculptures and installed these so that they seemed to fly off the original desks, which he'd salvaged. In Cologne, they filled the main room and tumbled down the staircase; in Turin, they climbed the walls of Merz's former studio, where the Italian artist's neon Fibonacci numbers would once have been. At both venues, most of the desks were laid out in neat rows, as they had been in the classroom, but in Milan one was also suspended above the floor. It was a beautiful way of memorializing the mundane daydreams and escapist hopes of a generation of Kosovar kids while attending to the powerful impact of political discord on their imaginations.

Very different and much older artifacts were at the heart of a project Halilaj realized in 2017 for his first institutional show in the United States, at New York's New Museum. Archaeological explorations near Runik in 1968 and 1983 had unearthed hundreds of figurines and musical instruments, evidence of a significant Neolithic settlement. The instruments, called ocarinas, were small globes with apertures that when blown into produced a breathy note like a birdcall. The discoveries were shipped off to Belgrade and never shown to the local people, who had no access to this part of their cultural heritage, except for a few objects that had been missed by excavators and unearthed by farmers during plowing. Halilaj researched the collections that had been removed from their local context and made copies in clay of more than five hundred objects. He turned each little



Above: Petrit Halilaj, *RU_Egretta cerulea, Limosa limosa*, 2017, reproductions of Neolithic artifacts from the region of Runik, Kosovo (clay, plaster, resin, pigments), brass, left: 28 3/8 x 11 x 20 1/8", right: 22 1/8 x 8 1/4 x 15 3/4".

Below: View of "Petrit Halilaj: RU," 2017-18, New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Opposite page: Petrit Halilaj, *Do you realise there is a rainbow even if it's night (red)*, 2017, Dyshek carpet from Kosovo, flokati, polyester, chenille wire, stainless steel, brass. Installation view, Arsenale, Venice. From the 57th Venice Biennale.





replica ocarina into a bird's body, giving it thin brass legs and claws. At the New Museum, he hung a set of huge nests made of branches and mulch from the walls; the replicas were arranged in the nests and on the floor. It was a striking sight, one laden with historical and political meaning. The work's creation was triggered by Halilaj's reflections upon internal colonialism, the ways in which modern states despoil and exert crypto-imperialist control over provincial territories. Rather than offering an explicit argument for the restitution of these artifacts, Halilaj showed how their loss

allowed them to be reimagined. Ocarinas and figurines metamorphosed into a flock of migratory birds, landing in their temporary nests in New York before departing for other climes. The work seemed to suggest the value of historical fragments in constructing a national self-conception that avoids the pitfalls of identitarianism and militarism, one that acknowledges change, transience, and a kind of strength in vulnerability.

It's no wonder that birds—tethered to specific places yet peripatetic, resilient yet seemingly fragile—loom large in Halilaj's art. He is drawn not to eagles and hawks but to less predatory and mostly smaller creatures, from the chickens that wandered around his childhood home and the canaries he kept as pets to the parrots and peacocks he sketched as a child. His 2014 artist's book, *of course blue affects my way of shitting*, is filled with images of his collages. These start with old black-and-white photographs of birds over which he drew extra colorful wings or stems and branches, sometimes pasting on fragments of fabric, making real animals into mythical creatures. It is easy to understand why a child in a refugee camp might identify with small birds and their capacity, despite their size, to fly wherever they wish, borders notwithstanding. This is a symbolism that is Halilaj's, but not so far from that of other artists: One might think of David Hammons's "Flight Fantasy" assemblages of the 1970s and '80s, or of the feathered *Ciguapas* that populate Firelei Baez's paintings, or Joan Jonas's performance and installation *Stream or river flight or pattern*, 2016.

Halilaj's identification with winged creatures, vulnerable ones especially, has been a way to express his queerness in a traditional and homophobic culture. This aspect of his art became more prominent in his contribution to the 2017 Venice Biennale. Invited by curator Christine Macel to make a work in the dim and lofty spaces of the Arsenale, he remembered his childhood love of moths, his awe at their transformation from larvae and the enchanting sight of their patterned wings. He embarked on a series of moth sculptures, which were also costumes that he sometimes wore in performance. The antennae were made from fuzzy chenille wire; the wings were fashioned from traditional woven Kosovar qilim, dyshek, and jan carpets and boasted trailing cascades of colored fabric. Halilaj made these works in collaboration with his mother, Shkurte Halilaj, and the process enabled the pair to talk through his sexuality, which he had only recently revealed to his family. The sculptures were installed in the Arsenale under flickering electric lights, some resting on the walls, others in the rafters. It was a captivating installation that won Halilaj a Special Mention (full disclosure: I was on the awarding jury). The moths flew from Venice to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, where they landed in 2018.

A couple of years ago, on one of Halilaj's regular visits to his Italian foster family, Giacomo Poli showed the artist a folder of the felt-tip drawings that Halilaj had made as a child in the refugee camp some twenty years earlier and that Poli had guarded ever since. Back in the camp, Poli had encouraged children to draw whatever they wanted, but also what they had seen, knowing that many would be unable to verbalize the traumatic events they had witnessed. The thirteen-year-old Halilaj must have been very open to this encouragement. He drew precise pictures of palm trees, parrots, sunset-drenched landscapes, peacocks. He also drew tanks, military aircraft, and equally precise pictures of crowds of Kosovars huddled together while being held at gunpoint, with lone figures separated from the group, kneeling down to face brutal beatings or execution.

Around the time Halilaj rediscovered these works, he became aware that Serbia's president, Aleksandar Vučić, was claiming that the massacres of the Kosovar war had never happened, that the stories of atrocities had been fabricated. Faced with this revisionism, Halilaj felt an urgent impulse to



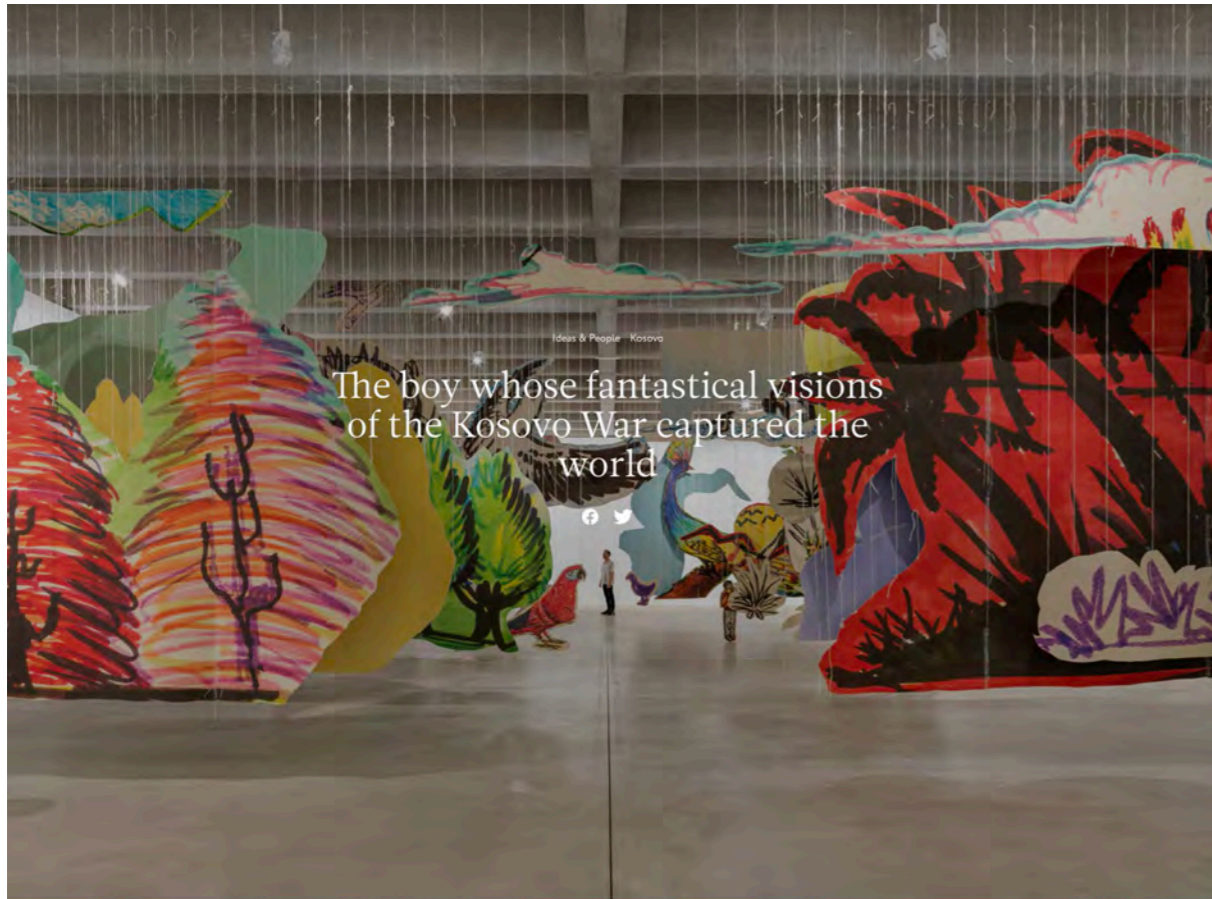
return to his juvenilia. He conceived an installation connected to his childhood drawings for his next institutional outing, a show currently open at Tate St Ives, UK. Certain elements of the drawings—trees, birds, soldiers, refugees—were scanned, digitally cut out, enlarged to many times their original size, and printed on huge felt sheets, which were also cut, silhouetelike, to conform to the contours of the images. These will hang in rows in the St Ives space, much as painted flats would be arranged on a stage. While most of Halilaj's installations evoke theatrical sets, he wanted to emphasize this resemblance here because he was thinking about the ways in which psychodramatists have helped survivors of war, genocide, and natural disasters to stage their own stories so as to bear witness and work through trauma. Crucially, Halilaj chose to separate the imagined scenes from the recollected ones by suspending the fantasy images facing forward, toward the entrance to the gallery, and the soldiers and refugees facing backward. This means that only when you turn around to exit will you see the images Halilaj once witnessed.

All but one of the felt sheets will hang suspended at varying heights. The exception, the only one of these felt works to touch the floor, is also the only one printed on both sides. It's an image of a child, and it comes from a rather special drawing. When Halilaj was living at Kukës II as a boy, he heard that Kofi Annan was coming to visit the camp and prepared, on cardboard, the most ambitious picture he had made up to that point. It showed a child watching a massacre. Annan, who had superhero status in Halilaj's eyes, actually asked to take the drawing to the UN, but Halilaj kept hold of it. The figure might be a kind of proxy for the viewers in this new exhibition, a character with whom to identify, so that it might be possible to understand what such children see, and what their dreams are made on. □

"Petrit Halilaj: Very volcanic over this green feather" is on view at Tate St Ives, UK, through January 16, 2022.
 MARK GODFREY IS AN INDEPENDENT CURATOR BASED IN LONDON. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

At Tate St Ives, Halilaj was thinking about the ways in which psychodramatists have helped survivors of war, genocide, and natural disasters to stage their own stories.





The boy whose fantastical visions of the Kosovo War captured the world

In a clip broadcast by a Swedish Television news programme on 17 May 1999, 13-year-old Petrit Halilaj gave his first matter-of-fact account of how Serbian police and special forces killed 152 people in a Kosovan village not far from his hometown. Now known as the massacre of Izbika, the event was one of the most horrific mass executions of the Serbia-Kosovo war.

Watching the footage now, it's difficult to see the young Halilaj as just a kid: he is poised and remarkably pragmatic in his word choice, aware that he's speaking on behalf of Kosovars who have lost relatives and homes. It's only when the topic changes to drawing — particularly his love of sketching parrots — that he beams with childlike wonder. "I drew these because I'm so into them," he says, grinning quietly.

Now 35-years-old and opening his first solo UK show — *Very volcanic over this green feather* — at Tate's westernmost outpost in St Ives, Cornwall, Halilaj wears the same expression of unbridled glee. He shows the natural world he has recreated in two-dimensional pieces of felt: peacocks and palm trees taken from his childhood drawings are delicately suspended from the gallery ceiling. As you navigate the installation, you encounter a pair of antelopes grazing, hens wandering. Then, amid some shrubbery, you spot a crying boy in the distance — the first sign that this peaceful landscape might be a mirage. From the back of the room, the landscape changes, revealing scenes of massacre depicted in childlike simplicity and frankness, with burning houses, displaced masses, and soldiers wielding guns.



Petrit Halilaj Photo by Angela B. Suarez



Petrit Halilaj Photo by Angela B. Suarez

Growing up in the village of Runik during the Serbia-Kosovo war, Halilaj learned to run at the sound of shelling. One day, his father disappeared. Women, children, and the elderly were rounded up. Fearing that the village would be torched, his mother collected a few treasured possessions and buried them in the ground — Halilaj's drawings were among them. Their home was razed, and his family were forced to flee to Albania, where they found shelter at the Kukës II refugee camp. At the time, they did not know if Halilaj's father or classmates had been imprisoned or killed.

Like many kids at the camp, Halilaj missed his classes. Without art supplies, he couldn't continue his creative pursuits. That was until Italian psychologist Giacomo "Angelo" Poli arrived with paper and colourful felt-tip markers. Drawing was to provide distraction and relief from cramped and uncomfortable living conditions — and help the children unload the heavy burdens of war.



Petrit Halilaj, Installation view of *Very volcanic over this green feather* at Tate St Ives, 2021. Photo: Matt Greenwood, Tate Photography

The pain that emerged from the exercise was harrowing: violence and NATO airstrikes are depicted in utter clarity; Serbian forces and armed KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army or the Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës) fighters fill every page. These sinister scrawlings of the cruelty and chaos of war make Halilaj's vividly-hued parrots all the more impactful.

"This was the first time anyone had given any attention to me or the other kids," the artist recalls of his time at the camp with Poli, speaking over Zoom from his Berlin studio. "[The drawings] seemed so important to people. This was when I

realised that art can talk to people and that it was important to show what was happening [amidst the war]."



Petrit Halilaj, *Paesaggio Fantastico (Fantasy Landscape)*, 1999. Courtesy the artist and Giacomo Poli

Among the scenes of tragedy, he also found space to dream: populating his drawings with magnificent peacocks, swans floating in serene lakes, and bucolic and tropical landscapes. It's no coincidence, perhaps, that peacocks unfurl their brilliantly-coloured tail feathers as a defence mechanism — to look larger and more intimidating. In the 13-year-old's case, drawing these creatures was a way of reconnecting with himself in the turmoil of war. "I was using that time [with Poli] to draw what I love: nature." It is something the artist is still fascinated by, so much so that when the internet connection drops and he has to switch rooms, Halilaj takes the laptop for a quick tour around his garden, to show me his birdhouses and flowers.

Naturally, the media covering the refugee camp caught sight of Halilaj's talent and for a moment, war reportage was brightened by his and other children's artworks. When the UN secretary general Kofi Annan asked to meet the young man, Halilaj's mum encouraged her son to draw a bigger picture for the occasion. Together, they made a canvas out of the cardboard floor of their tent — still damp from soil on the day of the meeting.



Petrit Halilaj, Installation view of Very volcanic over this green feather at Tate St Ives, 2021. Photo: Matt Greenwood, Tate Photography

In the summer of 1999, Halilaj and his family returned to Runik and reunited with his father. Together, they installed a temporary tent in the rubble of their house. It took many more years to rebuild their home and make it habitable. Meanwhile, Poli believed that the children's art represented an underappreciated perspective on humanitarian catastrophe and, on his return to Italy, he gathered the drawings to put on an exhibition.

He remained a pivotal supporter of Halilaj's artistic career: helping the young man secure a scholarship to attend the only art-focused high school in Peja, Kosovo, and later hosting him during his university studies in Milan, Italy. "Without his help, I would never have been able to achieve what I have." Once Halilaj arrived in Italy, he was finally able to spread his wings. "I wanted to see new things. I felt immensely lucky to have a new life. I had only ever imagined Venice and Paris, then, suddenly, I couldn't stop travelling," he beams.



Petrit Halilaj and Dr Giacomo Poli 1999 Courtesy Giacomo Poli

Throughout his career, he never ceased drawing birds, fascinated by their ability to transcend human boundaries. Early on, he exhibited a series of drawings showing an elegant breed of hens, which later inspired his installation: "They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens." He delved into the bird archive of the former Natural History Museum of Kosovo and, in

2020, turned Madrid's Crystal Palace into a giant bird nest with feeding areas to invite feathered visitors into the building. Though Halilaj hasn't brought real birds into Tate St Ives, he has sewn bird feathers into his felt wildlife, a representation of the way real life is torn apart and stitched together to form memories.

"I had no interest in going back into the war," Halilaj reflects. He didn't consider using his childhood drawings until the pandemic struck. In a smaller, separate room from the St Ives installation, his family's experience at Kukës II is presented in a display table outlining the conflict of 1998-9, NATO's interventions, and The Hague International Court of Justice's ongoing investigations into the war atrocities committed. Despite the timeline starting with in 1998, Halilaj says the tremors were felt long before the start of the war.



Petrit Halilaj, Installation view of Very volcanic over this green feather at Tate St Ives, 2021. Photo: Matt Greenwood, Tate Photography

"The nightmares began at the end of the 80s. My dad had work and we had a sense of regularity in the house. He would even bring toys every other week. Then, he was kicked out of his job, which happened to most Kosovar Albanians. The 90s grew darker and darker. There were no renovations at school. Teachers were unpaid. Albanians and Serbians were divided." With segregation came the slow enforced assimilation of Kosovar Albanians. "The war started when they closed schools, when they closed theatres, when they cut off culture. That's the real horror. That's how politics really sets in." The policing of culture crept into personal conversations and domestic spaces too. "I loved Serbian music. But my parents discouraged me from listening to it, worried about playing or celebrating our neighbours' culture."



Petrit Halilaj, Installation view of *Very volcanic over this green feather* at Tate St Ives, 2021. Photo: Matt Greenwood, Tate Photography

Whether exhibiting Albanian alphabet books (for his series *Abetare*), or using performance to bring to life the ruins of his hometown's House of Culture (for his series *Shkrepëtima*), his recent projects have been prompted by a desire to revisit, if not rebuild, this lost heritage. The artist knows too well how identity can be erased: he pulled out of the Belgrade Biennial last October, after organisers omitted his nationality from the official list of participants published

online (you can read his open letter [here](#)). Responding to the Biennial theme of "Dreamers", Halilaj had wanted to dedicate his work to the dreams of Runik's citizens, inspired by his former teacher, who he had recently discovered was an actor and activist prior to the war.

"After the withdrawal from the Belgrade Biennial, I went back to the childhood drawings [I made with Poli]. He proposed to curator Anne Barlow that they aren't treated as kids drawings, but instead ask questions about how to engage with this material. Still, there is something powerful about reclaiming the wonder of childhood imagination. "How else do you unblock something that is already historicised and analysed?"



Studio Petrit Halilaj, work in progress for Tate St Ives exhibition, Spring 2021

You cannot move on from the trauma of war. When you look at the lush landscapes, you cannot unsee those traumatic scenes. But, as the exhibition suggests, you can build a new narrative from those memories.

"We construct the future as we remember the past," continues Halilaj. "Seeing the latest developments in Europe, the way France and Holland have changed their mind about including southeastern countries into the EU, and the harsh diplomatic war continuing between Kosovo and Serbia, one thing is clear: there's a lack of vision for a better future." His disappointment with the Belgrade Biennial inevitably ties into this. "We should be more radical than ever, building new ways to connect. We should have a human point of view rather than a national point of view."



Petrit Halilaj, Installation view of *Very volcanic over this green feather* at Tate St Ives, 2021. Photo: Matt Greenwood, Tate Photography

His eyes light up when he talks about the future, a glimmer of optimism that, in the context of Halilaj's own history and the current pandemic, might seem astounding. That sense of hope is channeled through his felt creatures – reminders that life will flourish from disaster.

He points out an image of a soldier in the exhibition, this time sounding completely celebratory. “With the peacock in the background, it looks a bit like a drag queen dancing.”

Art



Claire Armitstead

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Mon 1 Nov 2021 09.00
GMT

Petrit Halilaj: 'I started to live with fear on a daily basis'



▲ 'Kofi Annan was bigger than Star Wars to me': Petrit Halilaj with some of his drawings from 1999. Photograph: Angela B Suarez

Petrit Halilaj was 13 years old when Serbian troops moved into his Kosovar village, forcing his family to flee and then burning their house to the ground. Piling as much as they could on to a tractor, they took off for his grandfather's home. When that was also invaded they moved again, flitting from refuge to refuge until they arrived at a camp in Albania, where they sat out the rest of the 15-month war between Serbia and [Kosovo](#).

It was there, in the spring of 1999, that Halilaj met up

with the Italian psychologist who was to change his life.

News reached the tent (in which he was living with his mother, grandfather and four siblings) that Giacomo "Angelo" Poli was giving out paper and felt-tip pens to any child who wanted to draw. Before long he was pouring out images so powerful that the then UN secretary general [Kofi Annan](#) asked to meet him during a visit to the camp.

"I'd grown up with Kofi Annan. He was bigger than Star Wars to me, so I said to my mum: 'I can't show him a little A4 picture,'" recalls Halilaj. Together they managed to liberate some of the cardboard used to floor the tents, so he could redraw one image of a massacre in a village. The original plan was to give the picture to Annan, but Halilaj's mind was changed by his grandfather's insistence that the visit was no more than a piece of political theatre. So, while the image was broadcast around the world, the picture itself stayed in Albania, where Halilaj only rediscovered it decades later.

A year after the war ended, the family returned to Kosovo. Halilaj was given a scholarship to art school in Italy, setting him on a course that now brings him to Tate St Ives for his first solo show in the UK. Though Angelo's visit to the camp only lasted two weeks, it was the start of a lifelong friendship. The two worked together to find an adult sense in the 35 drawings produced during that fortnight, which are the basis of Halilaj's Tate installation. One room documents his childhood: it not only includes a video of Annan patting Halilaj's head as he is shown the picture, but an Andrew Testa photograph he discovered years later on the New York Times website, of his little figure, squashed between two plumply upholstered women, in a food queue at the camp. Their plumpness, he points out, is the result of many layers of coloured felt that protected them from the vicious cold, and now plays a signature role in his art.

The installation itself is an enchanted forest of images, where parrots and peacocks hover over the churned earth of mass graves and burn you into the mind of a 13-year-old boy who somehow managed to craft his own salvation from the trauma of war. As installers stitch the felt cut-outs to the threads attaching them to the ceiling, the artist runs around poking feathers in here and there - peacock, chicken, flamingo - "for those who care to look closely".

"When we talk about the war in Kosovo, we are not talking about a historical situation that has been resolved," says Halilaj. But it is the artist's role to find an alternative to "boring diplomacy". In the end, Halilaj savs. "landscape is what remains and gives us dreams of

says, “landscape is what remains and gives us dreams of the future. So to me this exhibition is not just fragments

of 1999 but fragments of the future, too.”

Petrit Halilaj on his Tate installation



▲ Photograph: Matt Greenwood/Tate

The blanket

“This red and yellow cover was over the body of a three-month-old baby who was killed in the village of Obri, very close to where we lived. I didn’t put the child in the picture, because for me it’s an image of a massacre. I didn’t want to show the victims, because we’re so bombarded by war images. At first we were told that the soldiers would never hurt children. The murder of this child and his entire family was the moment when I started to live with fear on a daily basis.”



▲ Photograph: Kirstin Prisk

The burning house

“In another part of the installation you can see our yellow and red house before it all happened, but here it’s

yellow and red house before it all happened, but here it’s burning to the ground. There’s nothing left of it now. In

the background you can see a soldier and a bulldozer, but in the foreground are birds in those first colours Angelo gave us. It’s a way of giving back to him what he gave to us as kids: paper and colour and space for our imaginations. That was such an amazing gift.”



▲ Photograph: Kirstin Prisk

The peacock

“Birds represented to me the colour and joy of my imagination, even in the worst of places. Behind it you can see the shadow of a soldier with a knife. It’s up to you which way you turn: you have either the unfolding of war or the unfolding of dreams.”



▲ Photograph: Kirstin Prisk

The little boy

“This little boy is the one figure I have taken directly from the drawing I made for Kofi Annan. In that, he stands to one side, with a tank rolling in, watching a massacre. I didn’t want to put him in the middle because it’s not a self-portrait, but a picture of all of us.”

Petrit Halilaj: Very volcanic over this green feather is at Tate St Ives to 16 January.

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Wonders, and Horrors, Drawn From Boyhood in a War Zone - The New York Times

The New York Times | <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/27/arts/design/petrit-halilaj-tate-kosovo-war.html>

Wonders, and Horrors, Drawn From Boyhood in a War Zone

Petrit Halilaj became one of Kosovo's most acclaimed artists with work that reflects on his country's past. Now, he's getting personal.



By Alex Marshall

Oct. 27, 2021

ST. IVES, England — When Petrit Halilaj was 13 and a refugee from the brutal war in Kosovo, a group of Italian psychologists arrived at his camp in Albania and gave him some felt-tip pens.

Halilaj was soon drawing dozens of bright, childish pictures. But their subjects were far from colorful: In one, he depicted tanks blowing up a family's home; in another, a mass grave. Other pictures showed soldiers standing over dead bodies, with guns or bloody knives apparently raised in celebration.

The psychologists spent two weeks in the camp, in 1999, trying to help the children there process the traumas they had experienced during the war, in which ethnic Albanian rebels fought against Serbian troops. For Halilaj, an ethnic Albanian, those traumas were many. Serbian forces burned down his home and captured his father. His family fled from place to place, until they ended up in the refuge in Albania.



Halilaj in 1999 with Dr. Giacomo Poli, an Italian psychologist who encouraged the boy to draw in an Albanian refugee camp. via Giacomo Poli

Halilaj's vivid pictures impressed the psychologists — and not only them: Reporters visiting the camp interviewed him for international news bulletins. Halilaj told a Swedish broadcaster at the time that his sleep was broken by nightmares. "I feel happier when I spend time like this," Halilaj said of the drawings.

Now, more than 20 years later, Halilaj (pronounced Ha-lee-LYE) is a rising figure in Europe's art world whose work has been displayed at the Venice Biennale and in museums across the continent. In his latest exhibition, at Tate St. Ives, an outpost of the British museum group in Cornwall, England, Halilaj has returned to the shocking pictures he drew as a child who had seen too much. (The show, "Very Volcanic Over This Green Feather," runs until Jan. 16.)

On a recent tour of the exhibition, Halilaj, 35, said he revisited the pictures last year and was surprised by what he'd drawn. Among the violence, he said, "I saw all these birds — peacocks and doves — and they were as big as the soldiers, as happy and proud."

"I'd taken the space to draw landscapes that made me feel good," he added. "It was like I was saying, 'Yes, it was awful, but I can dream and love, too.'"



The suspended forms in "Very Volcanic Over This Green Feather" are based on Halilaj's childhood drawings. When visitors enter the gallery, they see a landscape of trees and exotic birds. Guy Martin for The New York Times



Halilaj's original drawings, from 1999. Petrit Halilaj



Petrit Halilaj



From the other side of the gallery, viewers see a more macabre selection of Halilaj's teenage doodles: soldiers, tanks, wailing, figures, burning houses. Guy Martin for The New York Times

In the show, segments of Halilaj's boyhood drawings have been reproduced at huge scale and hung from the gallery ceiling, so that when visitors enter, they are met with a fantasy landscape of exotic birds and palm trees. But when they reach the other side of the room and turn around, they find that some of the suspended forms have been printed on the reverse with a more macabre selection of Halilaj's doodles: soldiers, tanks, wailing figures, burning houses. The tranquil scene becomes one of horror.

Halilaj said he hoped the exhibition would make people think about how politicians and the news media portrayed the conflict. Even today, he added, some Balkan lawmakers twisted the reality of the war in Kosovo to bolster their nationalist agendas. But making the show had also helped him come to terms with his own memories, he said.

Christine Macel, the chief curator of the Pompidou Center in Paris who featured Halilaj's work in the 2017 Venice Biennale, said Halilaj "was both original as a person and artist — very open, and creative, and resilient, and full of imagination."

His work tackles serious subjects like nationalism and exile, she said, yet "there is always a note of fantasy and joy underpinning them." The Tate exhibition showed his early promise as an artist was being met, Macel added.



Halilaj, center, in a green coat, was 11 in 1999 when this photograph was taken in Albania. This photograph is part of the exhibit at Tate St. Ives. Andrew Testa

Erzen Shkolli, a former head of the National Gallery of Kosovo, who showed Halilaj's work there during his tenure, said the artist always used the country's history as a starting point in his work, "but his art is about so much more," and anyone can connect with it.

In some works, Halilaj's messages are clear. In 2011, he dug 66 tons of soil from his family's land in Kosovo, then piled it into a booth at Art Basel, the art fair, offering it for sale. Jennifer Chert, one of his gallerists, said that work "was obviously about attachment to soil, the idea of homeland, and exile, but there was also the more cynical side of, 'What is the value of land?'"

Other pieces are more elusive. For another work, "Poisoned by Men in Need of Some Love," Halilaj recreated displays of moths and butterflies that had once been on display at Kosovo's Museum of Natural History, but were left to decay during the war. Holland Cotter, a New York Times art critic, said in a 2014 review of that piece that Halilaj's art "makes much current New York art look like fluff."

Halilaj said he was prompted to make the Tate exhibition by a series of events that made him feel as if politics in Kosovo and Serbia were still stuck in the 1990s. Last October, he was scheduled to present work at an art biennial in Belgrade, Serbia — a country that does not recognize Kosovo as an independent state. Halilaj said he was excited by the opportunity, but disappointed when the event's organizers omitted his nationality from the official list of participants published online.



Halilaj at Tate St. Ives. The Kosovo-born artist is now a rising figure in Europe's art world. Guy Martin for The New York Times

After he complained, biennial administrators added that Halilaj was from Kosovo on the biennial's website, but put an asterisk by the country's name, as used by some international bodies to denote a contested status. Halilaj withdrew from the event in protest.

Around the same time, Halilaj said, he heard news reports saying that Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia's president, had described a massacre that occurred during the Kosovo War as "staged." If nationalist politicians were inventing fantasies about the conflict, he would respond with his truth: "I felt as a citizen, and an artist, I want to stand and counter-narrate something," Halilaj said.

Yet he said he didn't want visitors in St. Ives to focus solely on the show's dark side. They have to walk back to the start of the exhibition when they leave, Halilaj said, and if they happen to look back, they'll again be met by the fantasy landscape of exotic birds and trees. Did that desired ending reflect his views about Kosovo today?

"Totally!" Halilaj said, smiling broadly. He was "very, very positive" about the country's future, he added. Halilaj recently staged a joint show there with Alvaro Urbano, his husband and artistic collaborator, in which the couple hung huge fabric flowers under the dome of Kosovo's National Library during Pride Week. Those included a replica of a lily that had been part of the couple's engagement bouquet.

Kosovo is still a macho society, Halilaj said, yet no one had "thrown tomatoes" or protested against the artists' celebration of gay love.

"When this happened, under the flowers, I felt home for the first time in my life," Halilaj said. There was no need to imagine peacocks and parrots anymore.

ART | 2 HOURS AGO | BY [TF CHAN](#)

Petrit Halilaj reflects on trauma and hope at Tate St Ives

The artist looks back to his childhood drawings, made in a refugee camp during the Kosovo war, for a new exhibition at Tate St Ives, interspersing landscapes and birds with scenes of wartime devastation to create a powerful immersive environment



The Kosovar artist Petrit Halilaj in spring 2021, with some of the 84 silhouettes that feature in his 'Very volcanic over this green feather' exhibition at Tate St Ives. Made from pieces of felt printed with the artist's childhood drawings on one side, they form an immersive installation inspired by trauma and hope.

Photography: [Angela B Suarez](#)

In 1999, when Petrit Halilaj was 13, Serbian troops swept through his native Kosovo and forced him and his family to flee into refugee camps in nearby Albania. Wartime destruction, forced displacement and loss came to define his youth, and eventually shaped his career as an artist. Now one of the foremost cultural figures to have emerged from his young homeland, he has explored these themes with poignant urgency.

Cultural identity, nationhood and heritage

At the Berlin Biennale in 2010, Halilaj famously reconstructed the scaffolding of his family home, which was burned down in the village of Kostërc during the war and would later be rebuilt in the capital city of Pristina, and let loose a flock of live chickens as symbols of rural life and recovered freedom. He subsequently meditated on migration and integration through large-scale recreations of the jewellery that his mother had buried in the soil in their original home when they prepared to escape, and by filling an [Art Basel](#) booth in 2011 with the same soil.



Halilaj's *The places I'm looking for, my dear, are utopian places, they are boring and I don't know how to make them real*, installed at Berlin's KW Institute for Contemporary Art for the 6th Berlin Biennale, 2010.

Photography: [Uwe Walter](#), courtesy of the artist

Contemplating wider themes of nationhood, he created a giant bird's nest out of Kosovan soil, branches and twigs for the country's first pavilion at the [Venice Biennale](#) two years later, and then resurrected specimens from the vanished Natural History Museum of Pristina for a solo show at the Wiels Contemporary Art Centre in Brussels.

Adding to this more recent projects – such as *Ru* (2017), inspired by Neolithic artefacts from the town of Runik that wound up in Serbian hands because of the war and remain inaccessible to Kosovars; and *Shkrepëtima* (2018), which presented collective memories of Runik's citizens as a performance on the ruins of the former House of Culture – and Halilaj's ability to give widely resonant form to his personal histories becomes abundantly clear.



Halilaj's *Ru*, installation view at New Museum, New York, 2017. Photography: Dario Lasagni, courtesy of the artist, ChertLüdde, Berlin, kamel mennour, London/Paris

Petrit Halilaj's new exhibition at Tate St Ives

There is, however, one aspect of his biography that Halilaj was hesitant to mine for many years – his actual experience of the Kosovo War, which he is finally drawing on for a major installation at Tate St Ives, his first solo exhibition in a UK museum. 'For a very long time, I preferred to not talk about it, or to not remember it in detail, because I'm fascinated by what I can do today, speaking to personal and national identity, and what it means on a larger scale,' he explains over Zoom from his Berlin studio. 'I never went back to the conflict, and I was very annoyed by journalists who were interested in my experiences as a refugee.'

What changed? The passage of time, which empowered Halilaj to finally confront his traumas head-on. Ongoing experiences of erasure, which prompted a realisation of how a conflict from two decades ago continues to reverberate in contemporary politics (in 2019, the president of Serbia expressed public support for the demonstrably false claim that the Račak massacre of 1999 never happened). There was also the Covid-19 pandemic, which compelled the normally peripatetic artist to slow down and revisit his memories.

In lockdown, he had plenty of time to call an old friend, the Italian psychologist Giacomo 'Angelo' Poli. They first met at the Kukës II refugee camp in Albania in 1999, where Halilaj and his family were living, and Poli was part of a humanitarian mission. Poli wanted to help children at the camp to communicate their experiences, but he couldn't speak any Albanian nor they English or Italian – so he offered them felt-tip pens and paper and asked them to draw.

'After almost a month in the camp, where we had no education, I heard there was a programme for kids. I often describe it as one of the best presents of my life,' the artist says. The workshops were therapeutic, a respite from the hardships of the camp and a much-needed outlet: 'We drew about the war, and

it was one of the first times an adult would give us space to say something [about our experiences]. It wasn't just the personal need for expression. We were trying to inform everyone we could about who we left behind, and what we just saw, and the extremely hard time Kosovo was going through.'



Halilaj with psychologist Giacomo 'Angelo' Poli at Kukës II refugee camp, Albania, April 1999. Archive of Giacomo Poli

He depicted scenes of devastation – military helicopters descending on Kosovo, tanks tearing their way through the countryside, homes going up in flames, soldiers holding civilians at gunpoint, a family being massacred. But with Poli's encouragement, he also drew the same things he had drawn before the war, the idyllic landscapes and fantastic birds that now seemed a world away from his current situation but could offer a sense of normalcy and spiritual sustenance. Halilaj made quite an impression, first with his insistence on having twice the number of pens as other children (he is ambidextrous) and then with the drawings themselves, which attracted the attention of the international press and eventually the then UN secretary general Kofi Annan, who asked to see the young man on a visit to the camp.

Halilaj struck up an immediate friendship with Poli, who had to depart after 15 days, taking with him 38 artworks by Halilaj and leaving behind contact information and more drawing materials. 'I wrote to him anytime I could in the years to come,' Halilaj says. 'Back in Italy he showed my drawings, alongside those of other kids, and persuaded his municipality to give me a grant to go to the only art high school in Kosovo after the war. Eventually, Angelo and his wife hosted me for three years when I was at university [the Brera Academy in Milan]. They became my second family.'



One of 38 felt-tip pen on paper drawings that Halilaj produced under Poli's guidance at Kukës II camp in 1999

Petrit Halilaj on the stories that shape our lives

It was thanks to his recent conversations with Poli that Halilaj decided to revisit his 38 early drawings for Tate St Ives. He asked Poli to scan the drawings (he still prefers that the psychologist keeps them), and they began to discuss them one by one. Five or six drawings in, 'I started to be fascinated by how reality and fiction were already mixed in my mind [at the time], and I was asking questions about what I could do with such stories that shape your life, and how impossible it is to keep them frozen, because they still shape you', explains the artist.

'I thought it would be amazing to have the chance to elaborate on the idea of traumatic events talking to your biggest hopes and dreams, how the two can sustain each other.'

He was also inspired by the work that Poli had been doing with theatre techniques – acting as a way to process trauma. From there came the idea of creating an immersive environment in Tate St Ives' largest gallery (measuring 26m x 16m x 7m), like a gigantic theatre set, formed from magnified fragments of the drawings suspended from the ceiling. Each fragment, an outsized piece of felt printed on one side and offering only a silhouette on the other, relates to either war or fantasy, and Halilaj is configuring them so that viewers, on entering the gallery, witness a happy, utopian scene featuring birds in vivid colours, unaware of the horrors that await. 'The further you go in, the more the story of the war will unfold, and when you reach the other side and turn around, the impression is that of terror.'

Visitors exit the gallery from the same door they came in, so they have to traverse Halilaj's environment from this wartime perspective. As they leave, should they choose to look back, they will once again encounter the original

landscape, but in all likelihood they will struggle to shake off the visions of devastation, says the artist – 'I'm interested in this idea that you will never see only the birds again. In your memory, it will always be the other side.'



Halilaj in his Berlin studio in spring 2021, with one of the giant fragments that will feature in his Tate St Ives exhibition. Photography: Alfredo Ramos Fernández

Titled *Very volcanic over this green feather*, the work encourages empathy with the victims of war, but also articulates a certain optimism: while most of the 90 or so fragments hover mid-air, one is placed on the floor and printed on both sides. It's the child from the drawing that Halilaj had presented to Annan in 1999, and in the context of this installation it feels autobiographical. 'There's a magic to bringing together all these different events in your life, and building a new story with them somehow,' says Halilaj, who considers himself one of the lucky ones, to not only have survived the war but also found a better life afterwards.

To contextualise the installation, Halilaj is dedicating an adjoining gallery space to additional information about the war, and the political and social contexts that continue to impact Kosovar society and diaspora. Among the exhibits will be a replica of his grandfather's diary, which sees recollections of normal life brutally interrupted by vignettes of war, and a photo album from Poli, alongside Annan's notes on the Kosovo war and footage of his visit to Albania, to contrast local and international perspectives.

'I share the story of presenting my drawing to Kofi Annan. He asked me to give it to him, so he could bring it to the UN for a meeting on Kosovo the next week, and all the nations would see it. Today, I understand what he was saying. But at the time, I just remember my father saying that the war would have stopped earlier if Annan had wanted. So I didn't give it to him,' recalls the artist.



Detail of Halilaj's Berlin studio, featuring scans from the artist's childhood drawings with elements of devastation and escapism. *Photography: Angela B Suarez*

Trauma, hope and joy

Halilaj's exhibition has been curated by Anne Barlow, director of Tate St Ives, who says she is 'captivated by the power and presence of what he does. [This] significant new work is perhaps his most personal reflection on the trauma of the Kosovo war, shaped through the perspective of time. It draws on his own experiences of the war, but it also acts as a touchpoint for the memories and experiences of others, and this in turn opens up important conversations for all of us about the unique perspectives that art can bring to issues like conflict, displacement and oppression.'

Halilaj admits that he embarked on this exhibition to move past his own traumas. 'Actually, you learn that trauma will always be in life,' he reflects. 'It's just how we use it, and what we do with it that can change, that's in our hands.'

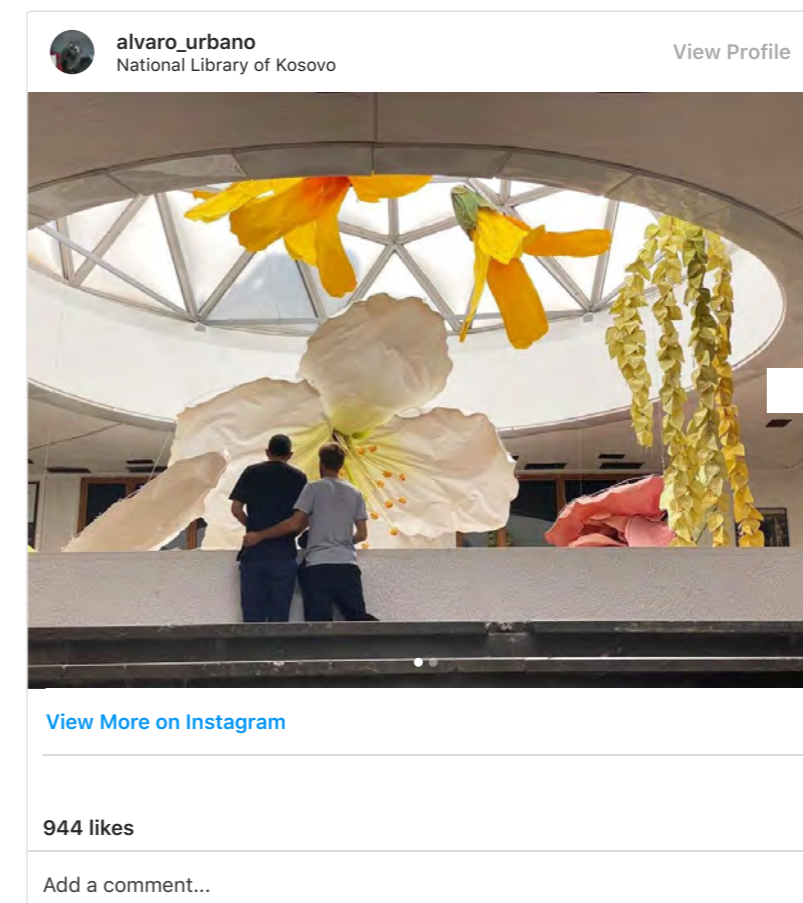
**'It's not in our hands to take trauma out of our lives.
It's what makes us who we are.'**



*To a raven and hurricanes that from unknown places bring back smells of humans in love, by Halilaj and his life partner Alvaro Urbano at Madrid's Palacio de Cristal in 2020. The artists created an installation of giant flowers, made from painted canvas stretched over steel frames, representing milestones in their relationship. *Photography: Imagen Subliminal, courtesy of the artist, ChertLüdde, Berlin, Kamel Mennour, London/Paris**

In a way, *Very volcanic over this green feather* dovetails with an installation that Halilaj and his life partner, fellow artist Alvaro Urbano, created for Madrid's Palacio de Cristal last year. Transforming the glasshouse into a giant bird's nest, they installed a series of enlarged flowers (made from painted canvas stretched over a steel framework) that represent milestones in their relationship. The installation not only stood as a dedication to queer love, but also expressed an aspect of Halilaj's identity that he once thought incompatible with his Kosovan heritage – 'We don't have Pasolini, we don't have Almodóvar', he quips in reference to his country's lack of prominent queer figures.

Happily, the tides seem to be changing; this July, he and Urbano were invited to present the flowers under the cupola of the National Library of Kosovo, as part of the Autostrada Biennial and coinciding with the nation's fifth annual Pride Week. It felt like a homecoming, he tells me, a testament to the joys of living authentically and without fear, of sharing one's full self with the world. ✨



Urbano (left) and Halilaj under the cupola of the National Library of Kosovo in July 2021, with their giant flowers installed for the Autostrada Biennial, and coinciding with Kosovo Pride Week

INFORMATION

'Very volcanic over this green feather', 16 October 2021 - 16 January 2022, Tate St Ives, [tate.org.uk](https://www.tate.org.uk)

[INSTALLATIONS](#)

[FEATURES](#)

PETRIT HALILAJ Y ÁLVARO URBANO
EN SU ESTUDIO DE BERLÍN. LA
ESCULTURA DE MÁRMOL ES DE
URBANO. EL PÁJARO, DE HALILAJ.

ESTA ES LA HISTORIA DE LAS FLORES GIGANTES DEL PALACIO DE CRISTAL

Petrit Halilaj y Álvaro Urbano han capturado nuestra necesidad de mensajes de esperanza con las enormes flores, símbolo de su historia de amor, que han 'plantado' primero en Madrid y ahora en más capitales. Los artistas nos abren su estudio berlinés

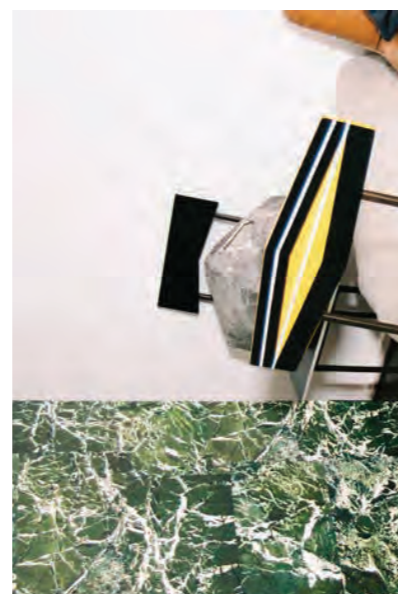
TEXTO Tom C. Avendaño

FOTOGRAFÍA Ángela Suárez





“Le dije a Petrit que si me pedía que me casara con él, lo hiciera bien. Llenó la casa de amapolas”, Urbano



ARRIBA, PETRIT HALILAJ CON LA MAQUETA DE SU INSTALACIÓN ESCULTÓRICA EN EL PALACIO DE CRISTAL DE MADRID.

ABAJO, ÁLVARO URBANO EN EL ESTUDIO QUE COMPARTE CON HALILAJ EN BERLÍN. SOBRE ESTAS LÍNEAS, UNA SILLA CREADA POR ÉL.

LAS FLORES GIGANTES DE LIENZO Y ACERO que desde julio se ven en el Palacio de Cristal de Madrid, e inevitablemente en las cuentas de Instagram de sus innumerables visitantes, son obra de Petrit Halilaj (Kostërrc, Kosovo, 1986). Tenían que servir de decoración para la gran performance que iba a ser To a raven and the hurricanes that from unknown places bring back smells of human in love: su boda con el también artista Álvaro Urbano (Madrid, 1983), su pareja desde hace diez años y que además colaboró en la fabricación de las flores. Ese plan se frustró, como se frustró todo, con el asalto de la covid-19. La exposición, en la que Halilaj había trabajado durante meses para el Reina Sofía, se quedó sin su pieza central y las flores se convirtieron en toda la historia.

El giro es que esas flores siempre tuvieron un gran valor narrativo. Está la Forsythia, la amarilla: recuerda aquellas que Urbano le regaló a Halilaj al mes de conocerle en Berlín, en 2010. “Es de las primeras en salir en la primavera alemana y de las últimas en desaparecer, el árbol entero se vuelve amarillo, es precioso”, explica Halilaj por teléfono desde su estudio en Berlín. Y apostilla Urbano desde la misma llamada: “Fue cuando me di cuenta de que estaba enamorado de él. Cogí una ramita y se la di”. En 2015, Urbano conoció a la madre de Halilaj. “Sabendo que a ella le encantan los jardines, le regaló dos semillas de palmera”, recuerda el kosovar. “En aquella época mi madre tenía dificultades para aceptarnos, pero las plantó y ahora son dos árboles que crecen en Kosovo”. La flor de esos árboles es la de mayor tamaño en la exposición, la que ocupa la capilla principal del Palacio. No muy lejos está la amapola, que debía simbolizar el final de aquel noviazgo. “Le había dicho a Petrit que si me pedía que me casara con él, lo hiciera bien. En 2018 llenó la casa de amapolas. Un millón de flores que había recogido con un amigo”, recuerda Urbano. Halilaj ilustra: “Las puse en el horno, en el retrete, en cualquier lugar imaginable de la casa”. Urbano dijo que sí, naturalmente, y empezaron a planificar esa boda que nunca sería.

“Es interesante hasta qué punto la covid ha cambiado el significado de estas flores”, razona Urbano. “Ya no simbolizan solo nuestras historias personales, sino también el acto de dar y recibir, de cuidar. Durante el confinamiento, el Real Jardín Botánico de Madrid estuvo cerrado y los jardineros recogieron todas sus flores y las llevaron a los hospitales de la ciudad. Es ese tipo de gesto: llevarle el jardín a alguien. Las flores se convierten en satélites, te hablan. También las vemos como entidades sexuales, algo con su componente erótico: la flor está para atraer insectos, con sus formas y colores, con sus texturas. Eso también es importante”.

Urbano y Halilaj tienen trayectorias artísticas independientes el uno del otro. De hecho, no muy lejos de la exposición de Petrit en el Retiro, está la de Álvaro en La Casa Encendida. Se inauguró en febrero y ambas apenas tendrían

que haber coincidido en el tiempo, pero el segundo giro de guion de esta historia es que, con el parón que ha provocado el coronavirus, van a convivir mucho más de lo previsto (hasta febrero de 2021 la de Urbano, hasta marzo la de Halilaj). Son dos de las exposiciones más excitantes que se han visto este año en Madrid y vienen no solo de la misma galería, Travesía Cuatro, sino de dos artistas que comparten estudio, ambiciones y vida.

En El despertar, Urbano reanima un edificio muerto, el Pabellón de los Hexágonos de la Casa de Campo. Proyectado por José Antonio Corrales y Ramón Vázquez Molezún, cuando se presentó en la Expo de Bruselas de 1958, se consideró una pieza clave de la nueva arquitectura española y se le entregó la Medalla de Oro, por encima incluso del Atomium belga de André y Jean Polak. Hoy, sin embargo, el pabellón está abandonado. Urbano recrea ese abandono en una sala iluminada por farolas en forma de hexágono, en la que la performance la hace el propio edificio: el espectador lo contempla mutar según lo observa de un ángulo u otro, como se mira una película, una de atmósfera kubrickiana. El proyecto tiene incluso banda sonora, del compositor Juan Carlos Blancas, la cual se editará en vinilo próximamente. La exposición se trasladará al Storefront for Art and Architecture de Nueva York, dirigido por el mexicano José Esparza, quien ha actuado de comisario desde el principio.

Halilaj, que hoy vive entre Alemania, Kosovo e Italia, parecía destinado a una carrera artística desde joven. A finales de los noventa, un matrimonio italiano lo vio dibujar en un campo de refugiados de la guerra de los Balcanes, y se ofreció a acogerle en su casa, en Bozzolo, Lombardía, para que pudiese estudiar. A finales de la década pasada, visitó Berlín durante unos días. “Allí vi que podía hacer mi vida, salir del armario como homosexual, y dedicarme a lo que me dedico”, recuerda. Urbano también ha desarrollado su vida en varias ciudades: a los 22 años se mudó de Madrid, donde estudió arquitectura de interiores en la Universidad Politéc-



EL ESTUDIO ESTÁ EN BRITZ, UNA PUJANTE ZONA AL SUR DE BERLÍN.

“Como idea de ver las cosas desde un punto de vista abierto y sin fronteras, sí, somos artistas ‘queer”, Halilaj

DCHA., SILLA DE URBANO Y
PINTURA DE TYRA TINGLEFF.
ABAJO, SOFÁ SALCHICHA, DE
NATALIE P. KOERNER.

EN LA PÁGINA SIGUIENTE,
ÁLVARO URBANO Y PETRIT
HALILAJ EN LA PUERTA DEL
ESTUDIO.



nica, a Nueva York, donde hizo performances en la calle. Allí, se decidió por una carrera artística. Se matriculó en la Universität der Künste de Berlín y en esa ciudad conoció a Halilaj. Todavía viven en ella.

De vez en cuando trabajan juntos. “Lo hacemos una vez al año, no más: no queremos que acabe siendo problemático”, bromea Urbano. En 2014 publicaron Kushtetuta, una revista de temática queer, en Kosovo: “La primera revista gay de los Balcanes”, según el artista. Hace cuatro años, durante una residencia en el centro Mak de Los Ángeles, diseñaron unos trajes de mapache con los que hacían performances: recuerdan a los animales que se ven hoy en El despertar. Ambos son profesores de la École des Beaux Arts de París. Han colaborado en otra flor para Berghain, el club musical berlinés que ahora, cerrado, acoge obras creadas



durante el semiconfinamiento de Berlín. Y una más de sus últimas creaciones también se puede considerar conjunta. Para la Biennale Ghardëina, que comisaría Adam Budak, del Palacio Kinsky de Praga, Petrit ha creado una caseta para pájaros. “Pero en cuanto te acercas a ella, la oyes roncar, un ronquido profundo de la noche. Una noche grabé a Álvaro en secreto y lo usé”, explica Halilaj. La obra sigue los principios rectores de las demás: “Es un gesto muy doméstico de dar y cuidar, que se convierte en otra cosa, como las flores”.

Precisamente las flores, otras cuatro nuevas que acaban de crear mano a mano, aparecerán en su nuevo proyecto, uno para la Quadriennale de Roma que comisarán Sarah Cosulich y Stefano Collicelli Cagol. “Toda la exposición va sobre escenas que necesitan su sitio en la sociedad pero no lo tienen necesariamente, como el deseo. En nuestro caso, el deseo queer”, explica Petrit. Pero alertan que esa etiqueta, queer, hay que usarla con cuidado. “Como idea de ver las cosas desde un punto de vista abierto y sin fronteras, sí, somos artistas queer. Pero no queremos estar vinculados a una sexualidad”, afirma. “Y esa es la gracia del arte. Cuando Álvaro le dio aquellas semillas a mi madre, muestra de un amor homosexual, ella lo vio como el gesto de un amor no solo homosexual y no solo entre nosotros. Los árboles que han salido de ellas no son árboles queer. La magia del arte es que cuando te expresas tú, de alguna manera acabas conectando con más gente”. *



MADRID

A Giant Nest

PETRIT HALILAJ
"TO A RAVEN AND HURRICANES THAT FROM UNKNOWN PLACES BRING BACK SMELLS OF HUMANS IN LOVE".
PALACIO DE CRISTAL
17 JULY 2020 – 28 FEB 2021

The first exhibition since the re-opening of Madrid's cultural calendar was organised by the Museo Reina Sofía and is an invitation by Petrit Halilaj (*1986) for humans and non-humans alike to feel at home inside a "giant nest" surrounded by flowers. Juan José Santos caught up with the artist to talk about the show.

Juan José Santos: Did you decide from the outset on the scaled variations of the flowers and the dialogue between exterior and interior?

Petrit Halilaj: This exhibition is the result of a deep engagement with the space, and every element has been created in close relation with the architecture and the historical context of Palacio de Cristal. The flowers were conceived and realised together with my life-partner, the artist Alvaro Urbano; their scale was adapted according to the shape of each flower, how it interacted with other elements of the exhibition and with the space itself. Palacio de Cristal is almost entirely made out of glass, and one quickly realises how the outside becomes so present inside the space. I wanted to emphasise this continuity – both formally and metaphorically. I decided to open the windows and place feeding areas inside to invite birds, insects, and other living beings into the space, those inhabiting or just transiting through Retiro Park. This simple gesture carries a political message that I see in strong connection with the history of Palacio de Cristal: I wanted to create an environment that

attempts to overcome the impossibility that many people face daily when their identity and subjectivity is neglected, dismissed, or even brutally repressed by family members, friends, society, or politics.

JJS Would you say that it is an exhibition made for the birds and insects that could inhabit it, and that the humans are the visitors to this gigantic nest?

PH This is a very interesting question and relates so much with many thoughts I am having lately regarding the structures we live in and those we humans have built. My desire was to welcome all living beings into the space, whether human or non-human. By questioning the scale it also implicitly questions species as seen from an anthropocentric perspective (with humans at the top of the pyramid). One of the things I love about bowerbirds is their "extended phenotype" (a concept introduced by Richard Dawkins in 1982) – the complex structures that they build and the elaborated rituals or choreographies that they create to attract a mate, are an effect of their genes on the environment. The creative behaviour of these birds seems to be rooted in their evolutionary process, where they are themselves not extravagantly beautiful but they build something aesthetically pleasing that is attractive to their species. I am fascinated by the fact that they act on the space in a way that is comparable to what artists do, and that this creative behaviour seems to be following an evolutionary process – with some aesthetic results being more successful than others, ensuring the successful reproduction of the bird.

JJS Your biography plays a great role in your work, to the point that you want to end the exhibition with a performance that is the wedding with your partner. Do you fear that

the biographical aspect could overshadow the viewer's interpretation, or that the opposite could happen: that the viewer will not connect what they see with your own personal story?

PH The exhibition is conceived as a stage for encounters to take place, as the bowerbird nest suggests, and for different forms of care and kinship to flourish. Every living creature transiting through or inhabiting Retiro Park is invited to do this while experiencing the space. The wedding ceremony is one of these encounters. We are also working on a public programme that departs from the need to deepen the reflection on the current political situation of Kosovo, where I come from. My decision to celebrate my marriage to Alvaro at Palacio de Cristal is partly driven by the fact that Spain recognises same-sex marriage but it does not recognise Kosovo, and partly by the fact that Alvaro comes from Madrid. So in a way, I am celebrating beyond this impossibility that is rooted in my personal experience, but that is also the condition that many of us experience today, for different reasons, belonging to marginalised communities that struggle daily against many forms of direct or subtle repression. The exhibition brings us together in a dreamy environment despite the reality of this situation.

JJS Your exhibition has been described as "instagrammable", and indeed, when I went to see it, everyone was posing in front of the flowers. Are you worried that it will only serve as a background image, or is that something that pleases you?

PH I am actually pleased that visitors are attracted by the flowers, as flowers have a similar function in nature: they attract birds, insects, butterflies, and other animals that are fundamental for pollination,

MADRID



Photo: ImagenSubliminal (Miguel de Guzmán and Rocío Romero)

View of "To a raven and hurricanes that from unknown places bring back smells"

reproduction, survival of the species and, by extension, for the balance of our ecosystems. From the feedback from people visiting the show and the articles I have read, it seems to me that people have been looking for the meaning of these works, and I believe that the exhibition has not been misunderstood. The issues of identity, belonging, care, and love that the show deals with have been generally felt and expressed. Also, I realised that I had a great responsibility opening an exhibition after this long time of isolation and disconnection. I am not worried that people share what they saw: every gesture we do in these difficult times to feel closer and more connected with others is of great importance to me.

JJS The connection established between your show and the neighbouring Mario Merz retrospective

in the Palacio de Velázquez is interesting. However, I find the relationship with *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch, also nearby in the Museo del Prado, more convincing. The items you have in the Palacio de Cristal are symbolic, and those open flowers are quite erotic – or am I getting carried away by the summer heat?

PH The flowers have really something erotic to them, as do actual living flowers, which are the plant's reproductive organs and serve precisely this function of attracting insects for pollination. During my first trip to Madrid in 2012, I went on the same day both to Palacio de Cristal and to the Prado. I was extremely impressed by Bosch's paintings, but I agree that the connection is far-fetched. The relationship between my work and Mario Merz's, however, is very important to me, and I

am honoured that my exhibition happens in conjunction with his retrospective. As in many projects I do, the process of installing shows me things I hadn't thought of before, and the exhibition really comes together only in the space, like a micro world that eventually starts to breathe all together. While I was installing at Palacio de Cristal I decided to leave all the glass that was removed from the structure inside, in order to put the windows on display instead of hiding them, as I had initially thought. These materials have been placed behind the giant bird legs, carried by branches and by soft silicon windows. They could suggest a nest that is still to be made, materials for Merz still to create a sculpture ... Or for birds to come and continue the work I started by nesting inside the palace. ✓



Exposición de Petrit Halilaj, en el Palacio de Cristal del parque del Retiro, en Madrid. / VÍCTOR SAINZ

El Reina Sofía inaugura en el Palacio de Cristal una exposición de Petrit Halilaj, la primera tras el confinamiento

El vergel interior de un artista

SILVIA HERNANDO. Madrid En abstracto, ciertas cuestiones resultan insignificantes en el gran contexto del mundo y, sin embargo, a título individual pueden convertirse en colosales dilemas. Un diminuto pájaro que se cuelga por las ventanas del Palacio de Cristal del Retiro madrileño es apenas perceptible unos segundos por el raballo del ojo, pero dentro de ese espacio arquitectónico, las enormes patas de ave que ha colocado el artista Petrit Halilaj (Kostërrc, Skenderaj, República de Kosovo, 1986) ocupan todo el campo de visión desde el suelo hasta el techo. Con esa ruptura de las escalas de sus obras en la exposición *A un cuervo y los huracanes que, desde lugares desconocidos, traen de vuelta olores de humanos enamorados* (hasta el 28 de febrero de 2021), el creador kosovar cuestiona la percepción en el sentido físico y, a partir de ahí, en el vasto terreno de lo metafórico.

Desde su prisma personal, se trata de relacionar nociones sobre la identidad y la libertad que, depende de quién las mire, pueden acabar en enormes traumas o en simples anécdotas. "Están los conceptos de que mi familia no acepte mi forma de amar pero la sociedad en un sentido más amplio sí; o que en Kosovo tampoco se acepten mis sentimientos pero sí en España, que sin embargo no reconoce a Kosovo como país", explica el autor, que con ayuda de su pareja, el artista español Álvaro Urbano, ha dado forma a unas enormes flores y ramas de árboles que, junto a personajes como su pájaro ficticio y los reales que sobrevuelan el edificio, componen las claves de la propuesta, dedicada, por encima de todo, "al

Con la ruptura de escalas, el creador cuestiona la noción de la percepción

El kosovar agradece el gesto con su país, cuya independencia no reconoce España

amor". Tanto que estaba previsto incluir una *performance* representando la unión matrimonial entre Halilaj y Urbano, un proyecto que podría retomarse antes de febrero si las condiciones lo permiten. Organizada por el Reina Sofía se trata de la primera exposición dedicada a Halilaj en España y la primera del museo que se inaugura tras el confinamiento. "Se empezó a montar cuando se declaró el estado de alarma, y cuando vine a verla los pájaros ya había empezado a usar las ramas para habitarlas", contó en la presentación el director del centro, Manuel Borja-Villel, que subrayó las similitudes que existen entre esta muestra y la del artista *povera* Mario Merz, en el cercano Palacio de Velázquez. "Tienen interés por las ramas, lo natural, los animales. Pero hay diferencias por el cambio de generación: mientras Merz construye desde una perspectiva humana, Halilaj no concibe la biosfera como algo separado".

De la conexión inextricable con la naturaleza surge el planteamiento de, por primera vez, dejar abiertas las ventanas del Palacio

de Cristal para que se cuelen los pájaros, o permitir que las arañas vayan apoderándose con sus telas de las ramas que pueblan el edificio. "Frente a la idea neoliberal del ser humano emprendedor y no empático, tenía sentido después de la pandemia que las instituciones se acercaran más a las nociones del cuidado y los afectos", apuntó el director del Reina Sofía, del que Halilaj quiso reconocer su "valentía" por fortalecer las relaciones culturales con Kosovo, que solo cinco países de la Unión Europea no reconocen como Estado independiente, entre ellos España. "Yo estoy muy conectado a este país por amor, pero Kosovo es una realidad muy pequeña para España, apenas se sabe nada".

El paseo por el vergel interior de Halilaj tiene la capacidad de evocar sensaciones completamente personales habiendo sido construido sobre los cimientos de la intimidad autobiográfica del artista. En medio de la vegetación artificial de la muestra, metida en una caja transparente rodeada de vegetación natural, un personaje con cuerpo de hombre y cabeza de cuervo blanco interrumpe la continuidad del recorrido colocado en una pose hierática, con un leño entre las manos. Cuando el abuelo de Halilaj, en plena faena en el campo, se enteró de que iba a tener un hijo, sostenía un tronco que abrazó como demostración de unos sentimientos que no podía declarar de otro modo sin poner en duda su virilidad, una de las claves del dolor que expresa el artista. "El amor no reconocido por mi familia es el punto de partida", explicó. "Pero yo he querido transformar eso en una celebración del amor y de vida".



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ARTE

Las flores gigantes (e 'instagrameables') de Petrit Halilaj llegan al Palacio de Cristal de Madrid

POR ALBERTO SISI SÁNCHEZ

16 DE JULIO DE 2020

Las piezas de gran formato del artista kosovar se podrán ver en la primera exposición de la nueva normalidad de este espacio del Museo Reina Sofía de la capital

Grandes flores, pájaros y elementos naturales gigantes son los habitantes del cosmos que el artista kosovar **Petrit Halilaj** ha ideado para la **primera gran exposición** de arte contemporáneo de la nueva normalidad en Madrid. En el **Palacio de Cristal del parque del Retiro**, esta exhibición estará abierta al público hasta el próximo 28 de febrero y lleva por título *A un cuervo y los huracanes que, desde lugares desconocidos, traen de vuelta olores de humanos enamorados*. Tras este larguísimo nombre se esconde una reflexión que, a pesar de su apariencia de escenario de un cuento de hadas, estudia las ideas de hogar, nación, identidad cultural y amor.

Tras dos años de investigaciones y documentación, **Halilaj** consiguió redondear una exposición diseñada expresamente para el espacio que la alberga. El artista se enamoró con uno de los enclaves más especiales de la ciudad de Madrid por lo que quiso idear un trabajo que interactuara con el entorno. **Varias ventanas se han abierto y se han instalado estructuras y comederos que atraigan a las aves y la fauna que habita el parque**, lo que convertirá a esta exhibición en un ser vivo que mute como lo hará el Retiro en los meses que están por llegar.



Parte de la exposición de Petrit Halilaj

© Miguel de Guzmán y Rocío Romero / Museo Reina Sofía

Amapolas, claveles o lirios son algunas de las flores enormes que más llaman la atención de la exposición. Son algunas de las que han marcado la relación del artista con su pareja, el también artista Álvaro Urbano, y buscan reflejar el significado especial que tienen en gran parte de su vida, junto a su compañero y sus familiares. **“He querido tratar el Palacio de Cristal como un lugar de celebración del amor”**, reconoce Petrit en las declaraciones explicativas de este ambicioso proyecto.

Here to remind you es otra de las obras que se pueden apreciar en la visita. Se trata de dos grandes patas de pájaro que se entrelazan y simulan dos personalidades que se enlazan en una sola. *History of a Hug*, formada por una escultura antropomórfica con cabeza de cuervo blanco que sujeta fuertemente un tronco, es otra de las instalaciones que se puede encontrar en *A un cuervo y los huracanes que, desde lugares desconocidos, traen de vuelta olores de humanos enamorados* y refleja una experiencia personal del artista con su propio abuelo.



Vista exterior de la exposición

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La apertura de las ventanas, la libertad que podrá experimentar la fauna del parque, los espacios abiertos y la falta de barreras componen una metáfora política que el artista ha querido expresar con esta exposición. A día de hoy, Kosovo tan solo es reconocido como un país independiente por 90 de las 193 que forman parte de Naciones Unidas. “Para mí, estar aquí en España es un hecho muy importante. Kosovo está muy aislado, no tenemos visados, y como sucede con otros muchos países, España no nos reconoce como estado. **Pero, por otro lado, aquí tengo la libertad personal que no encuentro en mi país.** Ser una persona homosexual supone que mi amor no es plenamente reconocido ni por mi familia ni por la mayoría de la sociedad kosovar, y eso es algo también muy complicado para mí”, reconoce **Petrit Halilaj.**

Culturas | Arte

ÚLTIMA HORA En directo: la evolución de la pandemia en Asturias

Un canto de esperanza en el centro del parque

El Museo Reina Sofía inaugura una exposición del artista kosovar Petrit Halilaj en el Palacio de Cristal del Retiro



Una de las obras de Petrit Halilaj en el Palacio de Cristal del Retiro. / MIGUEL DE GUZMÁN / MUSEO REINA SOFÍA

JULIÁN ALÍA
Madrid



Viernes, 17 julio 2020, 00:04

La primera obra que se exhibe en el Reina Sofía tras la pandemia tiene un título tan evocador como largo. 'A un cuervo y los huracanes que, desde lugares desconocidos, traen de vuelta olores de humanos enamorados' había comenzado a montarse antes del estado de alarma, y

hasta hoy no había podido ver la luz la primera muestra individual que se le dedica al artista Petrit Halilaj (Kosovo, 1986) en España, que estará abierta hasta 28 de febrero del próximo año.

En la obra existen dos partes claramente diferenciables, asegura Manuel Borja-Villel, director del Museo Reina Sofía. Una 'pre-covid' y otra 'post-covid'. La primera trata sobre su biografía y su pasado, como la pieza 'History of a Hug' (Historia de un abrazo, 2020) que reproduce la figura de un cuervo blanco antropomorfo que sostiene un trozo de madera, y que representa a su abuelo. El motivo no es otro que cuando éste supo que su esposa había tenido su primer hijo, y como mostrar los sentimientos era entendido como una falta de virilidad en su entorno, cogió un leño, su herramienta de trabajo, y lo apretó con todas sus fuerzas.

Además, ese punto de represión de los sentimientos se mezcla con el hecho de que el cuervo sea blanco, en referencia a la diversidad, la lucha y la resistencia al cambio. Como también ha experimentado el artista, para ser aceptado. **«Para mí, estar aquí en España es un hecho muy importante. Kosovo está muy aislado,** no tenemos visados y, como sucede con otros muchos países, España no nos reconoce como Estado. Pero, por otro lado, aquí tengo la libertad personal que no encuentro en mi país. Ser una persona homosexual supone que mi amor no es plenamente reconocido ni por mi familia ni por la mayoría de la sociedad kosovar, y eso es algo también muy complicado para mí», dice Halilaj, que ha trabajado durante dos años en la exposición. Con el Palacio de Cristal del parque del Retiro, en Madrid, como escenario, el artista quiso compenetrar su propia obra con la historia del recinto, que abrió sus puertas por primera vez en 1887, y que en su origen fue un invernadero que albergó una gran muestra de plantas exóticas para la Exposición General de Filipinas.

Por ello ha incorporado grandes flores, como amapola, clavel y lirio, entre otras, y pidió ayuda a su pareja, el artista Álvaro Urbano. Entre ambos, en un marco de acero y lienzo pintado, han llevado a cabo las flores, que decoran el lugar a diferentes alturas y lo convierten en «un lugar de celebración del amor». «Es fascinante cómo puedes relacionar un lugar a través de la persona a la que quieres», comenta Halilaj, que asegura que se puede acabar «queriendo el lugar casi tanto como a la persona».

Y ahí cobra importancia otra pieza, inspirada en el rito de apareamiento de los 'bowerbirds' ('ptilonorrínquidos', en lenguaje científico), a los que comúnmente se les relaciona con las aves del paraíso. Estos animales construyen unas estructuras ('bowers'), que son una especie de cenadores decorados con objetos coloridos para atraer a la pareja, y así tener un refugio en el que sentirse seguros y poder formar una familia. Sin embargo, pese a estar concebidos como un espacio íntimo, transforman el lugar en uno público, tal y como le gusta a Halilaj, que ve «el Palacio de Cristal como una plaza abierta donde la gente está invitada a transitar libremente».

Todo el trabajo del autor gira en torno a la metáfora de la libertad, ya que los pájaros, debido a su capacidad para volar, no entienden de barreras. En este punto nace la parte 'posCovid', en la defensa de que «la naturaleza y la biosferano tiene sentido si se entiende como algo separado de lo humano», en palabras del director del Reina Sofía.

Sobrevuelos

Arropado por el manto de la exposición, **el Palacio de Cristal se ha convertido en espacio de convivencia y deleite del hombre**, y también de los animales. Hasta el punto de que incluso están abiertas algunas ventanas, por primera vez, para que puedan entrar las aves y puedan hacer uso de los comederos que se han instalado en su interior.

Halilaj va un poco más allá y ha incorporado un guiño claro a la situación actual que se vive por culpa de la crisis sanitaria del coronavirus. La pieza 'Here To Remind You' ('Aquí, para recordarte', 2020) consiste en dos grandes patas de pájaro que van desde el suelo hasta el techo del interior del recinto. Ambas se tocan ligeramente a la altura de una de sus uñas, como un elemento de acercamiento en un momento en el que no se nos está permitido el acercamiento. Manuel Borja-Villel recuerda que «medio en broma, medio en serio» le pidió al artista que hiciera la obra de su vida. «Lo que no sabíamos es que iba a ser una pieza muy importante para nuestra propia biografía después de la covid-19», asevera ahora.

Por su parte, **Petrit Halilaj explica que «la exposición pretende afirmar y enfatizar nuestro deseo de libertad, reconocimiento y amor**, y la esperanza de que la exclusión será una palabra que no tendrá ya significado en el futuro». Quizá por eso, a la hora de dar las gracias por poder al fin exhibirlo al público, se acordó de «los pájaros que viven en el palacio, en el Retiro, e incluso los que migran y lo sobrevuelan», aunque sea durante unos leves instantes.

TEMAS España



di Vincenzo Latronico



La biografia personale e collettiva è al centro dell'opera di Petrit Halilaj, come un corpo celeste oscuro, invisibile e al tempo stesso indagabile in ogni dettaglio per l'attrazione gravitazionale che esercita sui suoi satelliti. Halilaj, nato in Kosovo nel 1986, aveva poco più di dieci anni quando la guerra del Kosovo (1996-1999) lo ha costretto in un campo di rifugiati in Albania. Lì ha sviluppato precocemente il suo talento artistico che gli ha permesso di essere ospitato in Italia e di studiare arti visive all'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera a Milano. Intorno a questa esperienza – che ha causato un senso di perdita e di sdoppiamento, accompagnato dallo sforzo di ricostruire un luogo lontano con la memoria e, quando non basta, con l'invenzione e con l'utopia – Halilaj ha realizzato un corpus di opere sorprendentemente coerente per temi, per impostazione formale e per il modo in cui si rapportano a questo nucleo biografico. In apparenza è un modo giocoso e sognante, ottimista. In questo caso l'apparenza inganna.

C'era già tutto verso la metà degli anni 2000, quando Halilaj studiava in Accademia. A quell'epoca risale un'opera intitolata *Chi mi romperà adesso i coglioni?*, un lavoro studentesco in seguito sparito dai cataloghi e dai profili biografici (ne conserva traccia un vecchio portfolio archiviato a Viafarini DOCVA, Milano). Era un mappamondo da cui l'artista aveva asportato la sagoma del Kosovo, all'epoca non riconosciuto come stato indipendente, incollandola nel mezzo dell'oceano. Da una parte, quest'opera manifestava il desiderio di pace e di isolamento di un paese, il Kosovo, reduce da vent'anni di guerre – spostato nell'oceano come per allontanarlo dal conflitto. Secondo questa lettura, gli interlocutori a cui si rivolgeva il titolo sarebbero i vicini guerrafondai e belligeranti. Ma è possibile un'altra lettura: essere un kosovaro in Italia – essere un giovane artista proveniente da un paese in guerra – significava dover necessariamente identificarsi con questa storia: guardare la propria identità riassunta in una tragedia, avere a che fare con un pubblico che si aspetta un certo tipo di discorso. Da questo punto di vista, spostare il Kosovo sulla mappa potrebbe essere un manifesto programmatico. Un modo per dire: voglio parlare di questo, perché è il mio paese; ma voglio parlarne in termini dislocati, trasfigurati, fantastici.

È rivelatorio considerare questo approccio in contrasto con quello di un artista come Adrian Paci – albanese, di una generazione più anziana di Halilaj, emigrato nello stesso periodo sempre a Milano. *Believe me. I am an artist* (2000), è il video di un interrogatorio di polizia. Paci in quel momento stava lavorando a una serie di opere in cui disegnava dei timbri doganali sulla pelle delle sue figlie. I lavori riguardavano il senso di spaesamento, la vita al di là di una frontiera che non si riesce mai a lasciarsi del tutto alle spalle; le aveva fotografate, ed era stato segnalato alle autorità come potenziale pedofilo. Nel video si disciupa di fronte a un poliziotto; per farlo gli deve spiegare cos'è l'arte contemporanea, cosa significa essere un artista albanese residente in Italia e così via, restituendo una scena tra l'umoristico e l'agghiacciante. In quest'opera, come in molte altre dello stesso periodo, Paci racconta memorabilmente

– in modo toccante, poetico, scioccante – un'esperienza al contempo personale e storica. Parla della sua identità, di quella del suo paese e di quella dell'Italia in cui si è rifugiato. Pochi anni dopo Halilaj parte da premesse simili per ribaltarle completamente: il mappamondo sembra dire di non voler sottomettersi alle aspettative di un'opera identitaria, vuole inventare. Dal titolo e dalla giocosità appare evidente che quella è un'opera giovanile, e forse è per questo che non l'ha poi voluta mostrare. Eppure era già tutto lì: lo sdoppiamento geografico, il desiderio di parlare di un luogo, ma anche di inventarlo. Se si fosse cercato il Kosovo su quel mappamondo, sarebbe stato possibile identificarne i confini senza alcuno sforzo. Ma al loro interno vi era una forma cava.

Una forma cava è anche ciò che Halilaj ha esposto alla Biennale di Berlino del 2010, la sua prima grande mostra internazionale. Nello spazio principale del KW Institute for Contemporary Art si diramava una struttura vagamente geometrica di assi di legno grezzo e rinforzi metallici, a formare il profilo di un solido complesso composto di cubi, parallelepipedi, riquadri. Osservando con attenzione vi si potevano indovinare delle stanze e dei corridoi, una cantina fra le fondamenta. Intorno alla base era del fieno, e un recinto metallico malmesso fra cui scorrazzavano delle galline. Quella in mostra era la cassaforma (o una sua replica) con cui la famiglia di Halilaj aveva ricostruito la casa in Kosovo in cui era cresciuto, distrutta durante la guerra. Aveva la stessa pianta dell'originale, ma ingrandita. La presenza delle galline (animali che ricorrono nell'opera di Halilaj) poteva tanto alludere alla domesticità quanto significare un ironico distacco dal rigore algido degli spazi d'arte, ma nel complesso pareva un tentativo di ancorare alla realtà rurale, abitata, la casa ricostruita nel ricordo che era esposta al KW. Anche in questo caso l'opera riguardava il senso di nostalgia e di perdita: rappresentava il tentativo di ricreare qualcosa che il tempo e la storia hanno cancellato, usando l'ingrandimento per compensare gli anni passati, e perché, nella memoria, i luoghi amati da bambino sono sempre più grandi. Già, eppure non era una casa: era un profilo, una forma cava. Se questo lavoro parlava di memoria, lo faceva sottolineando la natura fallace, impossibile. L'atto di recuperare ciò che si è perso non fa che sottolineare che un vuoto resta incolmabile. S'intitolava *The places I'm looking for, my dear, are utopian places, they are boring and I don't know how to make them real* [I luoghi che io cerco, cara mia, sono luoghi utopici, sono luoghi noiosi e non so come farli diventare veri].

Un'opera di un anno dopo, *Kostërrc* (2011) – presentata in "Statement", Art Basel 2011 – sembra il contrario di un vuoto incolmabile: è uno stand fieristico interamente riempito da tonnellate di terra proveniente dal paese natale di Halilaj in Kosovo, Kostërrc. La simbologia della nostalgia è evidente – si tratta, *letteralmente*, di suolo natio trasportato nella cornice asettica di una fiera d'arte contemporanea. Scrivendo di quest'opera su *Frieze*, Pablo Larios, sensatamente, ha commentato parlando del lavoro di scavo della memoria, o delle stratificazioni di ossa e reperti che si annidano nel suolo di una regione caratterizzata da una storia lunga e recentemente sanguinosa. Lo strato d'erba in superficie, un esile sbaffo di verde

They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens, 2008.
Veduta della mostra "Art is my Playground" presso
Tershanë, Istanbul, 2008. Fotografia di Alexis Zavialoff.
Courtesy l'artista e ChertLüdde, Berlino.

chiaro sopra la montagna umida e scura, è stato considerato un simbolo di speranza, forse un alter ego dell'artista. L'installazione, però, è accompagnata da una fotografia scattata nella campagna di Kostërre. Raffigura una veduta collinare – un albero, i campi sullo sfondo, i declivi idilliaci smorzati dai colori freddi, autunnali della natura. Al centro della collina è una buca sovradimensionata, profonda, scavata di fresco. È la cavità lasciata dalla terra estratta: l'origine dell'opera, il vuoto che ha reso possibile il pieno in mostra ad Art Basel. Se la montagna di terra esposta in fiera parla di forza e di speranza, di memoria, la foto sembra ricordare il costo personale e collettivo di questo processo. La buca sembra una fossa comune.

Lo stesso tema è al centro di *It is the first time dear that you have a human shape* (2012), una serie di grandi sculture di legno e metallo presentate a Kunsthalle St. Gallen il medesimo anno. Sono delle riproduzioni, ingrandite di cento volte, dei gioielli che la madre dell'artista aveva sepolto nel terreno della collina dove vivevano, prima di scappare. Sono realizzate con materiali poveri, consunti, molti dei quali provengono dalle rovine della casa di fronte alla quale erano stati interrati. Comunicano un senso di disgregazione e al contempo di tenerezza. Anche in questo caso l'opera presenta il tentativo di recuperare qualcosa che è stato disintegrato dalla collisione della storia personale con la storia collettiva. Anche in questo caso l'ingrandimento cerca di sopperire all'azione logorante del tempo, e non ci riesce: il risultato è povero e sghebbato, più simile a un'invenzione che all'oggetto esistente. È simile alla memoria di una persona cara sparita da tempo della quale ricordiamo sempre meno dettagli, che però diventano sempre più grandi nella memoria man mano che il resto scompare. Per questa serie – ma anche opere come *26 Objekte 'n Kumpir* (2009), una teca ricavata in un vasto nido di rami, ma anche il cubo di terra di *Kostërre* – il lavoro di Halilaj è stato avvicinato all'Arte povera. L'uso del metallo ricorda immediatamente Giovanni Anselmo; i rami e la terra fanno pensare a Luciano Fabro. La collana di scatole metalliche, gli orecchini giganti potrebbero essere considerati alla stregua dei giavellotti e delle canoe di Gilberto Zorio in quanto simboli di elementi astratti quali la femminilità, la madre, la perdita, la "terra" – evocata anche dalla scelta di materiali grezzi. Ma questa interpretazione sembra fuorviante. Se c'è qualcosa che caratterizza uniformemente il linguaggio di Halilaj è anzi il rifiuto sistematico dei simboli, dell'uso di una cosa concreta per riferirsi a una categoria astratta. Più che simboli, i suoi oggetti sono pronomi: si riferiscono a oggetti *specifici*, legati direttamente alla biografia dell'artista e, in modo più obliquo, alla storia del suo paese. Non cercano di costruire un discorso su delle categorie generali, ma semmai di rappresentare, poeticamente, il processo della memoria: che amplifica qualcosa di minuscolo, e al contempo lo sporca e lo rende fragile. Il punto d'arrivo è qualcosa che per certi versi somiglia moltissimo al punto di partenza, e per altri versi è drammaticamente, impossibilmente altro.

Negli ultimi anni, il lavoro di Halilaj si è concentrato sulla memoria storica della città di Runik, in cui è cresciuto, uno dei principali siti archeologici del Kosovo. La guerra, l'incuria e la dispersione hanno reso quel patrimonio in larga misura inaccessibile. Attraverso una serie di mostre ("Poisoned by men in need of some love" al WIELS di Vienna, "Ru" al New Museum di New York e SHKREPËTIMA a Fondazione Merz di Torino) Halilaj si è sforzato di farlo rivivere, ricostruendo alcuni reperti e integrandone altri con inserti di stoffa, pietra e metalli preziosi. *The city roofs were so near that even a sleepwalking cat could pass over Runik without ever touching the ground* (2017) è un video a due canali in cui vari abitanti del luogo raccontano come, negli anni, hanno continuato a scavare indipendentemente, per abitudine o per caso o per passione, trovando frammenti di manufatti neolitici o ossa di animali in una sorta di archeologia informale. L'emozione con



"RU". Veduta della mostra presso New Museum, New York, 2017-2018. Fotografia di Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum, New York.

cui ne parlano, la passione che trapela, per un istante fa quasi dimenticare che gli oggetti in questione sono probabilmente persi per sempre, o comunque inaccessibili. Al New Museum il video era accompagnato da una vasta popolazione di sculture simili a uccelli, appollaiati su trespoli o nascosti in una foresta di legnetti; si tratta, in realtà, dei calchi dei manufatti ritrovati, che l'artista ha trasformato con esili aggiunte dorate per farne dei volatili stilizzati dall'aspetto giocoso, fantastico. Il metallo, i colori, lo zoomorfismo possono essere visti come abbellimenti, come un atto di immaginazione quasi infantile; ma ciò che ha reso possibile quest'azione è il vuoto che tentano di colmare. Senza l'uno, non vi è l'altro.

Questo gioco reciproco fra presenza e assenza – lo stesso che separava il Kosovo incollato nell'oceano dalla sagoma vuota nei Balcani, la casa reale del passato da quella cava al KW di Berlino, il troppo-pieno di Basilea dalla fossa a Kostërre, – è la radice tematica dell'opera di Halilaj. Nell'approfondire questa ricerca, l'artista ha mantenuto un'estrema coerenza formale: i richiami all'immaginazione e all'utopia, la presenza ironica degli uccelli, la leggerezza dei disegni e delle forme, tutti elementi che sembrano partecipare alla stessa giososità, allo stesso gusto per il fiabesco. Superficialmente, l'opera di Halilaj è una celebrazione della fantasia e del potere creativo della memoria, incentrata su un luogo tutto sommato ristretto e definita dall'identità biografica dell'artista. Ma in profondità

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aleggia una coscienza molto più cupa, e molto più vasta di Rúník e della vita di Halilaj, che in ultima analisi non ne risulta argomento, ma occasione: la coscienza di tutto ciò che la fantasia nasconde e che la memoria non riesce a recuperare.

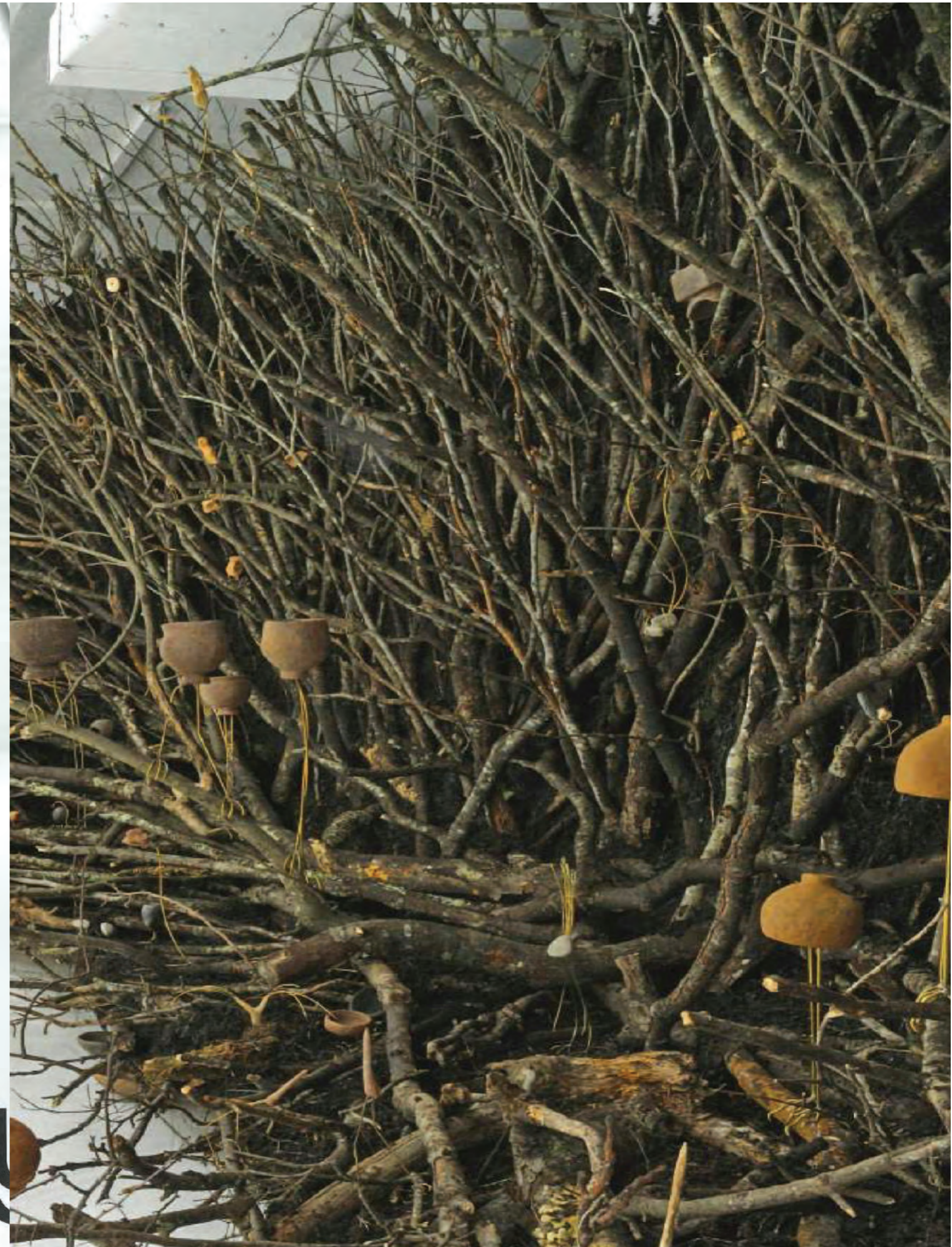
1 Pablo Larros, "In Focus: Petrit Halilaj",
Frieze no. 155, Maggio 2013

VINCENZO LATRONICO, scrittore e traduttore,
vive a Milano. I suoi romanzi sono pubblicati in Italia
da Bompiani; collabora con *Frieze* e *Internazionale*.

The places I'm looking for, my dear, are utopian places, they are boring and I don't know how to make them real, 2010. Veduta dell'installazione presso la 6a Biennale di Berlino per l'Arte Contemporanea, 2010. Dimensioni variabili. Fotografia di Uve Walter. Courtesy l'artista e ChertLüdde, Berlino.



PETRIT HALILAJ talks with *Hettie Judah* about butterflies, the politicization of artefacts and the lost cultural history of his Kosovar home city



Living Archaeology

CARPET MOTHS STITCHED FROM WOVEN RUGS, water vessels re-imagined as wading birds, woodland creatures sculpted from mud and wire: Petrit Halilaj's works are populated by a menagerie that suggests home and habitat are moveable, living entities. Little wonder: born in the former Yugoslavia in 1986, the artist fled Kosovo with his family when the Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001) broke out in his early childhood. The first artist to represent the Republic of Kosovo at the Venice Biennale, in 2013, Halilaj's work questions what is sacrificed in the construction of national identity. Who owns the past? What is no longer spoken of? Who is left out in the collective 'we'?

Recently, Halilaj has explored the hidden histories of his home city of Runik. Among them are modern myths relating to Neolithic artefacts that were excavated between 1968 and 1983, following the discovery of a site of major archaeological importance, and which still surface periodically. The findings were archived but work never resumed, inspiring the sculpture and film installation *RU* (2017), commissioned for the New Museum in New York. While working on this piece, Halilaj was alerted to the remains of Runik's House of Culture. Upon returning, he spent months reviving portions of the building and staged a night of collaborative performance. This became the foundation for the multifaceted theatrical installation, *Shkrepetima* (A Lightning Bolt, 2018), which was then shown alongside a film of the event at Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern and the Fondazione Merz in Turin. Fragments of the ruined building floated like an exploding dreamscape, as weird bird forms watched from the eaves, their harsh metal feet gripping deep into the plaster of the gallery walls.

THIS PAGE AND PREVIOUS SPREAD *RU*, 2017, installation details, New Museum, New York. Courtesy: the artist, ChertLüdde, Berlin, and kamel mennour, Paris/London; photograph: Dario Lasagni

HETTIE JUDAH *Chaotic museums, disordered archives, buried memories: these are all things I associate with your work. Why did you begin to explore these topics?*

PETRIT HALILAJ The first things that really moved me were butterflies. In 2009, I was doing a show at Station in Pristina, which shared its storage and gardens with what is now the Ethnological Museum of Kosovo. Upon cleaning out the space for my show, I was amazed to find butterflies in dusty wooden crates that had been abandoned by mistake. The installation *Poisoned by Men in Need of Some Love* (2013), which was shown at WIELS in Brussels, started there.

The Ethnological Museum didn't want to talk about the fact that they shut down the Natural History Museum in order to establish their institution. Knowing the space – and a trick to enter the building – I decided to steal the butterflies and bring them to Germany. What made me want to steal them was a conversation with my mum. She told me how, when I was very young, I had a passion for butterflies, flowers and other things that, in her opinion, were for girls to play with. Around the time of this conversation, I was discovering my sexuality, so the butterflies became very important to me. I was living abroad, in Berlin, and my family didn't know about my sexuality but I had no idea how to tell them.

This point was crucial: I didn't know how the state came to the decision to set aside the Natural History Museum and replace it with the narrative of the new nation. In the same way, I had no idea how I had decided to set aside my sexuality and to appear, culturally, as others did. What made me discover both was my passion for butterflies.

For *Poisoned by Men in Need of Some Love*, having finally reached an agreement with the museum, we re-opened the doors that had kept the collection hidden all these years, only to discover that 90 percent of the specimens had deteriorated to the point where they no longer had any scientific value.

HJ *RU* took as a starting point the unfinished archaeological excavation of Runik. How did you discover the historic importance of the city?

PH We did not learn about Runik's archaeological history in school, but I grew up with neighbours and their stories. In the new reality, after the Kosovo War, I came to see how important the fact that we were living on top of this Neolithic site was for everyday life; how the citizens identified with this earlier civilization and the stories about it. It was so poetic: people chose this history and not the recent history of conflict.

The excavation of the Runik site was interrupted by the downfall of the former Yugoslavia and the subsequent need to construct new properties. The artefacts were stored in different archives. I had no access to those in Belgrade and, while I had access in Pristina, most of the artefacts were unlabelled and disorganized. The Runik ocarina and the majority of the objects remain in Belgrade.

HJ You mentioned the Runik ocarina, the earliest instrument found in Kosovo; why is it so significant?

PH What I ask is how the ocarina was significant for the people of Runik, specifically. In Serbia, the artefacts have been culturally – and physically – appropriated and are identified with in a certain way, while in Albania, the same objects are appropriated and identified with in a different manner. In each case, the objects fit with a particular national interest. It's time we read these artefacts in a new light: instead of trying to nationalize them, they should bring people together.

This archaeology is so alive. People in Runik even use the vessel of the Neolithic goddess figure as an ashtray. I would be fascinated to find a compromise: to reflect how

these histories are now completely personal and part of day-to-day life. Can you conserve narratives and objects without taking them away from the people and the city? Perhaps you could declare the whole city a museum.

HJ *When we spoke at the time of your New Museum show, you mentioned a desire to hold a festival in Runik inspired by the ocarina. This led to the installation Shkrepetima. How did the project evolve?*

PH In Runik, the borders between fiction and reality were always so unclear. It was the result of a huge void of historical information. Even today, there is no billboard in the city that indicates the archaeological site you're standing on. As I didn't learn this at school, people were my primary source of information. They would say that this was the most important Neolithic site, and I thought: 'Yeah, every small town thinks they are the centre of the world.' But then I would go to museums and discover that what I thought of as mythology was, in fact, true.

While I was working on *RU*, I discovered there was something else which had been crucial for the community: the House of Culture. It had a library, a cinema and theatre, and it existed until 1989. I realized that the community knew what it was to have culture, but the narrative of the war had become so strong that this never came to the surface.

When I discovered that one of my teachers in Runik was also a former actor and activist, it opened a whole new conversation. I was deeply touched. Even within the frame of communism, some 30 years ago, there had remained signs of a multi-ethnic society. There were always dreamers, and that is something that I had almost stopped dreaming of myself. That was the beginning of *Shkrepetima*.

HJ *For both the reconstruction of the House of Culture and the performance that ultimately took place within, you brought in professionals from outside of Runik. Why was this?*

PH There were no archives. Everything was either burnt or lost. People were the only available basis for my research. The first thing was to feel what it meant to use the square again and whether people even wanted it, because this is not my house. This is not a museum. This is not a place you are supposed to go as an artist.



“Can you conserve narratives without taking them away from the people?”



ABOVE *Abetare (Fluturat)*, 2017, installation view, kamel mennour, Paris. Courtesy: the artist, ChertLüdde, Berlin, and kamel mennour, Paris/London

BELOW *Shkrepetima (A Lightning Bolt)*, 2018, performance documentation, Fondazione Merz, Turin. Courtesy: the artist, Hajde! Foundation, Fondazione Merz, Turin, ChertLüdde, Berlin, and kamel mennour, Paris/London; photograph: Majlinda Hoxha

Shkrëpetima, 2018. Veduta dell'installazione presso Fondazione Merz, Torino, 2018-2019. Fotografia di Renato Ghiazza. Courtesy l'artista; Fondazione Merz, Torino; ChertLüdde, Berlino; e kamel mennour, Parigi / Londra.



MONOPOL

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Shows.PREVIEW



In Turin spürt PETRIT HALILAJ der verlorenen Heimat nach

„Shkrëpetima“ heißt das Zauberwort dieser Soloschau anlässlich des Mario-Merz-Preises an Petrit Halilaj. Die albanische Vokabel bedeutet „Blitz“ oder „plötzliches Gefühl“, doch lautete auch der Titel eines Kulturmagazins so, das in den 70ern und 80ern in Runik produziert wurde, dem Dorf im Kosovo, in dem der Künstler aufwuchs.

Wie auch der vietnamesisch-dänische Künstler Danh Vo hat Halilaj aus seiner von Flucht und Migration geprägten Geschichte eine besondere Formensprache gewonnen. Er zeichnet Vögel und andere Tiere oder baut Environments, die nach Bauernhöfen, Baustellen, Ruinen oder allem zugleich aussehen. Außerdem arbeitet

Halilaj mit dokumentarischen Videoaufnahmen.

Die Ausstellung in der Turiner Fondazione Merz bildet den Endpunkt eines dreiteiligen Projekts, das mit einer eintägigen Performance in Runik begann und im Berner Zentrum Paul Klee mit einer Ausstellung weitergeführt wurde. Halilaj zeigte dort eine Videoinstalla-

tion, die sich um steinzeitliche Fundstücke aus seinem Heimatdorf drehte und um die Spekulationen, die sich um diese Artefakte ranken. Das Wissen über die ferne Vergangenheit lebt in dieser ruralen Gegend vorwiegend in der mündlichen Überlieferung weiter, wobei die Grenzen zwischen Realität und Mythos verfließen. Museen gibt es keine. Das Vergangene ist wie ein schwankender Urgrund, auf dem Halilajs Kunst schwimmt. Und natürlich sind seine Werke auch von dem bestimmt, was der Künstler zu Zeiten des Kosovokriegs 1998/99 erlebt hat – als Teenager musste er mit der Familie nach Italien fliehen. Sporadisch kehrte er nach Runik zurück, etwa 2010, ausgerechnet einen Tag bevor seine alte Schule abgerissen wurde, was Halilaj in einem Videofilm dokumentierte – mit der Melancholie des Heimkehrers, der seine Heimat nie wirklich wiederfinden wird.

JENS
HINRICHSSEN

PETRIT HALILAJ:
„SHKREPËTIMA“, Fondazione Merz, Turin, 29. Oktober bis 3. Februar 2019

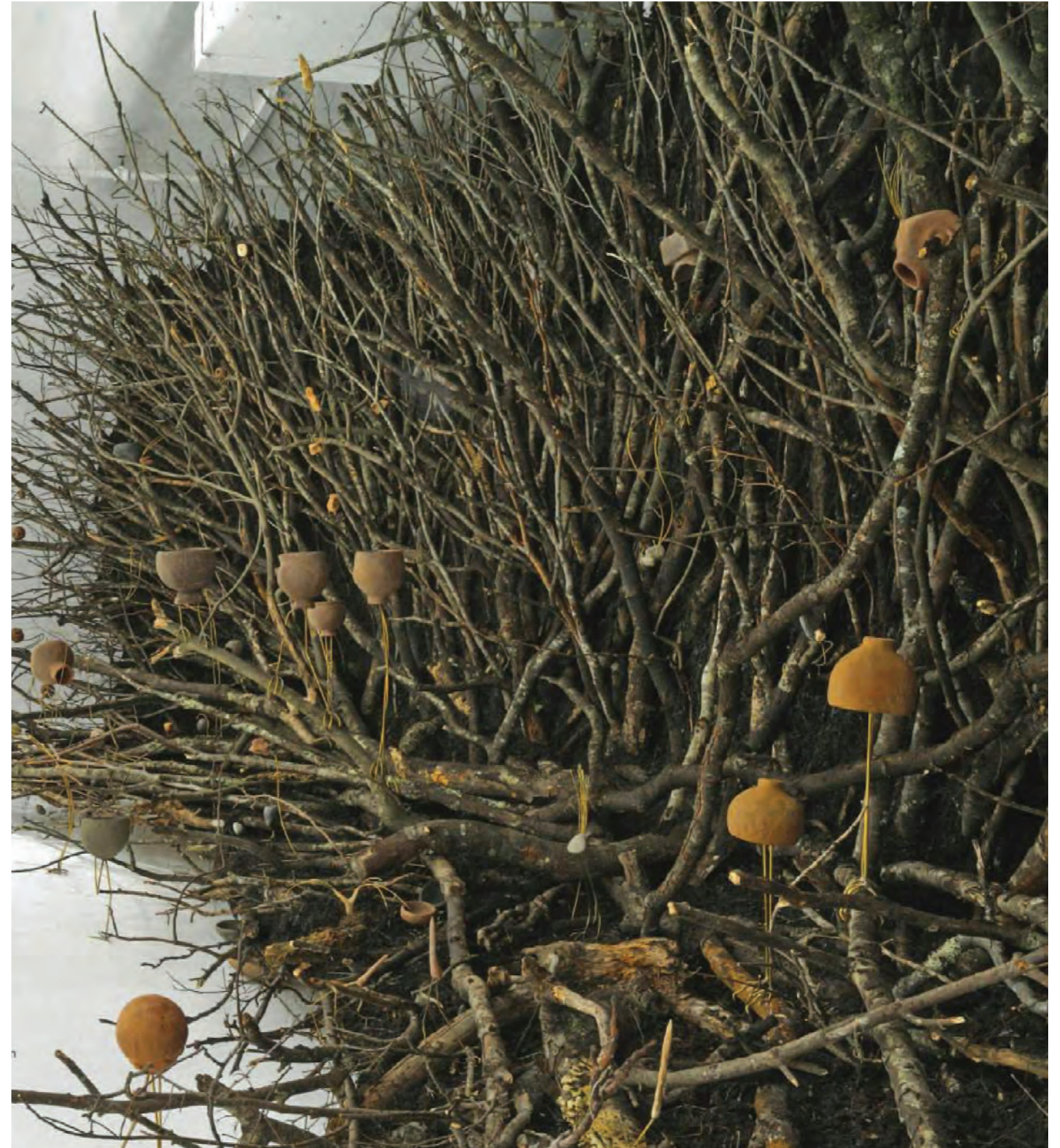
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OCTOBER 2018

STORIES FROM THE RUINS

PETRIT HALILAJ, THE BERLIN-BASED
ARTIST WHO WAS AWARDED THE MARIO
MERZ PRIZE LAST YEAR, GAVE NEW LIFE
TO A CULTURAL CENTER — AND A
COMMUNITY — IN HIS NATIVE KOSOVO

BY ANYA HARRISON

PHOTO: DARIO LARAGHI





Petrit Halilaj

Petrit Halilaj
drawing
his studio in Runik
July 201

The town of Runik sits in the north of Kosovo, some one-and-a-half hour's drive from the capital, Pristina. The journey there, on a dark night in early July, took me via serpentine routes through a Balkan landscape cocooned by greenery during the day, but pitch black after the sun sets. I could occasionally make out small settlements, lone houses standing mid-construction, their newness paralleled in the smooth asphalt of the roads not yet worn down by years of use. Everything, in fact, more or less feels new, a strange reminder that the conflict that left much of this land in ruins only 20 years ago has, in its wake, perpetuated a natural hurry to rebuild, leaving no traces of the past behind.

Runik itself is not much different in this respect. But just behind the few shops, bars and cafes that line its main street, is the ruined carapace of its former House of Culture. Built in the 1950s, like other similar structures across former Yugoslavia it functioned as the beating heart of the community — staging plays, screening films, hosting a library — before falling prey to neglect during the 1990s as ethnic tensions steadily grew. Until a few months ago, it had lain dilapidated, the square in front of its façade a rubbish heap. That is until Petrit Halilaj, the Berlin-based Kosovar artist, got a team of helpers, including the curator Leonardo Bigazzi, on board to clean up the building to use it as the setting and subject of "Shkrepëtimal," a one-night-only, open-air performance that blended theater, music, choreography and costumes, and which forms the first chapter of a three-part project that has been in development since Halilaj was awarded the Mario Merz Prize last



PHOTO: MALJUNDA HOSINA



Petrit Halilaj,
"RU,"
installation
view,
New Museum
New York, 2017.

ILASAGNI



Petrit Halilaj,
"Shkrepëtima," 2016,
produced by
Fondazione
Merz and Hajdel
Foundation.

said. "It's a huge economical, developmental change, a moment in certain materials acquire a history because you see things appearing right in front of your eyes, your city changing constantly from month to month." This can be witnessed in the multiple works that have been borne from Halilaj's research into the aforementioned Natural History Museum in Kosovo. After the war was over, was transformed by the new government into an ethnographic museum, its rich collection of taxidermy animals ended up in damp basements where they slowly disintegrated. Similarly, a re-evaluation of what might be neglected by some but assured by others was an underlying theme in "RU," which was first shown at the New Museum last

year (part of the work has since travelled to the Paul Klee Zentrum in Bern). "RU" took as its starting point Runik's identity as the site of one of the earliest Neolithic settlements in the region. A portion of the project recreated over 500 found and recorded objects and fragments, discovered during archaeological digs in the 1960s and '80s — including the musical instrument ocarina, native to Runik — but which for the most part are now kept in storage at the Natural History Museum in Belgrade, while those of lesser quality are in Pristina. Yet locals still dig up fragments of clay and stone objects in their backyards, forming the basis of new origin myths. For Halilaj, who gave these artefacts new identities as birds, it's a natural reflection of the need to belong and "to try and give a sense to the world by

placing yourself in the center of it." In the films that form part of "RU," we hear locals' own interpretations, "the mythologies that come up of how they deal with these artefacts," explained Halilaj, "but also what they mean in a place where everyone is looking either to appropriate or to find a new identity, one that we are all trying to fix and are obsessed with." He added, "It's about the power of fiction that connects us back to reality, and the translation between the two." So far, his approach seems to have worked. Soon after the performance in Runik, the House of Culture was declared a protected building, spurred on by the head of the Kosovo Parliament's own experience that night. It was an apt reminder that a lightness of touch, boundless energy and a poetic outlook can be infectious.MP



INSTALLAZIONI

HALILAJ, IL KOSOVO È UN SOGNO MULTIETNICO

Si può scivolare in un sonno profondo e sognare. Ci si può svegliare, anche se il sogno continua. E camminare tra voci attutite e suonatori di ocarina, attraversare una nube di schegge e detriti e passare accanto a uccelli che ti osservano quasi sbigottiti. Petrit Halilaj ci ha abituati a installazioni ad alto tasso poetico e sontuose giostre di rimandi alla sua terra. Così, non delude neanche a Torino, ospite della Fondazione Merz (dal 29 ottobre al 3 febbraio), ultima tappa di una trilogia che è partita dal suo Kosovo. *Shkrepetima* si intitola. Che vuol dire lampo ed è come un pensiero improvviso. Ed è anche il titolo della rivista multietnica pubblicata in Kosovo tra gli anni 70 e 80. Dopo di allora e prima che il secolo chiudesse, sono solo lampi di guerra.

Nessuno è uscito indenne: Halilaj, classe 1986, ha 13 anni quando le truppe serbe spazzano il suo paese, finendo a loro volta sotto il tiro della Nato. In un campo profughi, uno psicologo italiano, Giacomo Poli, nota i disegni di questo ragazzino spaurito e gli procura una borsa di studio. Poi una laurea a Brera e infine l'approdo a Berlino. Nel 2013 rappresenta il suo paese, da poco indipendente, alla Biennale di Venezia. Oggi è uno degli artisti più intelligenti della scena internazionale. A forza di chiudere i porti e gli occhi di fronte ai rifugiati si rischia di perdere talenti, sembra dire la sua storia. «I confini evaporano sotto il volo degli stormi che migrano da una costa all'altra», dice oggi. «Intere civiltà sono fiorite identificandosi in queste creature o dando loro poteri sovrumani. È tutto quello che lui sa sull'urgenza di migrare. E di tornare. Per realizzare *Shkrepetima* è volato a Runik, la città della sua infanzia, dove ha fatto rivivere un centro culturale abbandonato, ha scritto una drammaturgia con la storia della gente del posto e l'ha di-

ArtMag
by Deutsche Bank



FEATURE

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Rescuing Butterflies Tea with Petrit Halilaj

Petrit Halilaj is conquering the art world with his poetic installations and fantastic drawings. Yet his work is also quite political and based on hard experiences: war, expulsion, forgetting. The young Kosovar artist is represented in the Deutsche Bank Collection. Oliver Koerner von Gustorf visited him in his Berlin studio.

"Take another good picture of it, tomorrow the school will be gone," says the little boy. Although there is something aloof about this remark, it is also menacing. But the video for Petrit Halilaj's exhibition *ABETARE* 2015 at the Kölnischer Kunstverein begins very innocuously. In 2010, he revisited his old school in the Kosovar village of Runik, which he attended from 1992 to 1997. He must have loved it. According to his biography, he had his first solo exhibition there at the age of ten, apparently curated by his teacher. Just a year later, in 1998, following the outbreak of the Kosovo war, Halilaj was fleeing with his family. Years later the artist, now working internationally, returned to his hometown, as luck would have it, a day before the school building was torn down to make room for a new edifice. He filmed the activity – the workmen on the roof sorting out recyclable building material, elementary-school children frolicking around the abandoned building, collecting themselves, then speeding into different directions like a flock of birds. Intuitively, the children seem to sense that Halilaj is different. At first a little timid, they now become aggressive. They put their hands over the lens, grab for the camera, grimace, start screaming. Latent violence is in the air, somewhat more than is usual in a schoolyard. Halilaj can barely keep them in check and follows a group into the building on a wild-goose chase that culminates in a moment of pure destruction. Owing to the presence of the camera and the artist, things start to escalate. The children smash windows, spray paint, rip up posters and cards, tear pictures down from the walls. Halilaj is stunned, and, while filming, repeatedly says "Stop it!" as he tries to get the children under control. "Who is this guy?" a brawny boy asks hypocritically as he stomps on a framed photograph of an athlete or a politician. "I don't know, but you're destroying his face," replies Halilaj dryly. And a fundamental conflict suddenly emerges: a silent, secret battle between nerds, outsiders, eccentrics, and representatives of purported normality, who seem to always have the upper hand. At this moment the film suddenly has a subversive irony that characterizes Halilaj's entire oeuvre, even drives it.

ABETARE are the school booklets that every child in Kosovo knows and that Halilaj grew up with. The film showing the destruction of the village school is repeatedly interrupted by book pages with idealized illustrations, letters, and writing exercises, like a foil that no longer matches reality. For his installation at the Kölnischer Kunstverein, the artist created a different kind of alphabet out of these overlapping levels. He used thin steel rods to reconstruct, on a much larger scale, the doodles, drawings, and comments covering the furniture and the classroom, which in the film he appraises together with the children. Three dimensionally, these giant scribbles, hearts, stars, machine guns, birds, and insignias like KFOR and UCK pervaded the sun-flooded postwar modern building. They were concentrated on the ceiling, encircled doorframes, clung to banisters, cast shadows, and created mirror images. In the basement, old desks were piled on top of one another. The artist gave some of them legs so long that they rise up through the stairwell to the upper floors. It looked like the aftermath of a bombing. With his intervention, Halilaj filled the museum with these scrawls, creating a direct, semiotic experience. Thinking of *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, the famous treatise by the poststructuralist and semiotic theorist Roland Barthes, one could say that Halilaj brought together something like fragments of a language of war and conflict – all the standards and constraints, the clichés and gender roles children are confronted with from a very early age. In addition, the installation has an imaginative and poetic aspect that cannot be pinned down, that flutters lightly like a butterfly, and from a position of

vulnerability produces something new and original.

He himself, says Halilaj, was a rather special child. "My mother told me that apparently when I was four or five I loved butterflies and when my parents didn't lift me up to catch them I cried like what they referred to 'as a crazy girl.' I caught them and took them to my room. In my room there were always about ten butterflies. And my mom had to laugh and said: 'We were so happy when you started going to school because you became more normal.'" But Halilaj was never really "normal." At a refugee camp in Albania, staff from an aid organization offered each child a colored pencil to draw with. Halilaj asked for two because he was ambidextrous. A little later, camera teams filmed the then 13-year-old refugee rendering different kinds of birds with both hands.

Years later, you still have the slight impression that you are sitting across from a child prodigy. The artist, who is only 30, is extremely open and friendly, almost soft. It's a rainy winter evening in Berlin. We're drinking tea in his studio in Berlin Wedding. It is nothing like what you would imagine that of a budding art star to be. He works in a modest, manageable shed in the backyard. There is giant table full of books, magazines, drawings, and sheets of paper, and a couch on which his little sister is currently spending the night. Her visa will run out soon and then she'll have to return to Kosovo. Halilaj and his assistant are sitting across from each other at two small desks.

It's hard to believe that he realizes all of these projects here. It all began in 2010, with the Berlin Biennale curated by Kathrin Rhomberg. In 2013, he was the first artist to represent Kosovo at the Venice Biennale, and he had a large solo exhibition at WIELS in Brussels. That was followed by a double dip in the Rhineland. Almost concurrent with ABETARE at the Kölnischer Kunstverein, Halilaj showed *She Fully Turning Around Became Terrestrial* at the Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany. When we meet to talk, his rather monumental show *Space Shuttle in the Garden* is on view at the renowned Pirelli Hangar Bicocca in Milan. With the exception perhaps of the Vietnamese-Danish artist Danh Vo before him, Petrit Halilaj is the only young artist to become a darling of curators in just a few years. What he and Vo have in common is the fact that from a past characterized by flight and migration, they have developed their own conceptual visual language that is reduced yet also biographically and psychologically charged. Halilaj, too, incorporates fragments of his family history and historical artifacts in his work and questions gender roles and cultural identities. And he, too, engages with absence, with the loss his home and a sense of belonging.

What differs is Halilaj's earthiness, in a literal sense, the clay and excrement he works with, the filth he roots around in. An example is the 60 tons of soil from the property of his parent's destroyed house in Kosovo that he had dumped without comment in the "Statements" sector of Art Basel – the load was so heavy that the floor of the hall almost collapsed. Or the menagerie of animals he molded out of clay and cow dung and mounted in minimal, geometric installations made out of golden shimmering copper rods for the exhibitions at WIELS and the Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany. Both of these exhibitions were preceded by the adventurous discovery of a complete ethnology museum that had disappeared.

When Halilaj was organizing an exhibition in a project space housed in the ethnology museum in Pristina, he made a strange discovery. "The night before the opening I was cleaning up and moved things to storage, and there I discovered these amazing wooden cases filled with what used to be butterflies. I was really fascinated because you could still see the pins that were used to fixate them, but the butterflies had decayed and had started to disappear. I just could guess that they had a very tough history. There were splashes of cement, paint, grain, dust everywhere on the cases. To tell you the truth, I was getting kind of obsessed by them. So I simply took the butterflies and really thought I was rescuing them as obviously nobody wanted them. But in the morning the curator of the contemporary art center that shares spaces with the ethnological museums arrived and asked me: What the hell have you done? I answered: But they are neglected and I want to have them. And he responds: No, we bring them back in the night when the museum guards are not there. He told me they were not his and he is not supposed to touch them, they are from the ethnological museum. And I asked myself, why would an ethnological museum have butterflies? And then I visited the museum and there was no sign of any animal. So I was wondering if these were special Albanian or Serbian butterflies?"

When he returned to the project room one day, he found an old, soaking-wet notebook. Opening it, he read the words "Pristina Natural History Museum." Halilaj relates how he pulled out all the stops to keep the butterflies and find out what had happened to the ethnology museum. He sent "love letters" to the curator and director, but to no avail. Only when the museum appointed a new director did he make headway. Halilaj met the former director of the ethnology museum, a biologist, who, like in a Kafka novel, lost his job and thirteen years later was still sitting in an office in the building. He found out that the natural history museum was vacated in a cloak-and-dagger operation to make room for an ethnology museum, which from now on would give insight into Albanian folk traditions. Which was understandable, says Halilaj. It was clear that in their young nation, Kosovo Albanians wanted to show their history more than domestic fauna. But what happened then was a true scandal. "During the war the Serbians took a lot of the archeological artifacts but they left the collection of the natural history museum completely intact, untouched. When the system changed they took the collection out. The first party ignored it; the second party just let it down without even caring what was happening. It was a mix of arrogance, ignorance, and laziness. They didn't even take the time to think about how to store the animals correctly."

Halilaj's film *Poisoned by Men in Need of Some Love* (2013) shows the recovery the artist pushed through. The path down to the basement is like a descent into an Egyptian burial chamber. Guiltily, aggressively, with bureaucratic or scientific zeal,

the museum's staff tried to prevent entry to the exhibits until the last moment, and to conceal their shame about what had happened to the collection in the moist, overheated rooms. The situation was reminiscent of a scene at a school. Halilaj represents the nerd, the crackpot, the child who wants the butterflies. He refuses to go away and innocently asks time and time again: "What in the world are you doing here?" During our conversation, he says that it's okay to unsettle people and create difficulties for them. You can understand why when you see the workmen ripping open boxes, revealing incredible damage. The sight of the stuffed animals, covered with mold and cracks, is strangely beautiful. With their dried limbs, bills, and snouts, the beaver, deer, and herons look like mythical creatures. The groups of owls and ducks pressed together, the drawers full of snakes, which have almost disintegrated to dust, are symbols of neglect. In the film, in his installations in old display cases, and in his animal bodies molded out of excrement, Halilaj achieves the feat of making this decay visible as a social state without wagging his finger didactically.

Instead, one can view his art as a labor of love. The birds and animals that Halilaj copies in minute detail, including those in his works in the Deutsche Bank Collection, based on old documentary photographs from the natural history museum, are much more than reconstructions of reconstructions. He imbues these forgotten creatures with fantastic, art-nouveau-like feathers, like the actors in a decadent play. He gives one stuffed, eyeless canary in his installation an operetta-like, frivolous mask that is suspended at a distance from its beak – a metaphor for the interplay between seeing and being seen, subject and object, but also a symbol of a different, queer look. The animals he renders using cow dung and clay and implants in modernist structures made of shimmering gold brass rods underscore his manner of working – the alchemical idea of obtaining gold from excrement, from things that are absolutely worthless. In alchemy, this material process is an inner spiritual path that leads to wisdom and knowledge. "In a way one could say that my work is sometimes about our way of dealing with shit, ignoring it and letting it go. When I was dealing with the museum I asked myself, should I let it go? I knew the whole museum was in storage. And it was a very bad story to be ashamed of. Should I touch this thing or should I ring my friends and make an amazing trip and create some kind of artwork out of it? I couldn't really decide as it would put other people on the line as well. But after all, it was and it continues to be all about confronting myself."

ARTFORUM

New York

Petrit Halilaj

NEW MUSEUM
235 Bowery
September 27–January 7

Petrit Halilaj's complex exhibition merges issues of identity, collective narrative, and echoes of past battles in a dreamlike environment populated by flocks of imaginary birds. In the two-channel video *The city roofs were so near that even a sleepwalking cat could pass over Runik without ever touching the ground* (all works 2017), Halilaj interviews people living in the titular village in Kosovo, where he grew up—an area that contains important Neolithic settlements found during archeological digs in 1968 and 1983. After the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, the artifacts became displaced. The most valuable pieces are currently stored in Belgrade's Natural History Museum—inaccessible to the people of Runik but vividly alive in their minds. With handheld cameras, Halilaj visits rural neighborhoods and farms, and walks in fields where women, men, and children still dig up fragments of ancient pottery and animal bones. They share recollections of their discoveries with an intensity that highlights a deep attachment to the symbolic values of their heritage.



View of "Petrit Halilaj: RU," 2017–18.

We watch the video reclining on soft fabric sculptures in the shape of large fowl, which takes us to the following room, where Halilaj's research on the habitats of migratory birds becomes a metaphor for a utopian free world. Here we find the sprawling installation *RU*, made up of about five hundred objects and fragments collected from Runik's historic sites. Small pots, vases, and cups are placed on thin bronze legs and appear as odd avian creatures perched on intricate branches, either sitting around a pond or scattered on the floor. The delicate poetry of this fantastic landscape shifts nostalgia for a lost past to a lively present, where memories and legends give shape to a new world, devoid of borders.

— Ida Panicelli

domus

Petrit Halilaj's presents a major project at the New Museum

As birds who have temporarily taken residence in the New Museum, New York, Petrit Halilaj recreated a total of 505 found and recorded Neolithic archeological objects found in Runik before the Kosovo War.



The New Museum inaugurated its new South Galleries in New York with an exhibition by young Kosovan artist Petrit Halilaj. In his "RU" installation he uses his own biography as a point of departure, adopting exhibition processes to alter the course of private and collective histories. For his New Museum exhibition, Halilaj presents a major new project that begins in Runik, the city in Kosovo in which he grew up and the site of one of the earliest Neolithic settlements in the region, where some of Kosovo's most important artifacts have been found.



Petrit Halilaj, exhibition view

Archaeological digs in 1968 and 1983 uncovered part of the country's most significant material history from the period, including the musical instrument known as the Runik Ocarina. Now spread across two countries and several institutions as the result of the Kosovo War in the 1990s, the most valuable of these objects currently reside in storage at the Natural History Museum in Belgrade, with the less significant finds still kept at the Kosovo Museum in Pristina. Out of public reach and inaccessible to the people of Runik, these objects hold great symbolic value for a nation missing parts of its shared frame of reference, but also point to the condition of contradictory claims from two countries that share material heritage.



In "Petrit Halilaj; RU," Halilaj presents a new video work, several large fabric sculptures, and an extensive environment that draws on his research into the flight patterns and habitats of migratory birds. Piecing together multiple institutional and archeological records coming from sources across borders, Halilaj makes the full extent of the findings in Runik available to the public for the first time. Recreating a total of 505 found and recorded objects and fragments as birds who have temporarily taken residence in an imagined landscape, Halilaj envisions these artifacts on temporary stopover, momentarily reunited as beings who live and thrive through movement, rather than belonging to any one site or context.



Petrit Halilaj, exhibition view at the New Museum, New York, 2017

BOMB

Looking Back on 2017: Art

Featuring artworks by Dana Elcar, Mia Galyon, Fatima Sanaullah, S.D. Chrossenski, Karl Holmquist, Philip Lauson, Mary Shriver, and more.



Petrit Halilaj, exhibition view of *RU*, 2017. The New Museum. Photo by Dario Lasagni.

Elina Alter

Writer

In the New Museum's recently expanded ground-floor galleries, there is a flock of birds that aren't birds. It includes long-legged, web-footed, and squat specimens, clustering in the dry branches, preening by a golden pool or mirror, and relaxing in the dirt of a root system that grows out of the ceiling. Filling a room in Petrit Halilaj's ongoing show, *RU*, all 505 of these are actually empty clay vessels on wire legs, referencing 505 important Neolithic artifacts found near Halilaj's hometown of Runik, Kosovo. Since the Kosovo War the artifacts have been split

between museums in Kosovo and Serbia, each country exercising its own exclusive claim on the past; the show suggests art's ability to imagine a different history, independent of state claims (but not of museum politics). *RU* also includes fabric sculptures and a video work, but it was the birds in their improvised, indoor wood that stayed with me for weeks: cute and unobtrusive, each one projects a sense of peering at you inquisitively—the way we say real birds do—despite having nothing like a head. Given the fact that many of those real birds will soon become a matter of only historical knowledge, they are a present reminder: we have to answer for what we do.

9 Breakout Artists from the Venice Biennale

By [Marina Garcia-Vasquez](#); photos by [Karim El Maktafi](#)
Aug 21 2017, 9:11pm

We selected nine rising international art stars, from the Republic of China to Kosovo.

All images courtesy [Karim El Maktafi](#)

This article originally appeared on [Creators](#).

Every two years, the Venice Biennale **sets the stage for investigative art** that represents the current human condition and **grapples with identity, nationality, and liberty**. Established in 1895, the Biennale today invites artists from all over the world to share their work on a global stage. 120 artists are invited to **represent themselves, their countries, their aesthetics, and their personal politics** to an audience of about 500,000 visitors over the course of six months.

Since its inception, artist reputations have been made, catapulting some to fame and others into webs of controversy. Says curator Christine Macel, the director of the 2017 Venice Biennale, "The role, the voice and the responsibility of the artist are more crucial than ever before within the framework of contemporary debates. It is in and through these individual initiatives that the world of tomorrow takes shape."

Creators visited the **57th Venice Biennale** to meet with the youngest artists of the exhibition. Here we selected nine rising international art stars, hailing from

the Republic of China to Kosovo, who span disciplines, mediums, and themes. We wanted to learn more about their provocations, inspirations, and what it feels like to make art specifically with the Biennale in mind.

Petrit Halilaj, Republic of Kosovo

Within the core of the Arsenale building, fabric moth sculptures are hidden in the rafters, and fill artist **Petrit Halilaj**'s exhibition space, titled, *Do you realize there is a rainbow even if it's night!?* The moth structures, handcrafted by Halilaj and his mother out of traditional Qilim carpets from Kosovo, shift between objects hanging on a wall and costumes for the artist to wear during poetic live performances. Halilaj's moths personify the wondrous capacity for self-expression, recognition of his own sexuality, and the symbolic dance between self and society. "I can enter and the body disappears becoming an insect. So with this idea of hiding and becoming an insect, I just escaped another time to talk and confess about something that is still too complicated," the artist tells *Creators*. Halilaj's autobiographical installations grapple with the weight of exile, war, and abandoned territory—at the age of 12, his family fled the Kosovo War to an Albanian refugee camp. He pulls inspiration from animal nature to translate emotions of catharsis. He says, "I would try to dream something beyond verbal, a different kind of language that would be added to my body. This is the first costume or performative sculpture that has different layers coming from history, culture, and personal nature."





PETRIT HALILAJ

by STEVEN KOHLSTOCK
text by FRANCESCO URBANO RAGAZZI

www.vogue.it/l-uomo-vogue/people-stars



IN QUESTA PAGINA, TOTAL LOOK ETNO.
IN APERTURA, TOTAL LOOK SALVATORE
FERRAGAMO. FASHION ASSISTANT FILIPPO
CASAROLI, GROOMER BERENICE AMMANN
USING KEVIN MURPHY & UNO GRETTEL
BERLIN, FASHION EDITOR SARAH GRITINI.

Non è la prima volta a Venezia per Petrit Halilaj, 31 anni compiuti a marzo. Nel 2013 aveva realizzato un'imponente scultura-nido, dimora di una coppia di canarini, per quella che fu la prima partecipazione ufficiale del Kosovo alla Biennale Arte. E se pensate che sia cosa da poco, basti ricordare che un'ottantina di nazioni Onu, tra cui cinque membri dell'Unione Europea, ancora non riconosce l'autonomia del giovane stato balcanico dalla Serbia. La Biennale è talvolta specchio lucidissimo della geopolitica internazionale. «Quattro anni fa ho contribuito a fondare un padiglione: una casa per una parte fragile della mia terra d'origine e della mia vita. Stavolta è un po' diverso perché il mio lavoro sarà esposto all'Arsenale, in mezzo a tante altre opere», racconta Halilaj dal suo studio di Berlino. «L'atteggiamento però rimane lo stesso perché credo che noi artisti dovremmo avere un pensiero politico in qualunque occasione, anche quando esponiamo nel più piccolo dei musei di provincia». In quattro anni però le cose cambiano in fretta. Oggi il Kosovo vive una fase di evoluzione che nel 2013 era solo all'inizio, dopo la dichiarazione di indipendenza del 2008 e dopo la guerra tra il '96 e il '99, quando l'artista, costretto alla fuga con tutta la sua famiglia, aveva poco più di dieci anni. Halilaj pensa allora alla società kosovara come a una farfalla notturna, un animale capace di trasformazioni radicali lungo l'arco di una vita breve. E a Venezia espone una serie di maschere da falena. «Do you realise there is a rainbow even if it's night?», le cui ali sono prodotte assemblando tappeti kilim con altri tessuti tradizionali: «Sono così pesanti che quando ho indossato la prima maschera nel 2016 durante una performance al centro d'arte contemporanea di Pristina, le mie gambe non smettevano di tremare. Per muovermi ho dovuto chiedere al pubblico di aiutarmi a sorreggere il costume». Petrit aveva già finito tre maschere prima di incontrare Christine Macel, che lo ha subito spinto a rendere questo progetto monumentale: «Avevo chiesto

a mia madre di aiutarmi a cucire, perciò all'inizio lavoravo fingendo di avere una commissione da un museo anche se non era vero. Il tempo passato con lei era così bello e le discussioni così piene d'amore che non volevo smettere. Infatti le sculture ora sono diciotto». Così i viaggi verso est si moltiplicano e una parte dell'atelier viene trasferito per la prima volta nella nuova casa di famiglia, dalla Germania a Pristina: il contrario di quanto era successo per la collaborazione con il padre alla Biennale di Berlino nel 2010. La ragione per cui Petrit coinvolge intensamente i suoi familiari nella realizzazione delle opere sta nel legame tra i cambiamenti di un'intera società e il progresso personale: «Dopo che i miei cari sono tornati in patria, migrando dalla vecchia casa sulla collina di Kostërë alla capitale, anche mia mamma ha iniziato a trasformarsi. Dall'essere una donna dedita solo alla famiglia ha iniziato ad apprezzare l'indipendenza che le dà il suo lavoro di sarta, e cambiando ha potuto capire meglio il mio modo di essere e di amare». Questa comprensione reciproca è incorporata nelle falene a cui madre e figlio hanno lavorato assieme. Sotto i pesanti kilim i due hanno cucito un tessuto acrilico lucente e colorato che per motivi diversi rappresenta l'evoluzione di entrambi. «Il cambiamento fa paura ma è anche meraviglioso da osservare. Per questo il titolo della mia opera lo si deve leggere come se alla fine non ci fosse solo il punto di domanda, ma anche il punto esclamativo».



Petrit Halilaj

All'HangarBicocca

di Alberta Romano



C'era una volta la favola del paese con la *esse* davanti. Un bel giorno Giovannino Perdigiorno, uno dei personaggi più cari di Gianni Rodari, si ritrovò in uno strano paesino in cui ogni oggetto aveva una "esse" davanti al proprio nome. C'era lo *stemperino* che non appuntava le matite, ma le faceva ricrescere; lo *staccapanni* che non richiedeva panni da attaccare, ma che ne metteva a disposizione sempre di nuovi; lo *scannonne* che, se messo in azione, aveva il potere di porre fine a qualsiasi tipo di guerra. Insomma, nel paese con la "esse" davanti, ogni oggetto si presentava nella sua accezione positiva, nella sua veste più bella. Sono proprio le storie così chiare e delicate che molto spesso riescono a veicolare, nel migliore dei modi, anche dei contenuti complessi, altrimenti difficili da digerire. Quando penso a Petrit Halilaj (Kosovo, 1986) penso al paese con la *esse* davanti. Penso alla delicatezza con la quale l'artista è in grado di trasmettere contenuti importanti, senza mai appesantire il visitatore, anzi affascinandolo e coinvolgendolo con la sua sensibile positività. Petrit Halilaj nasce a Runik, un piccolo paesino del Kosovo, nel 1986. Testimone troppo giovane dei conflitti con la Serbia, vive il dramma dell'emigrazione, dello sradicamento dalla propria terra e della permanenza in un campo profughi, dove, leggenda vuole, sia stato notato per le sue doti artistiche. Si trasferisce in Italia, s'iscrive all'Accademia di Brera, studia, si diploma e in brevissimo tempo diventa uno dei giovani artisti più apprezzati del panorama contemporaneo. Oggi vive tra Berlino e Bozzolo, un piccolo paesino nel mantovano e, una cosa è certa, non smette mai di produrre.

L'HangarBicocca ospita, fino al 13 marzo 2016 *Space Shuttle in the Garden*, la prima grande mostra personale di Petrit Halilaj in Italia. Tra sculture, installazioni, disegni e video si ripercorreranno gli ultimi anni di produzione dell'artista. Tra le opere più imponenti: *The places I'm looking for, my dear, are utopian places, they are boring and I don't know how to make them real* (2010-2015). Già presentata alla Biennale di Berlino nel 2010, si tratta della ricostruzione della sua

vecchia casa di Pristina, che si presenta questa volta in maniera del tutto nuova. Per quest'occasione ogni stanza acquista una propria autonomia, entrando in contatto con lo spazio circostante e con le opere che lo abitano. Un'opera che funge da *trait d'union*, abbracciando tutto l'operato dell'artista tra passato e futuro, tra Kosovo e Italia. Halilaj, nel ricostruire pezzo dopo pezzo la sua casa, non racconta la disfatta, ma la costruzione e la volontà di procedere attraverso strade che, spesso, possono dimostrarsi faticose o tortuose, ma che vale sempre la pena di percorrere. Così come ha fatto nel 2011, in occasione di Art Basel Statements, quando prelevò sessanta tonnellate di terra in Kosovo e le trasportò fino in Svizzera dando vita a Kostërë. Entrando in punta di piedi nelle nostre coscienze ci parla di sé, dei luoghi della sua infanzia, come di tutti quei luoghi che hanno caratterizzato la sua formazione fino a oggi. Con *It is the first time dear that you have a human shape*, si torna di nuovo alle favole. I gioielli di sua madre, sotterrati per essere messi al sicuro dalla guerra imminente, vengono recuperati e portati alla luce. Hanno ancora addosso la terra che li ha soffocati e protetti allo stesso tempo, ma sono di nuovo lì, presenti e cento volte più grandi di quando erano stati sotterrati la prima volta. C'è poi *They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens II* (2009), parte di un ciclo di lavori unitario molto più ampio. L'artista costruisce un pollaio a forma di missile spaziale, e lascia alle galline, uniche fruitrici della struttura, la possibilità di vivere il sogno di volare. Tuttavia, l'opera più grande di Petrit Halilaj sta nel trasformare tutto quello che ha vissuto sulla propria pelle in qualcosa di nuovo, in qualcosa di buono. Per quanto termini come "favola", "buono" sembrano, al giorno d'oggi, quasi sminuire e mortificare il lavoro di un artista contemporaneo, sono tuttavia i termini della semplicità, i termini attraverso i quali ogni concetto può essere compreso anche da quei bambini, che in un campo profughi, entreranno per la prima volta in contatto con l'arte.

Petrit Halilaj, "They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens II" 2009, courtesy l'artista e Pirelli HangarBicocca, ph. Agostino Di No

TAG

HANGARBICOCCA, MILAN, PETRIT HALILAJ

FB — TW

SPACE SHUTTLE IN THE GARDEN. PETRIT HALILAJ

Space Shuttle in the Garden, Petrit Halilaj's first institutional solo exhibition in Italy, on view at Milan HangarBicocca until March 13, brings together a selection of works from recent years as well as new ones conceived specifically for the occasion. Setting out from the life and history of the artist and from the changes that have occurred in his native country, the show explores universal themes such as memory, the search for identity, and the concept of home as both a shared and private space, arriving at reflections on community and on the creation and preservation of a common cultural heritage. Positioned outside Pirelli HangarBicocca, the work *They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens II* (2009) serves as an antechamber to the show: a wooden rocket ship constructed by the artist's relatives, neighbors and friends, with its interior painted an elegant Klein blue, is inhabited by chickens, preparing to discover a new still to be invented world. As an iconic work of the 2010 Berlin Biennial, *The places I'm looking for, my dear, are utopian places, they are boring and I don't know how to make them real* (2010-2015), the artist's reconstructed life-size family house, appears here in a completely new form. Suspended within the exhibition space, the house, now fragmented, reflects the changes its inhabitants have lived through. *Si Okarina e Runikut* (2014) is a series of sculptures inspired by a Neolithic wind instrument found in the village of Runik, Kosovo. The works are vessel flutes that invite visitor participation; while originally conceived to be played individually, the artist reconstructed them to possibly enable collective engagement.

Space Shuttle in the Garden by Petrit Halilaj
[HangarBicocca, Milan](#)
Through March 13





Il Sole **24 ORE** **DOMENICA**

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MILANO/HANGAR BICOCCA

Halilaj: che borghesi queste galline!

di Gabi Scardi

Per Petrit Halilaj tutto rimanda alle verdi colline di Kösterc, in Kosovo. Negli anni Novanta lui viveva lì e, bambino in una famiglia contadina, viveva gli effetti del conflitto balcanico in corso; la sua prima casa veniva bruciata e ridotta in macerie. Oggi Halilaj è un giovane artista impegnato in un percorso internazionale che lo ha portato, tra l'altro, a vivere a Berlino, a rappresentare il proprio paese alla Biennale di Venezia, a tenere mostre in importanti musei di tutto il mondo e a lavorare con gallerie tra le più interessanti del panorama attuale. Eppure il rapporto con il contesto di provenienza resta al centro del suo lavoro.

La vita rurale, la terra, il lavoro, la famiglia trasferitasi a Pristina, gli animali domestici, primi tra tutti le galline, sono elementi ricorrenti di installazioni che coniugano sempre intimità e accenti ironici per parlare di temi quali i legami e l'assenza, la migrazione, la trasformazione, l'in-

tegrazione e la diversità.

Ospite dell'Hangar Bicocca, Halilaj ha proposto una serie di installazioni di dimensioni ambientali attraverso le quali reinterpreta immaginativamente paesaggi e vicende vissute. I materiali sono semplici: terra, legno e acqua, disegni; ma ci sono anche suoni e video. Le opere rimandano le une alle altre in un racconto ininterrotto. C'è la struttura portante in scala reale della nuova casa di famiglia a Pristina, sospesa nello spazio a shed dell'Hangar, e con alcune stanze dislocate, come a dare forma sensibile all'allontanamento di alcuni membri, trasferitisi altrove, ma non per questo meno legati al gruppo familiare. C'è il video sognante, girato sulla collina dove una volta sorgeva la casa. Ripreso da un punto di vista ribassato, il paesaggio appare oggi integro, calmo, animato solo da farfalle e uccelli, dal soffio del vento, dal frinire delle cicale; ma a tratti vi si insinua il respiro affannato di una corsa, e appare un'immagine, realizzata da un giornalista della Cnn all'indomani della guerra e recuperata dall'artista a distanza

di due decenni: Petrit Halilaj, ancora bambino, mangia delle ciliegie arrampicate su un albero. La contraddizione di un'infanzia testimone di fatti sommamente tragici emerge così, non detta, conferendo all'opera un carattere struggente.

Ma un'atmosfera ironica e surreale è assicurata all'insieme dall'installazione *They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens II* (sono fortunate a essere galline borghesi II), che occupa uno spazio tra interno ed esterno; al suo centro c'è un razzo spaziale in legno che funge da riparo e nello stesso tempo evoca il desiderio di viaggio e di scoperta. Il razzo è stato costruito da Halilaj grazie alla cooperazione di amici e parenti della cittadina di Runik. Abitanti di questa società in miniatura sono alcune le galline lucide e impettite; animali che ambiscono a una vita agiata e chic; proprio come succede agli uomini.

Petrit Halilaj. Space Shuttle in the Garden, a cura di Roberta Tenconi, Milano, Hangar Bicocca fino al 13 marzo



PETRIT HALILAJ | La mostra «Space Shuttle in the Garden» all'Hangar Bicocca



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Hangar

Code: abbonamento: 097574

Review of Petrit Halilaj: Space Shuttle in the Garden, HangarBicocca, Milan



"When I conceived and constructed the shuttle rocket for *They're lucky to be Bourgeois Hens*, I was thinking deeply of how things might be transformed if looked at or considered from above, from an unusual point of view." With this statement, Petrit Halilaj introduces one of the largest works to be displayed outside HangarBicocca, in Milan. The intervention was planned to stand just outside the exhibition space, serving as a metaphorical entrance to the show. As a connection between the external urban fabric and the hangar within; between natural and artificial light, as well as between imaginary worlds and multiple realities. It takes the form of a rudimentary space rocket conjuring up the notion of a voyage of discovery and re-evokes the title of Halilaj's first institutional solo exhibition in Italy: *Space Shuttle in the Garden*.

With its Klein-blue vault, the shuttle interior is actually home to dozens of real hens – a metonymic animal in Halilaj's work – that are as free to move among the works in the exhibition as the visitors themselves. Just like a poetic declaration, this installation aims to strip away all notions of hierarchy between living creatures, introducing a humorously-inflected desire for change. The rocket-shaped installation is the latest part of a project begun in 2008 as part of *Art Is My Playground*, a group exhibition held in an amusement park in Istanbul. There, Halilaj presented a series of sculptures made from water, iron, wood and *objets trouvés*. These offered an introduction to the *Space Shuttle in the Garden* installation, with a floating black feather immersed in the waters of an austere, hydraulically-activated fish tank.

Halilaj practice bears witness to the renaissance of an independent country – Kosovo – while elaborating on various experiences of the recent war. A period of loss for the artist and his family is explored, representing the history of his country of origin, considered a new ground for re-birth.

Employing his baggage of memories, he delves into universal themes like the search for identity and the concept of home as both common and individual space. The issue of *Domesticity* at HangarBicocca is primarily examined in works like *The places I'm looking for, my dear, are utopian places, they are boring and I don't know to make them real* (2010-2015). Created in 2010 for the 6th Berlin Biennial, and now on show in a new form for the first time in Italy, the installation is made from the wooden framework used to construct Halilaj's new family home in the capital, Pristina, after the family decided to leave Runik, where they had lived for years. Like a disassembled negative mark, the structure – a mould of the building – fills the exhibition space with its outlined emptiness, defining different rooms and spaces.

In HangarBicocca, the work has been exploded on different horizontal and vertical levels. The common areas of the house serve as the central section of the installation, connecting other, surrounding works such as *26 Objekte n'Kumpir* (2009) and the metal enlargements of the space, realised in 2015, entitled *It is the first time dear that you have a human shape*. In fact, imbued by a desire marked by expectation, a feeling that precedes any move to a new city, *The places I'm looking for* is actually a family portrait in which past and future intertwine to compose new stories derived from the vicissitudes of its inhabitants' lives. "When I look at this new displacement", remarks Halilaj, "I can almost perceive the real house, now almost finished in Pristina. The same house that I have not been able to build with all of my family and the one I still have to see in person, because I'm often abroad. Each artwork shown here in Milan is a measurement of the distance, in space and time, I could have not covered during the years." This is the common element that runs equally strongly through the sculptures, projections, installations and drawings on show: truth spreading through a time-lapse microcosm.

Ginevra Bria

Petrit Halilaj: Space Shuttle in the Garden, until 13 March, HangarBicocca, Via Chiese 2, Milan, Italy.

Learn more at www.hangarbicocca.org.

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Credits

1. Petrit Halilaj, *26 Objekte n' Kumpir*, 2009. Courtesy the Artist and Pirelli HangarBicocca. Photo: Agostino Osio.

Posted on 30 January 2016

Venezia

Mensile Data 12-2015
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MILANO

Una casa volante per polli astronauti

L'infanzia, la guerra nell'ex Jugoslavia e la famiglia nelle opere di Petrit Halilaj: **all'HangarBicocca l'autobiografia s'interseca con la macrostoria**

All'HangarBicocca è allestita dal 3 dicembre al 31 marzo una mostra personale di Petrit Halilaj. Il titolo «Space Shuttle in the Garden» allude all'opera installata all'esterno, un razzo spaziale dipinto al suo interno di blu Klein, che ospita delle galline. Lo spazio all'Hangar si trasforma in un luogo incantato, abitato da una casa sospesa (quella della famiglia dell'artista a Pristina, in Kosovo), da gioielli in metallo giganteschi (quelli appartenuti alla madre), da una foresta di sculture suonabili, a forma di ocarine. La mostra, a cura di Roberta Tenconi, raccoglie opere che raccontano ed esorcizzano un passato traumatico, quello della guerra tra Serbia e Kosovo, alla fine degli anni Novanta, in cui la biografia personale dell'artista, nato 29 anni fa, rappresenta un costante spunto creativo. Il risultato è un'arte universale, capace di parlare del passato così come del futuro, intrisa di poesia e di speranza.

Petrit Halilaj, «Space Shuttle in the Garden» è la sua prima mostra in un'istituzione italiana, se si eccettua la sua partecipazione alla Biennale di Venezia del 2013, dove ha rappresentato il Padiglione del Kosovo. Che cosa significa per lei esporre a Milano, la città dove si è formato come artista studiando in Accademia?

Si tratta, per me, di un ritorno in Italia dopo cinque anni. La mostra include lavori rivisitati appositamente per lo spazio dell'Hangar e lavori prodotti negli ultimi cinque anni. È la prima volta che posso guardare tutte queste opere esposte insieme. Nelle mie mostre, compresa questa all'Hangar, tornano spesso vecchi interessi e ossessioni. Sono curioso di vedere come le storie innescate dai lavori esposti dialoghino tra loro e che cosa comunichino oggi.

Alcune, perciò, sono opere concepite anni fa ma ripensate per la mostra milanese?

Sì. Uno di questi è il progetto che ho presentato alla Biennale di Berlino nel 2010, «The places I'm looking for, my dear, are utopian places, they are boring and I don't know how to make them real», per cui ho ricostruito in scala reale la struttura portante della casa di famiglia a Pristina, la capitale del Kosovo. Qui a Milano l'impalcatura perde compattezza: le stanze occupano diversi livelli all'interno dello Shed. Questa nuova installazione fa da cornice ai lavori in mostra, li unifica all'interno dello spazio. Inoltre essa rispecchia la situazione attuale della mia famiglia.

Ora ciascun membro della famiglia ha una propria vita e una propria casa. Si tratta di un lavoro «vecchio», la cui nuova foggia consente di inquadrare e comprendere una situazione presente.

Ci racconti di più della sua casa di Pristina.

È la casa che io e la mia famiglia abbiamo costruito dopo il conflitto tra Kosovo e Serbia. È sempre stato un desiderio dei miei genitori andare a vivere in una città più grande, con più possibilità. È un sogno che avevano sempre avuto ma che non si era mai realizzato. Nel 2010, quando Kathrin Rhombert mi invitò a partecipare alla Biennale, ho pensato di soddisfare questo desiderio di famiglia, costruendo una casa vera e propria appena fuori Pristina e, contemporaneamente, il suo fantasma, la sua impalcatura a Berlino. L'installazione evoca un'assenza: rappresenta la casa che al tempo ancora mancava, pur essendo in fase di costruzione. È una struttura sospesa, spettrale. Quando abbiamo deciso di costruire la casa, la mia famiglia non era al corrente della mia omosessualità. Vivevo a Berlino, dove mi trasferii nel 2008, e la mia vita aveva assunto un nuovo corso. Costruire una casa insieme era forse il modo più semplice per conoscerci meglio. È stato il principio di un lungo processo di comunicazione e di avvicinamento.

I suoi lavori nascono da ricordi e memorie spesso legate alla sua infanzia e al suo Paese natale, il Kosovo. L'importanza delle sue opere sta nel fatto che conferisce forma materiale a tali ricordi, li rende universali e capaci di parlare anche del nostro presente.

Spesso leggo che il mio lavoro è connesso alla memoria, alla mia infanzia in parte trascorsa in un campo profughi in Albania. Il conflitto ha senz'altro influenzato me come individuo. Ma credo che anche le conseguenze della guerra, le trasformazioni che ad essa hanno fatto seguito, mi abbiano ugualmente influenzato. Ciò che rende speciale questa mostra è il fatto di essere in Italia, a Milano. Per me trasferirmi in Italia ha significato capire chi fossi e da dove venissi; mi ha permesso di assumere quella distanza critica che mi consente di adottare un nuovo punto di vista. Certamente i miei lavori nascono dal passato; eppure vivono nel presente e posseggono uno slancio verso il futuro. Uno dei lavori in mostra, ad esempio, è «Cleopatra», una luce il cui movimento riproduce quello degli insetti attratti da una fonte luminosa. Quest'opera è parte di un progetto più ampio sul Museo di Storia Naturale di Pristina; è connessa in particolare alle «defunte» collezioni di insetti e farfalle del vecchio museo.

Dopo la guerra, esso è stato trasformato in un museo etnologico; le collezioni naturali sono state trasferite in un deposito sotterraneo e abbandonate a se stesse. Quando andai a esplorare i depositi, mi resi conto che l'80% del materiale del vecchio museo era rovinato e non più utilizzabile. In quel preciso momento della storia del Kosovo la priorità era avere un museo che raccontasse la diversità e la specificità dei kosovari. La natura, una risorsa comune nella quale possiamo tutti identificarci, è stata messa da parte, dal momento che non raccontava alcuna diversità. Per questo, in occasione della mia mostra recente alla Bundeskunsthalle di Bonn, ho deciso di ricreare la mia personale versione del Museo di Storia Naturale di Pristina: un'installazione composta da animali scolpiti con un impasto di terra, erba ed escrementi. È stato fantastico quando, quest'anno, ho ricevuto un'email da uno studente della Università di Costanza: un team di biologi albanesi e tedeschi mi invitava a partecipare alla realizzazione di un nuovo museo di storia naturale, ora chiamato Kosovo Environmental Education and Research Center. Per tornare al mio lavoro, questo è un esempio di come la mia pratica tragga origine dal passato, in questo caso il defunto Museo di Storia Naturale, per poi condizionare concretamente la realtà presente grazie allo slancio verso un miglioramento futuro.

Uno degli aspetti più affascinanti delle sue opere sono i titoli. Sono spesso lunghe frasi in cui lei sembra rivolgersi a un interlocutore immaginario o all'opera stessa. Come nascono i suoi titoli?

Quando vivevo in Italia scrivevo molto, in particolare tra il 2007 e il 2008. Molti dei miei titoli più lunghi e complessi provengono da questi testi. È incredibile il fatto che estratti da testi scritti diversi anni fa possano adattarsi in modo così naturale a nuovi lavori. L'anno scorso ho raccolto questi scritti in un libro, accompagnati da alcuni disegni, perlopiù di uccelli (il libro è *Of course blue affects my way of shitting*, Chert e Motto Books, 2014, Ndr).

Si racconta un aneddoto legato alla sua infanzia. Durante la guerra in Kosovo, quando si trovava in un campo profughi in Albania, all'età di 13 anni, chiese a un volontario due matite colorate, quando a ogni ragazzo ne veniva consegnata una sola. Insistette per averne due, sostenendo di essere ambidestro e, perciò, di essere in grado di disegnare contemporaneamente con entrambe le mani. È una leggenda o è accaduto per davvero?

Accadde veramente. Il volontario in questione, cui chiesi due matite anziché una, è Giacomo Poli, un italiano di Bozzolo, in provincia di Mantova, dove ora ho il mio studio. Giacomo è la mia seconda famiglia. Nel campo profughi, tra me e lui, nacque una profondità di complicità; ogni giorno mi invitava a disegnare e a dialogare con lui. Mi invitò in Italia a studiare arte nel 2004: per questo sono arrivato a Milano.

All'Accademia di Brera ha frequentato il corso di Alberto Garutti. Come ricorda quel periodo?

Mi sento estremamente fortunato a essere stato suo allievo. All'inizio, per me, le sue lezioni furono uno shock completo. Vi era un reale scambio di opinioni tra studenti e professore; ci esortava continuamente a vedere quello che succedeva nel mondo, al di fuori dall'ambiente dell'accademia. È stato un incoraggiamento straordinario.

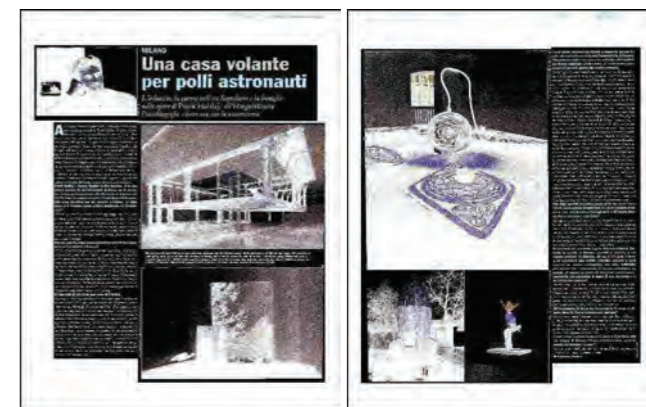
I suoi lavori parlano spesso di casa e riportano alle sue origini. Il Kosovo, l'Italia o la Germania: quale di queste definirebbe «casa»?

La vera «casa» è quella che vive dentro di noi. È la sola che possiamo portarci dietro ovunque decidiamo di andare.

■ Federico Florian



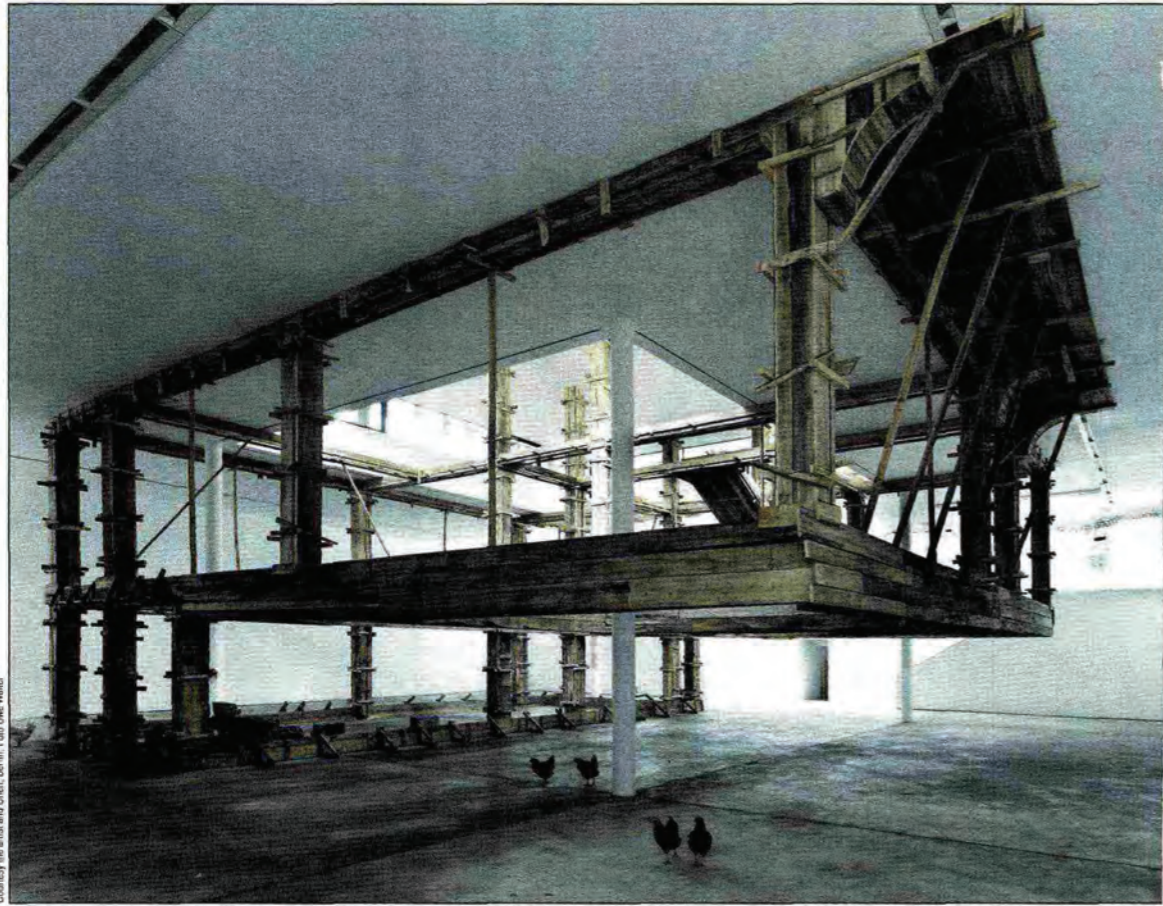
Foto: Enzo Bignardi



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Courtesy the artist and Chert, Berlin. Foto: Uwe Hübner

Alcune opere di Petrit Halilaj (in alto a sinistra), protagonista di un'ampia mostra all'HangarBicocca di Milano: qui sopra, «The places I'm looking for, my dear, are utopian places, they are boring and I don't know how to make them real» (2010); in basso, «Poisoned by men in need of some love» (2014). Nella pagina accanto, in alto, «It is the first time dear that you have a human shape» (2012); in basso, da sinistra, «They are lucky to be bourgeois hens II» (2009) e «Poisoned by men in need of some love» (2014)



Courtesy the artist and Chert, Berlin/Karim Mennour, Paris. Foto: Kolden Damm, 2014

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Hangar



Courtesy the artist and Chert, Berlin. Foto: Karim Mennour, Paris. Foto: Kolden Damm, 2014



Courtesy the artist and Chert, Berlin/Karim Mennour, Paris. Foto: Kolden Damm, 2014

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Hangar

Petrit Halilaj at Kölnischer Kunstverein

July 10, 2015



Artist: Petrit Halilaj

Exhibition title: ABETARE

Venue: Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, Germany

Date: April 14 – August 2, 2015

Photography: images courtesy of the artist and Kölnischer Kunstverein and Simon Vogel

The basis of Petrit Halilaj's (b.1986) work as an artist is provided by the (still short) trajectory of his life, which was substantially shaped by the history of his homeland of Kosovo. In installations, drawings and films he deals with the experiences of his childhood and adolescence and, with a great capacity for empathy, he examines thematic complexes including homeland, memory and identity. At the same time, there is always something universally valid bound up with the artist's works, which seem to have emerged from the world of a storyteller. Thus, they speak to and lastingly touch their viewers, regardless of their relationship to the recent history of south-eastern Europe.



ALTE MEISTER, VON NEUEN GELIEBT

Künstler sind Pilger. Es gibt Werke, zu denen kehren sie immer wieder zurück. **PETRIT HALILAJ** ist fasziniert von Albrecht Dürers „Blaurackenflügel“ aus der Sammlung der Wiener Albertina

„Es war der erste Tag, an dem wir die Türen zu der Sammlung des früheren Naturhistorischen Museums in Pristina öffneten. Das Haus war 2001, zwei Jahre nach Ende des Kosovokrieges, geschlossen und in ein ethnologisches Museum umgewandelt worden. Die dadurch überflüssigen Tierpräparate hatte man in einem dunklen Kellerraum verstaut. Ein Großteil war durch die Feuchtigkeit und jahrelange Schließung zerstört oder verwest, manche Stücke hatten aber überlebt.“

In einem kleinen Holzschrank entdeckte ich den abgerissenen Flügel einer Blauracke und musste an Dürers berühmtes Bild denken. Das Fundstück entsprach bis ins Detail Dürers Darstellung. Nicht, dass ich dachte: Wow, ein Dürer! Aber der Kontrast zwischen der kunstgeschichtlichen Ikone und diesem zeretzten Stück Müll sagte mir, dass ich weitermachen musste mit meiner Arbeit. Der Flügel wurde Teil meiner Ausstellung, die zunächst in Wiens gezeigt wurde und zurzeit in der Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn weitergeführt wird.

Zum ersten Mal sah ich Dürers Arbeit in einem Buch, im Haus meiner zweiten Familie in Italien. Ich kam als 18-Jähriger nach Italien, um in Mailand Kunstgeschichte zu studieren, meine Familie blieb im Kosovo. Dürer hat ja eine ganze Reihe von detailgenauen Tierzeichnungen gemacht. Ich teile mit ihm die Leidenschaft für die Natur, aber ich bin kein Kenner seines Werks. Mehr als einzelne Meisterwerke interessiert mich die Idee der Reproduktion, der Moment, in dem etwas zu kommunizieren beginnt. Was mich an der Blauracke besonders fasziniert, ist der Konflikt der Einzigartigkeit, der Konflikt der Zeiten. Der Kontext, aus dem heraus Dürer sein Bild geschaffen hat, und der Kontext, aus dem heraus jetzt dieser Flügel in meiner Ausstellung gelandet ist. Kulturgeschichte, Natur, Zerstörung, Müll, Zufall. Die Hintergründe sind völlig unterschiedlich, aber das Ergebnis ist das gleiche Bild. Die Blauracke in meiner Ausstellung ist für mich vor allem die Spur einer Abwesenheit.

Wir haben im Jahr 2013 die Türen zu einer Sammlung geöffnet, die vor der Öffentlichkeit verschlossen war, aber einst zu ihr gehörte. Das war für sich schon ein sehr positives Ereignis. Nicht nur, weil wir 20 Prozent des Museums retten konnten, sondern weil wir damit etwas Neues angestoßen haben. Der wissenschaftliche Nutzen der Exponate ist verloren, niemand wird sie sich jemals wieder zum Studium der Natur anschauen. Aber indem wir sie in den Kontext der zeitgenössischen Kunst überführt haben, wird aus Naturgeschichte eine Art sozialer oder menschlicher Geschichte. Solche Transformationen spiegeln zugleich den radikalen Wandel, der sich im früheren Jugoslawien



ALBRECHT DÜRER
„Flügel einer Blauracke“, um 1500 oder 1512, Aquarell und Deckfarben auf Pergament, 19,6 x 20 cm

vollzog, als Kultur und Geschichte nicht nur zerstört, sondern oft auch für den Moment genutzt wurden. Und das nicht immer zum Besten. Die Umwandlung des naturhistorischen in ein ethnologisches Museum fiel in eine Phase, als der Kosovo unabhängig wurde. In dieser Zeit des *nation building* herrschte ein größerer Bedarf an völkischen Exponaten. Man fand keinen neuen Ort für die Tiere, wollte es vielleicht auch gar nicht, und so verschwanden sie im Keller.

In Kooperation mit dem neuen Direktor des Museums – und dank der Gelder meiner Ausstellungsetats – gelang es mir, die versteckte Sammlung zu öffnen, die hinter einer Mauer verborgen war. Man konnte den Raum nicht einmal erahnen. Viele Tiere waren mit Spinnennetzen und Pfizen übersät. Ein eigener Mikrokosmos

hatte sich gebildet, eine neue Schöpfung mitten im Tod. Je mehr Zeit ich dort unten mit den Tieren verbrachte, desto mehr schienen sie mir wie ein Porträt der Menschheitsgeschichte, ein Abbild dessen, was uns widerfahren ist. Was Isolation bedeutet. Was mit Dingen und Gruppen geschieht, wenn ein Krieg ausbricht. Wenn sich die Prioritäten ändern, rücken manche Themen in den Fokus, andere verschwinden.

Selbst heute noch ist der Kosovo ein isoliertes Land in Europa. Erst nicht Teil des Schengener Abkommens. Man braucht ein Visum, um in den Rest Europas zu reisen. Meine Familie durfte nicht zur Eröffnung meiner Ausstellung in Bonn kommen. Eine Ausstellung in der Bundeskunsthalle! Als Künstler darf ich für eine Museumsschau einreisen, habe eine Galerie in Berlin, aber ich darf nicht länger als drei Monate in Deutschland bleiben. Wenn wir nach Madrid oder Paris reisen wollen, geht es nicht um den billigsten Flug und das beste Hotel, sondern wir müssen einen triftigen Grund finden, um überhaupt ein Visum zu erhalten. Wir werden anders wahrgenommen. Wie bei den Spinnennetzen über den Tieren legt sich etwas über dich, was du eigentlich nicht bist. Insofern kann ich es fast verstehen, dass wir nach 15 Jahren noch immer kein neues naturhistorisches Museum haben – das Land hat andere Probleme. Aber ich bin zuversichtlich. In letzter Zeit ändert sich viel im Kosovo.“



Petrit Halilaj lebt und arbeitet zwischen Berlin, Ruzik (Kosovo) und Bozolo (Italien). Aktuelle Ausstellungen: „She, fully burning around, became terrestrial“, Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, bis 18. Oktober. „ABETARE“, Kölnischer Kunstverein, bis 7. Juni, anschließend Pause, dann 17. Juni bis 2. August

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A BRIEF – AND PROLONGED – HISTORY OF TRAUMA IN CONTEMPORARY ART

BY JENNIFER ALLEN

Can contemporary art represent trauma? While the trauma caused by a natural disaster, in its anonymity and inhumanity, eludes representation, damage inflicted by man seems to lend itself to narration, recollection and testimony on the part of survivors. Trauma resists being represented by its victims, by definition: though they repress it, it cannot be fully erased because its "transmission" offers crucial information for our own survival and that of our descendants. Jennifer Allen—faced with the stuffed animals covered with mud of Petrit Halilaj, a zoo of zombies that cannot vanish—ponders an art that cannot be "contemporary" but can only bear retrospective witness.



Opposite: Petrit Halilaj, *She, fully turning around, became terrestrial*, 2015. Photo: Simon Vogel.
Above: *Terrestrial*, 2015. Courtesy: the artist, Chert, Berlin; Kamel Mennour, Paris.

di Jennifer Allen

può il trauma trovare rappresentazione nell'arte contemporanea? Se il trauma provocato da una catastrofe naturale resiste, nella sua anonimata e disumanità, alla rappresentazione, è la rovina inflitta dall'uomo a prestarsi alla rievocazione, nei ricordi e nelle testimonianze dei sopravvissuti. Ma il trauma resiste, resiste per definizione alla rappresentazione da parte del traumatizzato: è rimosso e tuttavia non può scomparire perché la sua "trasmissione" offre informazioni cruciali per la sopravvivenza propria e dei propri discendenti. Jennifer Allen si ferma a meditare su un'arte che non può essere "contemporanea" ma solo testimoniale, retrospettiva, lo fa davanti agli animali impagliati e ricoperti di fango di Petrit Halilaj, uno zoo di zombie che non può scomparire.

È difficile immaginare un'arte in grado di cogliere gli eventi traumatici del nostro tempo, dalle catastrofi naturali a quelle causate dall'uomo, dalle alluvioni che sommergono le città ai profughi che anegano in mare. La mostra di Petrit Halilaj allestita alla Bundeskunsthalle di Bonn – "She, fully turning around, became terrestrial" – sembra fondere il naturale e l'umano in una sala dall'atmosfera sinistra, popolata dai fantasmi dell'ex museo di storia naturale della sua Pristina. La collezione di animali impagliati – anche se non direttamente colpita dalla guerra del Kosovo – è stata sigillata in archivio nel 2001 per far posto al nuovo Museo etnografico, che antepone la cultura alla natura. Quando il film di Halilaj dal titolo *July 14th?* (2013) mostra il momento in cui il sigillo viene rotto, si comprende, con dolore, che la collezione è stata messa via senza alcuna cura: più sepolta che conservata. Se è questo l'aspetto degli animali – disidratati, impagliati, ricoperti di muffa, infestati dalle tarme, in decomposizione al buio – si può capire se non proprio la condizione delle persone quantomeno quella dei loro ricordi. Halilaj sottolinea il costante deterioramento ricreando gli animali come sculture di fango: finalmente sepolte nella terra sebbene in superficie. Spostando l'attenzione dalle persone agli animali, l'artista allude alle sfide di un'arte che affronta il tema del trauma. C'è un problema di fondo nel creare un'opera – figurarsi un dialogo – capace di esprimere il trauma da e per una prospettiva umana, sia essa artistica, collettiva o individuale. La mostra segue una doppia morte: gli animali perdono la vita e poi, aspetto ben più importante, la loro esistenza come manufatti per gli esseri umani, poiché pochi resterebbero impressionati dalla prima morte. Trasformare la natura in cultura appare un primo passo necessario per comprendere la perdita. Nel caso della catastrofe naturale, come si può conversare, per esempio, con un terremoto? L'approccio giornalistico diffuso tende a far parlare le vittime in maniera tale da fondere la testimonianza alla documentazione: il caso più recente è quello del terremoto del Nepal dell'aprile del 2015, a un mese di distanza. Magari uno, cinque, dieci o addirittura vent'anni dopo seguirà un'altra serie di interviste... finché le tracce e la memoria svaniranno. Rispetto all'anonimato o alla disumanità della catastrofe naturale, quella causata dall'uomo sembra dapprima prestarsi con più facilità alla rappresentazione: se non proprio un dialogo, almeno dei racconti che si possono raccogliere, ripetere o persino contestare. Un caso eccezionale è quello della Commissione per la verità e la riconciliazione del Sudafrica che, per quanto imperfetta, è stata l'occasione per raccogliere le testimonianze delle vittime e dei perpetratori della violenza sotto il regime dell'apartheid. Un esempio recente è il processo dell'anziana guardia di Auschwitz, Oskar Gröning, la cui deposizione in tribunale è stata confrontata con

quelle dei sopravvissuti all'Olocausto tra cui Eva Mozes Kor, che gli ha concesso un controverso perdono a patto che lui riconoscesse le proprie responsabilità. In qualunque modo si giudichino Gröning o Mozes Kor, è importante prendere in considerazione se e come il passare del tempo abbia svolto un ruolo in questo scambio. Nello zoo di fango di Halilaj non ci sono esseri umani né accenni al fondamentale mezzo artistico della durata. Un'atmosfera umida e silenziosa investe il visitatore che entra nella sala della mostra: l'odore di una decomposizione che si rifiuta di perire.

Forse è opportuno qualche chiarimento. Il trauma resiste per definizione alla rappresentazione da parte del soggetto traumatizzato: in caso contrario, l'esperienza non sarebbe traumatica. Nella letteratura medica è presentato come una tenace cancellazione: un evento talmente spaventoso da essere bandito dalla coscienza, ma che in qualche modo persiste come un LP che salta sullo stesso grafico, lo stesso ricordo che non si riesce a rievocare per intero. Persino un incidente – senza un evidente intento umano più o meno malevolo – può essere rivissuto dall'inconscio solo in sogno, mentre i momenti precedenti e successivi vengono ricordati e raccontati con consapevolezza. Il saggio dei ricercatori e psicanalisti Françoise Davoine e Jean-Max Gaudillière dal titolo *History Beyond Trauma* (2004), ispirato dal loro lavoro clinico sul trauma, sostiene che i traumi cercano una rappresentazione simbolica: non solo nei sintomi del disturbo post-traumatico da stress del corpo del traumatizzato, ma anche in manifestazioni esterne al corpo come la letteratura e l'arte.

Il sottotitolo dello studio – "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one cannot stay silent" (di cui non si può parlare, di cui non si può tacere) – evidenzia questo paradosso rispetto alla rappresentazione simbolica. Eppure tale tensione tra silenzio ed espressione sembra anche logica. Poiché di fatto minaccia la vita, il trauma non si può dimenticare: la sua esperienza custodisce informazioni cruciali per la sopravvivenza dell'individuo e dei figli. È difficile ignorare il graffio sull'LP che ci ricorda che qualcosa è stato dimenticato ma non avrebbe dovuto esserlo... Mentre altri ricercatori hanno dimostrato che il trauma si può trasmettere da una generazione all'altra in senso psicologico e fisiologico, per Davoine e Gaudillière si tratta di un ricordo nomade, una sorta di clandestino mnemonico che passa da una generazione all'altra, persino attraverso i secoli, per raggiungere la meta della rappresentazione simbolica.

Tornando all'arte, emergono due elementi. In primo luogo l'arte contemporanea sul trauma – o almeno sui traumi contemporanei dal punto di vista del traumatizzato – sembra impossibile. "Contemporaneità" è l'antitesi di "trauma". Anche se, mentre io scrivo e mentre voi leggete queste righe, si stanno verificando innumerevoli eventi spaventosi, questi diventeranno più visibili nell'arte contemporanea del futuro. Il resto non è altro che l'insieme dei resoconti di altri testimoni. L'arte sul trauma tende a essere non solo testimoniale, ma anche retrospettiva, una reminiscenza espressa anni o decenni dopo l'evento. Possiamo solo ipotizzare che Mozes Kor abbia avuto bisogno di tempo per perdonare in parte la guardia di Auschwitz, eppure è chiaro che la sua esperienza non si poteva condividere per decenni. Come ha detto, parlando della defunta sorella gemella, anche lei sopravvissuta al campo di concentramento: "Non ne abbiamo parlato fino al 1985".

In secondo luogo, il trauma sembra produrre una scissione nell'individuo: prima e dopo, noto e ignoto, ricordo e dimenticanza, in seguito testimonianza e deposizione, esperienza e spiegazione. Nel caso

delle guerre, spesso rimangono poche o zero tracce materiali in grado di dimostrare quanto è avvenuto o cosa esisteva prima del trauma (e cosa potrebbe favorire un ritorno a una vita e a un'identità precedenti). Sembra esistere solo una vita "oltre" il trauma, che di frequente è ricostruito tramite ricordi orali: lo dimostra la prevalenza di deposizioni trascritte, registrate o filmate. Tale scissione produce uno sdoppiamento, forse addirittura una moltiplicazione, nel soggetto o nei soggetti traumatizzati. Ancora una volta lo zoo di fango di Halilaj – il raddoppio delle carcasse impagliate e poi in decomposizione degli animali – offre un'opportuna approssimazione della moltiplicazione traumatica: una sorta di zombie che non può parlare, ma non può neanche essere eliminato e ci tornerà per sempre.

Opposite - Petrit Halilaj, *"She, fully turning around, became terrestrial"* installation view at Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, 2015. Courtesy: the artist; Chert, Berlin; Kamel Mennour, Paris. Photo: Simon Vogel.



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Opposite - Petrit Halilaj, "She, fully turning around, became terrestrial" installation view at Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, 2015. Courtesy: the artist, Chert, Berlin; Kamel Mannour, Paris. Photo: Simon Vogel

It's hard to imagine an art that could capture today's traumatic events: from natural to human disaster, floods drowning cities to refugees drowning at sea. Petrit Halilaj's exhibition at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn—"She, fully turning around, became terrestrial"—seems to fuse both poles of the natural and the human with an eerie hall, filled with the ghosts of the Ex-Natural History Museum in his native Pristina.

The collection of stuffed animals—while not directly impacted by the Kosovo War—was sealed in the archives in 2001 to make way for the new Ethnographic Museum of Kosovo and its preference for culture over nature. As Halilaj's film *July 14?* (2013) shows the moment when the seal is broken, it becomes painfully clear that the collection was shut away without maintenance: more buried than stored. If that's what the animals look like—dried, stuffed, covered in mold, infested by moths, rotting in the dark—one can fathom if not the state of the people then that of their memories. Halilaj underscores this perpetual decay by recreating the animals as mud sculptures: finally buried in earth, albeit above ground.

By shifting his attention from people to animals, Halilaj suggests the challenges of addressing trauma with art. There is a fundamental problem of creating a work—let alone a dialogue—that can articulate trauma from and for a human perspective, whether artistic, collective or individual. Halilaj's exhibition follows a double death: the animals lose their own lives and then, more importantly, their existence as artifacts for humans, since few would be shocked by the first death. Turning nature into culture appears as a necessary first step to grasp loss. Indeed, in the case of a natural disaster, how do you have a conversation with, say, an earthquake? The popular journalistic approach is to let victims speak in a way that binds testimony with documentation—most recently about the April 2015 Nepal earthquake, one month on. Another set of interviews may come one year later and five years, ten or even twenty... until the traces and the memories fade.

The human disaster—compared with the natural disaster's anonymity or inhumanity—would initially appear to lend itself more easily to representation: if not a dialogue then at least narratives, which can be collected, retold or even contested. An exceptional case is South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which, however flawed, provided a testimonial platform for victims and perpetrators of violence under apartheid. A recent example is the trial of the aged Auschwitz guard Oskar Gröning, whose court testimony was matched with testimonies from Holocaust survivors, including Eva Mozes Kor, who controversially offered him forgiveness, albeit with the insistence that he acknowledge his responsibility. However one judges Gröning or Mozes Kor, it seems important to consider if and how the passage of time played a role in this exchange. In Halilaj's mud menagerie, there are no humans, nor mention of the crucial artistic medium of duration. An atmosphere of moist silence hits you when you enter the exhibition: the smell of a decay that refuses to die.

Some clarifications seem necessary. By definition, trauma resists representation by the traumatized subject; otherwise the experience would not be traumatic. In the clinical literature, trauma appears as a stubborn erasure: an event so horrific that it is banned from the consciousness yet somehow persists, like an LP record that keeps on skipping over the same scratch, the same memory that cannot be fully recalled. Even an accident—without clear human intent, malicious or otherwise—may be relived by the unconscious in dreams only while the moments before and after can still be consciously recollected and retold. Based on their clinical work on trauma, the researchers and psychoanalysts Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière's *History Beyond Trauma* (2004) argues that traumas seek symbolic representation: not only in symptoms of Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD) in the body of the traumatized individual, but also in manifestations outside the body, such as literature or art.

The subtitle of their study—"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one cannot stay silent"—underscores this paradox in relation to symbolic representation. Yet such a tension between silence and expression also seems logical. Since the trauma is de facto life-threatening, it cannot be forgotten; its experience holds crucial information for the survival of the person and their offspring. It's difficult to ignore that scratch in an LP record that reminds us of something that has been forgotten but should not have been... While other researchers have demonstrated that trauma can pass from one generation to the next—psychologically and physiologically—Davoine and Gaudillière suggest that a trauma is a nomadic memory, a kind of mnemonic stowaway who keeps moving from one generation to the next, even across centuries, to reach its destination of symbolic representation.

As far as art is concerned, two points emerge. First, contemporary art about trauma—or at least about contemporary traumas from the perspective of the traumatized—seems impossible. "Contemporary" is antithetical to "trauma." Although countless horrific events are occurring as I write and as you read these lines, these events can be expected to become more visible in the contemporary art of the future. The rest must remain accounts from other witnesses. Art about trauma tends to be not only testimonial but also backward looking: articulate in reminiscence, from years to decades after the event. One can only speculate if Mozes Kor needed time to partially forgive the Auschwitz guard, yet it's clear that her experience could not be shared for decades. As she noted about her late twin sister who had also survived the death camp: "We did not talk about it until 1985."

Second, the trauma seems to produce a splitting in the subject: before and after, known and unknown, recalled and forgotten, even later, witnessing and testimony, experience and explanation. In the case of wars, there are often few or no material traces left that would prove what has happened or what existed before the trauma (and what might provide some kind of return to a former identity and life). There seems to be an afterlife only to the trauma, which is often reconstituted through oral memories—the prevalence of testimonies recorded in writing, sound or film being a case in point. This splitting produces a doubling—perhaps even a multiplication—within the traumatized subject, if not subjects. Again, Halilaj's mud menagerie—as doubles of the stuffed and then rotting animal carcasses—offers a fitting approximation of traumatic multiplication: a kind of zombie that cannot speak but cannot be extinguished and always haunts you.



Above - Petrit Halilaj, *Poisoned by men in need of some love (Duo Mustela nivalis)*, 2013. "Poisoned by men in need of some love" installation view at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, 2013. © the artist. Courtesy: the artist and kamel mennour, Paris. Photo: © WIELS Contemporary Art Centre/Laura Toots

Below - Petrit Halilaj, *July 14th?* (still), 2013. Courtesy: the artist; Chert, Berlin; Kamel Mennour, Paris



It's hard to imagine an art that could capture today's traumatic events: from natural to human disaster, floods drowning cities to refugees drowning at sea. Petrit Halilaj's exhibition at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn—"She, fully turning around, became terrestrial"—seems to fuse both poles of the natural and the human with an eerie hall, filled with the ghosts of the Ex-Natural History Museum in his native Pristina.

The collection of stuffed animals—while not directly impacted by the Kosovo War—was sealed in the archives in 2001 to make way for the new Ethnographic Museum of Kosovo and its preference for culture over nature. As Halilaj's film *July 14?* (2013) shows the moment when the seal is broken, it becomes painfully clear that the collection was shut away without maintenance: more buried than stored. If that's what the animals look like—dried, stuffed, covered in mold, infested by moths, rotting in the dark—one can fathom if not the state of the people then that of their memories. Halilaj underscores this perpetual decay by recreating the animals as mud sculptures: finally buried in earth, albeit above ground.

By shifting his attention from people to animals, Halilaj suggests the challenges of addressing trauma with art. There is a fundamental problem of creating a work—let alone a dialogue—that can articulate trauma from and for a human perspective, whether artistic, collective or individual. Halilaj's exhibition follows a double death: the animals lose their own lives and then, more importantly, their existence as artifacts for humans, since few would be shocked by the first death. Turning nature into culture appears as a necessary first step to grasp loss. Indeed, in the case of a natural disaster, how do you have a conversation with, say, an earthquake? The popular journalistic approach is to let victims speak in a way that binds testimony with documentation—most recently about the April 2015 Nepal earthquake, one month on. Another set of interviews may come one year later and five years, ten or even twenty... until the traces and the memories fade.

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Artist's Diary

Alvaro Urbano & Petrit Halilaj

The artists tell us about their recent large installation "For the birds" and its development, from their one year residency in Villa Romana, in Firenze, to the group show "Trouble in Paradise" at Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, and how everything started in their Berlin apartment.

luglio 17, 2015
ATPdiary

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Sometimes the best things start by necessity.

Almost since when we started to live together in a 45 sq meter space in Kreuzberg we have been sharing our home with canary birds. Small, fragile and beautiful animals flying around without a cage...



— ? Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj



— ? Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj



— ? Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj

Slowly we started a conversation with them, studying and imitating the sounds they produced. A strong relation and admiration grew with time. We never tried to teach them or train them and our situation far from being something idyllic, our living space ended up being a wild ecosystem where our needs started to melt and we had to constantly redefine them day by day.

The canaries built a little nest with all the small things they found in our studio, from human hair to small pieces of paper to tobacco, to Christmas and party decoration... the nest was a sort of bizarre and colorful model, which one could see maybe as a quite fascinating miniature of our home. Then the eggs and small new birds came after.



— ? Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj



— ? Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj



— ? Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj



— For the Birds, 2014. Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj at Villa Romana. (picture by Alvaro Urbano)

The first plan was to leave them free in our apartment inside the Villa but in the end we moved them to the studio on the other side of the house. To go from the apartment to the studio one has to pass through the garden... Some days we would bring them to the apartment and then back to the studio again...



— ? Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj



— For the Birds, 2014. Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj at Villa Romana. (picture by Alvaro Urbano)

In 2014 and after a long trip with our birds by train we arrived at Villa Romana in Florence to stay almost for a year. The director of the residency Angelika Stepken warned us about four "predators" that would have loved our birds just as much as we did...

Eventually, we came up with the idea of connecting the two spaces... it wasn't meant to be an installation or a sculpture, but at that time it was simply something necessary for us. Planned and developed together with our good friend and architect Pietro Minelli and a lot of help from other friends - we built a 90-meter long passage over two long weekends. We used rope and chicken fence, and a very simple helicoidal construction.



— For the Birds, 2014. Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj at Villa Romana. (picture by Alvaro Urbano)



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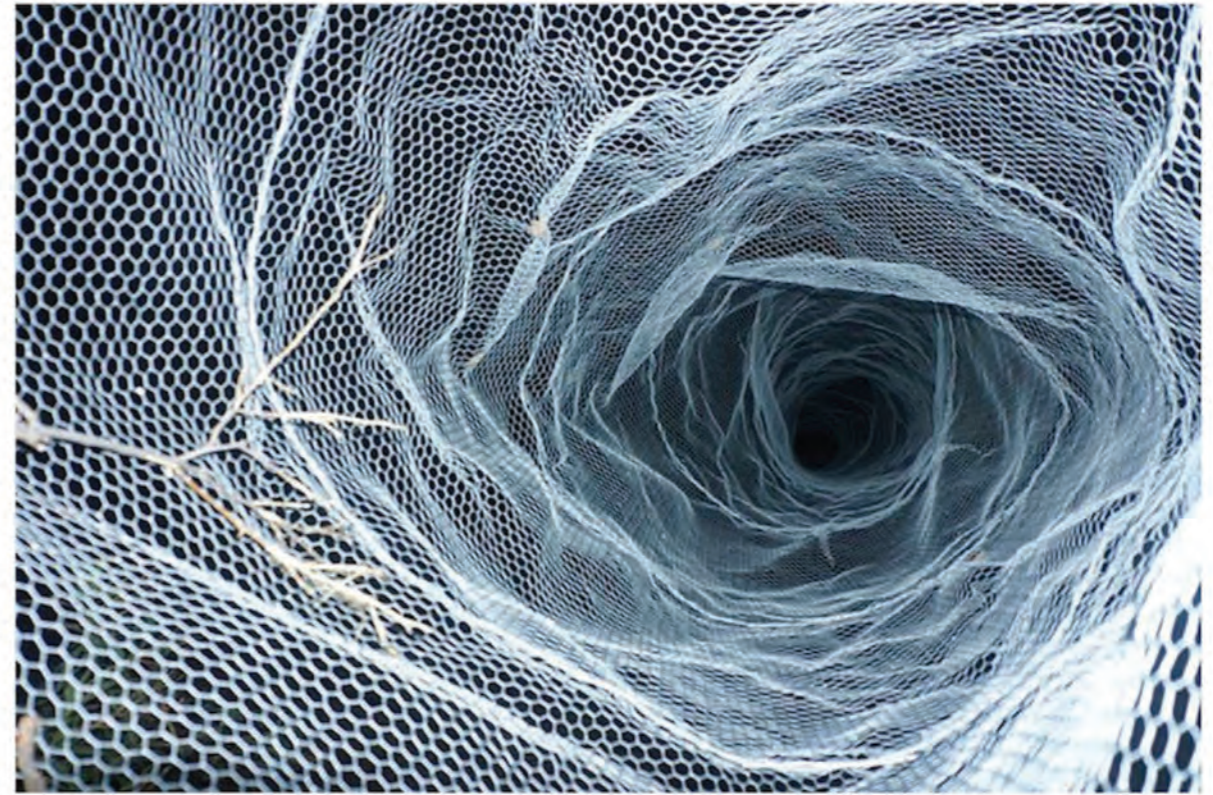


— For the Birds, 2014. Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj at Villa Romana. (picture by Alvaro Urbano)

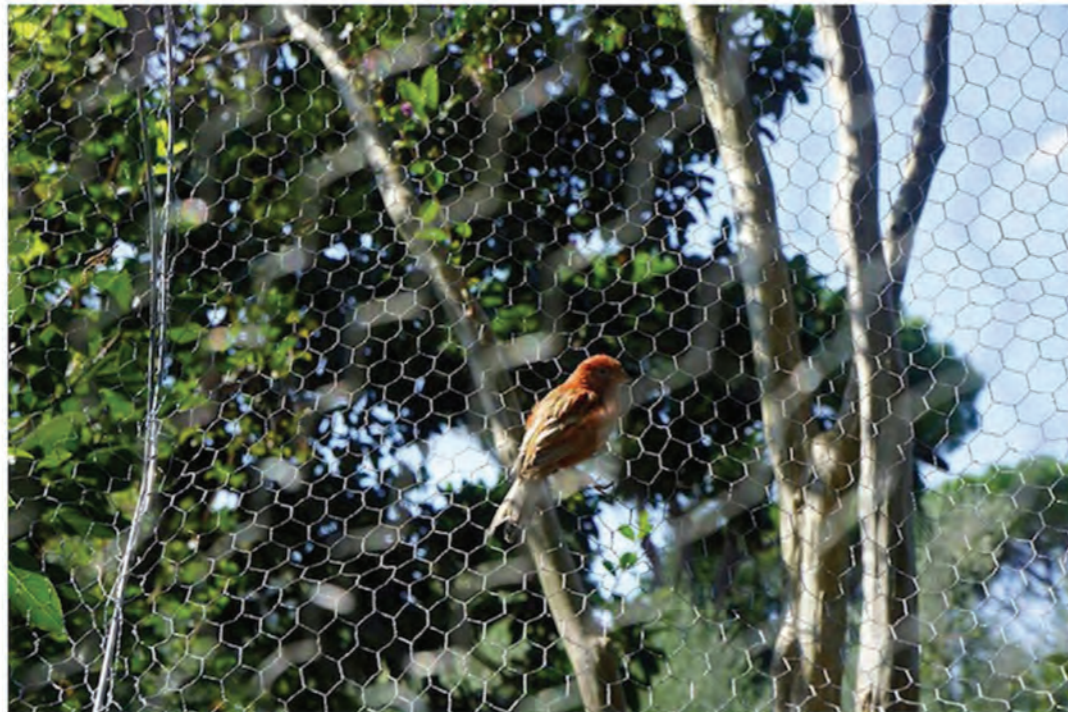
We traced the form and the curves by thinking about how a bird would fly; the trees and the architecture of the Villa shaped the rest. This floating structure was an attempt to give our birds more autonomy and still protect them.



— For the Birds, 2014. Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj at Villa Romana. (picture by Alvaro Urbano)



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— For the Birds, 2014. Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj at Villa Romana. (picture by Alvaro Urbano)

The experiment ended up being quiet successful since the birds seemed to be very happy and already started flying from our home to the studio from the very first day. In the next weeks they could do it in only few seconds. Birds were appearing and disappearing in the room fluttering and chirping. Small and colorful dots singing, flying and zigzagging in the garden... The window of our bedroom looked like sci-fi entrance, as if you could jump into another dimension.



— For the Birds, 2014. Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj at Villa Romana. (picture by Alvaro Urbano)



— For the Birds, 2014. Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj at Villa Romana. (picture by Alvaro Urbano)

Back in Berlin we both were invited to participate in the group show "Trouble in Paradise" at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn and we thought this was the perfect occasion to present the birds project.

The resulting piece, called "For the Birds", in this new context was not only quite different in terms of the building - from our apartment to a public institution, but also the path itself was in contrast to the specific architecture of the building.



— For the Birds, 2015. Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj at Bundeskunsthalle. (picture by Alvaro Urbano)



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— For the Birds, 2015. Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj at Bundeskunsthalle. (picture by Sanaz Modabber)

On this occasion we extended the project to the library as well, hiding some photos of our birds and their domestic life in the book collection of the museum.



— Where you Were Hiding. 2015. Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj 2015. At Bundeskunsthalle (Picture by Alvaro Urbano)

The birds in Bonn seemed to be quiet happy and made a nest and had eggs.



— ? Alvaro Urbano and Petrit Halilaj

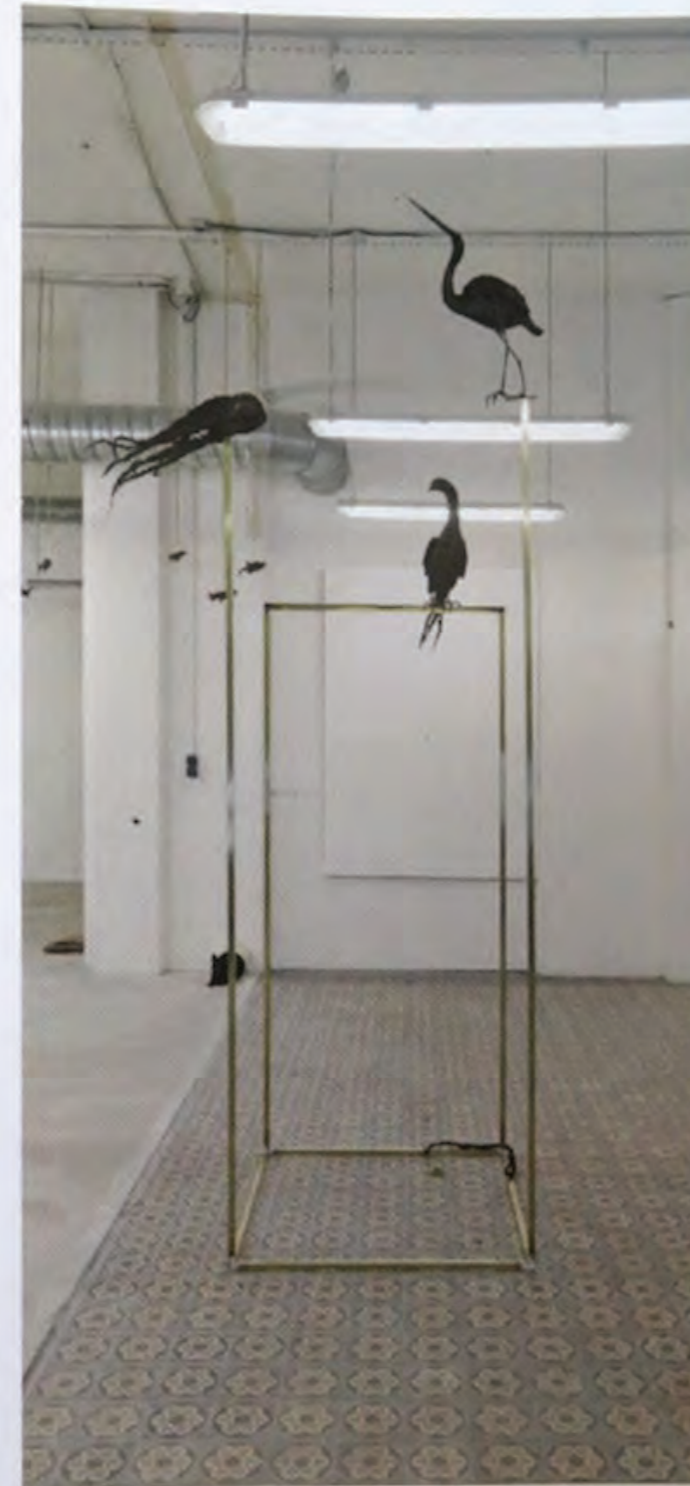
Soon after, while our birds were growing their little ones, we were invited for another project at Salts, Basel, where we extend the idea by building a big egg.



— What Comes First, 2015. Petrit Halilaj & Alvaro Urbano. At S.A.L.T.S (Picture by Alvaro Urbano)

This time for chickens...

ARTISTS' ARTISTS BEST OF 2014



MAURIZIO CATTELAN
Petrit Halilaj (Galleries Lafayette Foundation, Paris) Greetings from Kosovo! Today, in the Natural History Museum of Pristina, I saw fishes, peacocks, rabbits, and lizards. They were made out of soil and excrement, and they wandered the space like ghosts. They looked very dignified, though. It seemed that they were transitioning, occupying a space in between. Maybe because they weren't in Pristina anymore but in Paris. Or maybe because someone—namely, Kosovar artist Petrit Halilaj—excavated their carcasses from the museum's underground stockrooms and made replicas of them, now displayed in what will become the Galleries Lafayette Foundation art space. It felt like wandering in someone's unconscious (or in mine?). It also felt like being in a "lost" museum, which is the best, most twisted way to inaugurate a building committed to a new future.

Petrit Halilaj, *Poisoned by men in need of some love*, 2013, earth, grass, animal excrement, brass. Installation view, Galleries Lafayette Foundation, Paris. Photo: Aurélien Mole.

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Petrit Halilaj "I'm hungry to keep you close. I want to find the words to resist but in the end there is a locked sphere. The funny thing is that you're not here, nothing is." at Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon
 August 27~2014



Kunsthalle Lissabon presents "I'm hungry to keep you close. I want to find the words to resist but in the end there is a locked sphere. The funny thing is that you're not here, nothing is.", the first solo show of Kosovo artist Petrit Halilaj in Portugal.

Petrit Halilaj was born in present day Kosovo in 1986. He is too young to remember the fall of the Berlin Wall, but old enough to remember the ensuing consequences of that historic moment for the geographic area that rapidly came to be known as "ex-Yugoslavia". In questioning his own life experiences, the artist has come to reject pathos or any kind of nostalgia associated to his childhood memories of life as a refugee, privileging instead a more optimistic and materially complex practice, which favours a more critical and politically relevant approach.

From the start of his artistic activity, Halilaj's preference for ordinary materials and childhood memories have come to constitute an attempt to understand what notions of "home", "nation" or "cultural identity" might mean. The way in which he frequently combines earth, rubble, wood, birds (especially domesticated birds like chickens or canaries) or delicate drawings, evokes a personal and utopic world. At the same time, it reveals the incontrovertible reality of a geo-political situation that is much vaster and all encompassing than any single subjective experience of the world.

For his first exhibition in Portugal, Petrit Halilaj will present the inner structure of the nest that

previously formed the project he developed for the Republic of Kosovo's first official representation in the Venice Biennale of 2013.

The exhibition at the Kunsthalle Lissabon recovers both the work's title and the inner structure (made of wood panels and paint) of the installation. By moving this structure to Lisbon, these panels cease to operate as forms that construct and outline a space, and become the content of the project itself. Halilaj presents these architectural elements as both simple construction materials and as independent and autonomous objects, bearing the marks of their previous lives and usage.

For the original presentation in Venice, the panels were demarcating an inaccessible, closed space; a private nest for two canaries, which visitors could only peep at. Now, this space is open and accessible to the public, who are free to walk amongst the panels.

Furthermore, by situating these components in the exhibition context of the Kunsthalle Lissabon, which has been self-performing as an institution since its conception, the artist reflects on questions connected to the ways in which national or other representational logics are materialized in certain objects, and in the narratives they conjure.

at Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon

until 27 September 2014





Petrit Halilaj "I'm hungry to keep you close. I want to find the words to resist but in the end there is a locked sphere. The funny thing is that you're not here, nothing is." installation views at Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon

Mm 40

Agenda

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really blazing hot and even the skeptics would quietly move to the shade or ask around for some sunscreen. As this was an interesting mixture of atmospheric and social realities I got curious about whether this rumor, or maybe even the ozone hole itself, was part of the biennial?

The hole in the ozone layer? Yes, I think it could be part of the show, just like the Guaiba river and the sunset already are. I just haven't stated this on any caption yet.

And how did weather turn into the main theme of the whole biennial?

The truth is that many of the artworks I was interested in from the start were making various references to weather patterns or the atmosphere. I had also reread the novel *Atmospheric Disturbances* by Rivka Galchen, a complex story about falling out of love, where weather becomes a way to understand reality and to make a distinction between what is a desire and what is real. The atmosphere is what prevents us from seeing, it's a haze, but understanding the weather is also a way to understand how contemplation works. Contemplation has a lot to do with looking inside; it's a constant movement between what you are looking at and what you know. It's like losing yourself, but also understanding yourself more at the same time. So it is also about coexisting better with reality.

It seems that a lot of works in the exhibition act as measurement and communication devices, but permeated by disturbances of nature and the imagination.

Well, I do think that art is a communication technology, the oldest one. And getting the exhibition together, I wanted to deal with it without nostalgia or obsolescence. These notions are imposed on us because of how technology has been defined, because we are measuring its effectiveness based on speed, not quality. This exhibition tries to offer other ways to sense time.

Another thing I was interested to see was that many pieces in the show, both new and historic ones, were produced outside of art circles, involving various industries and corporations. Was that part of your concept?

Yes, that is definitely part of the exhibition. The historical artists I've included, like Vassilakis Takis, were collaborating with industries and universities early on. Also, this area of Brazil has a lot of industries working with ethanol, plastics, paper, mining, metal, etc. And it happens that many people on the biennial's board own these industries, so for me it was like a dream come true and a chance to start my own commission's program inviting artists to collaborate with various enterprises. This was about not just using the money and equipment, but the knowledge.

I overheard another rumor that apparently over 400,000 students are going to be involved in the biennial's educational program. True or false? It's true. Historically, the visitors to this exhibition, who number from 300,000 to 500,000, are mainly students from elementary and high schools in this area. The print run of the educational materials is around 7000 copies, meaning that we work with as many teachers.

So it's a huge part of the whole biennial.

For me, the whole project is an educational one. Each gallery in the exhibition space is a classroom. There is no separation between aesthetic and pedagogical experiences, if you see pedagogy not as a way of educating, but as a way of learning.

And what was the most important thing that you learned while doing this biennial?

Before starting this project, I thought that advanced technology is a synonym for socioeconomic progress. Then after a while I realized that there are many technologies and many temporalities. The efficacy of a particular technology should be measured in a specific context. So in a way I've dropped the idea of progress to embrace entropy and sustainability as a cultural approach to others.

(Sofia Hernández Chong Cuy interviewed by Jonas Zakaitis)

10. Performa 13

Various venues, New York
performa-arts.org

Through its past editions, Performa has reshaped the role of performance in the art world. What is the main goal of the upcoming edition?

As with the past biennials, the goal remains both to present innovative new artists and to place performance, which has been experiencing resurgence in the visual art world since Performa 05, firmly in an art-historical context. And as always, we aim to work with our network of peers throughout all of New York to transform the city into the center for performance.

One of the most important features of this year's Performa 13 will be the exploration of national borders in "Pavilions Without Walls," a fluid and innovative way to approach national identities in relation to performance. How will this interaction operate?

These "pavilions without walls" are modeled on the way that pavilions function during the Venice Biennale, but without the expense of built structures or the limitations of only supporting artists of certain nation-

alities. Instead, Performa and the participating countries – Norway and Poland – have collaborated to pool resources from the ground up, creating a comprehensive cultural exchange platform that includes commissioning, producing, touring, educating, collaborating and job training. These intensive multi-year partnerships incorporate Performa's vision of the city as a vibrant urban landscape by using spaces throughout the five boroughs of New York along with the extraordinary cultural infrastructures of these countries. In this way, the Performa Pavilions are a truly collective effort to develop, present, and disseminate the most innovative art and culture of our time around the world.

Surrealism will be this year's historic point of reference for Performa 13.

What is the most important characteristic of Surrealism that is still influential in contemporary performance?

Our historical anchors help us research the ways that a past movement, Surrealism in this case, have had an impact on the thinking and development of performance and the visual arts, as artists continue to engage with it as an ideology, artistic movement, and state of mind – a way of being in the world that oriented itself towards the unconscious. There are a number of projects that correspond directly to this within the biennial, including LA artist Shana Lutker, who is taking her fascination with the Surrealist fistfights – specifically one that actually took place on the occasion of Tristan Tzara's *Le Coeur à Gauche* in 1923 – and turning it into a highly stylized performance that includes her signature painted sculpture as well. Our research on this year's Surrealist theme began in January with the two-day symposium "Get Ready for the Marvelous: Black Surrealism in Dakar, Fort-de-France, Havana, Johannesburg, New York City, Paris, Port-au-Prince, 1932–2013," a groundbreaking conference that explored historical Surrealism in the African Diaspora and its relevance to contemporary art. This year's biennial will also feature a program with Fernando Arrabal that will elaborate on his parapsychics movement and include a Surrealist Café over two nights, *Two Arrabalesques*, which will feature a number of Surrealist performances.

Like our past biennials, which focused on Futurism and Russian Constructivism, our team's thorough research into the subject of Surrealism has established a point of departure for many of the projects you will see.

How does the Performa Institute develop the theoretical structure around performance practice?

Performa does not seek to develop theoretical structures – we break them! Take the Performa Commissions, for example: we help visual artists to take their first steps in live performance. The way they approach creating a live work is frequently different, and introduces new ideas and approaches to the whole field. The Performa Institute additionally provides a way to approach theory by looking at the field, live and in action. If we look at theory at all, it's about theory and practice in tandem, which, as with the mind-body axis, should be viewed as inseparable, as two sides of the same coin.

Looking back, how has shaping a performance biennial influenced your attitude towards performance?

My approach to performance has been honed through a lifetime of working across disciplines, in dance, fine arts and political science and viewing art history through a broad cultural lens that is not limited by media. That approach is evident in my book on the history of Performa, first published in 1979, and regularly updated to incorporate the newest developments in performance and contemporary art around the world. Deciding, in 2004, to organize a specialized biennial that would focus on "the live" in all disciplines, came from a desire to make this history known to a broad public, to show performance as being central to shaping the history of art, not a side show. The biennial continues to contextualize performance in this visual art trajectory and in the larger cultural setting. In many ways, Performa itself is "a museum without walls." We bring this hugely significant history to life, allowing audiences to fully consider the material in a context that addresses the history that preceded it while also looking forward to new directions.

(RoseLee Goldberg interviewed by Elena Tavecchia)

11. Petrit Halilaj

WIELS
Av. Van Volxemlaan 354, 1190 Brussels
wiels.org

The first time I saw Petrit Halilaj, he was flying. In a video, at the end-of-year exhibition at the Brera Academy: he was jumping in slow-motion around a classroom, with his Papageno profile, to the news of his country's independence, which at the time was only a dream. For that matter, he is a migratory creature, travelling an annual route between Kosovo, Italy, and Germany, as well as between present and past – his own having been ravaged by the war and by exile during his adolescence (he was

born in 1986). He loves birds. As a boy, he would play with the hens around his house in the country, later destroyed by the conflict, and imitate their clucking; as an adult, he began drawing them, lived with them in an installation, turned his parents' new chicken coop into the fantasy of a moon-bound rocket ship. As we know, neither barnyard animals nor humans can escape their imprisonment behind fences with a flap of their wings. I've seen him build nests, like the huge one made of earth and woven branches, inhabited by empty clothes and a pair of canaries, with which he represented Kosovo at this year's Venice Biennale: *I'm hungry to keep you close. I want to find the words to resist but in the end there is a locked sphere. The funny thing is that you're not here, nothing is.* Those canaries came from his home: they live free there, with no cage, and he watched them for months as they raised a family. At WIELS, for the exhibition "Poisoned by men in need of some love," curated by Elena Filipovic, Halilaj has peopled the museum with sculptures of birds and other animals, made from a mixture of dirt, straw, excrement, glue, and wire. He has perched them on light fixtures, on the ground, on the corner of a window, head-down or balanced on elegant brass rods. They are dark specters of the stuffed specimens from the former Museum of Natural History in Pristina, which no longer exist, except in photos and archival records. The story is told to us in the catalogue by the head of the Nature Sector, Safet Nishefci, who traces the life of the collection (some 1,812 specimens, 600 of birds alone, highlighting the biodiversity of the Balkans – and it's hard not to think in metaphors): from its inauguration in 1951, to the traumatic transfer of its contents to Belgrade during the conflict, to its reopening after the war, with a new inventory and the translation of all records from Serbian to Albanian and scientific Latin, until 2001, when the museum had to make way for the Ethnographic Museum of Kosovo and the animals from the showcases ended up behind a wall, rotting in the dark. Halilaj also tells its story in the video triptych that accompanies the show (*July 14th?*, 2013 – the title is a fragment of dialogue) recording the staff member's reluctance to reopen that door in the basement, justifying things with the American orders that everything was to be "tidied up" quickly. Under the spotlights, the "skeletons in the closet," covered in mold and cobwebs, seem macabre and fascinating, like mummies pulled from a sarcophagus. Embarrassing mummies, though, that no one here wants brought to light. At WIELS there is just one specimen "captured" from the real world: a yellow canary for which Petrit Halilaj ad Alvaro Urbano have constructed a blue mask of paper and wire, rendering it hard to identify. On the walls we instead find Halilaj's drawings of the museum's inventory cards, which turn the birds of the region into exotic creatures with tropical plumage. Kosovo (Kosova, in Albanian) is, in Serbian, an abbreviation of Kosovo Polje, or "Field of Blackbirds," the place near Pristina where a famous battle was fought in the fourteenth century between Serbs and Ottomans. On the six-hundredth anniversary of this event, in 1989, Slobodan Milosevic gave a speech that marked the beginning of Serbian hostilities towards the Albanian population, which then grew into the horrors of civil war and ethnic cleansing. Kosovo's former flag, in homage to the Albanian one, featured a glorious two-headed eagle, but the bird that lends the country its name is the *kos*, or *Turdus merula*, the Common Blackbird – duly registered as number 37 in the inventory of the vanished Natural History Museum of Pristina, where different races and species, ornithological and otherwise, could coexist in peace. There is a stubbornness full of tenderness, and of maturity, in Halilaj's attempt to bring that time back to life. The dioramas of natural history museums are among the ineradicable memories of childhood, convincing examples of the illusion that time can be made to stand still, be frozen and kept safe under glass. It is best expressed by Holden Caulfield, obsessed with the ones in New York: "The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. You could go there a hundred thousand times, and that Eskimo would still be just finished catching those two fish, the birds would still be on their way south, the deers would still be drinking out of that water hole [...]. Nobody'd be different. The only thing that would be different would be you. Not that you'd be so much older or anything. It wouldn't be that exactly. You'd just be different, that's all." (Text by Barbara Casavecchia)

12. 2013 Carnegie International

CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART
4400 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15213
ci13.cmoa.org

You have made a rehousing of the permanent collection a key part of the 2013 Carnegie International, which does not seem like a typical approach to the International, or other exhibitions of international art, for that matter.

TK: When we began our conversation, and started looking for things we

could latch onto that would structure our conversation, one of them was the institution itself. There is the architecture of the space, but, more importantly, the collection, which is the history of choices people have made in the context of this institution. We found these choices very useful, something to cast ourselves up against.

Right, because there's the exhibition that happens in the moment, which is very much about the present, and then there's the collection that sticks around, since much of the Carnegie's modern and contemporary holdings have been acquired out of past Internationals. The work that actually gets purchased out of the exhibitions might reflect different values.

DBA: We are in essence considering the show within the wake of the show, through the things that get left behind, while at the same time being very much enmeshed in the present.

TK: The choices that we've made about the works in the collection are through the lens of the contemporary artists chosen for the current section of the exhibition – we are always looking for dialogues between the two.

Has living in Pittsburgh for the planning of the exhibition influenced your approach to the exhibition?

DBA: It was a conscious decision from the beginning to be entwined in the local, to be meaningful about this, but not provincial. Part of this is just about being inclusive. This began with the blog, the Apartment talks, bar events, going out to specific neighborhoods and understanding perspectives outside of the given.

TK: There is this sense that Pittsburgh has been pursuing an environmental change. I don't mean ecologically speaking, but culturally and within the arts. We, in a sense, are the beneficiaries of this openness that is permeating the city.

DBA: The museum as a place within this city is very much in our thoughts. This is the interesting question: why all of a sudden, in 2013, did we start to like the institution and appreciate its history? I am surprised how positive our thinking is. I mean, despite all the obstacles, we have almost a perverse optimism.

So there is no sense of a critique in the International?

DBA: Well, we are not approaching the institution's history as a burden. Rather, as something that is quite functional and entirely backed up by a kind of civic generosity.

DBY: I think we hope that what we do for the International does change the museum, but the only reason we can get away with it, so to speak, is that the exhibition is temporary. So we can propose "what if the institution behaved in this way?" because it doesn't have to be a sustained thing, it is enough to just show what is possible.

Are there spaces in the building that you're using for installations that are not typically occupied by Internationals?

DBY: Yes, there are projects in the café, the hall of sculpture, the coat room, the botany hall, the grand staircase, the gem collection, two different hallways, and, of course, outside and offsite.

What happens in the coat room?

DBA: That is the place to get undressed.

You get naked?

DBA: It is a surprise. Some things have to remain a surprise. It makes everything more fun.

Where will the offsite projects take place?

DBY: There is a project in Braddock, which is just outside of Pittsburgh, with Transformazium, a collective that lives and works in North Braddock. Braddock is home to the last functioning steel mill in town, and has gone through very rough times. Another project will be in Homestead, the site of a great deal of labor history, where Philadelphia-based photographer Zoe Strauss is setting up a portrait studio.

Have there been many Pittsburgh-area artists in past Internationals?

DBY: Transformazium will be the first in maybe 45 years.

This International also includes a "playground," which is already installed right in front of the museum. Does it suggest that the audience should be childlike?

DBA: Childhood does suggest a sort of unspoiled spirit of the artist, but we are more interested in experimentation and risk. In addition to the *Lozzium* outside of the Museum, there is a section of the exhibition that is dedicated to twentieth-century playground design.

TK: The playground is a metaphor for a kind of experience that we believe art can provide, which is about sustained engagement. It would be great if our visitors get the sense when they're approaching the museum that it's not about dusting the cobwebs off of old, inanimate objects, but rather about experience.

DBY: It's also a metaphor for an institution. I like the risk of experiencing the new amongst other people who are strangers, in a public space. The museum has the potential to be a space where contradictory experiences occur and continue to resonate.

(David Norr in conversation with the co-curators of the 2013 Carnegie International: Daniel Baumann, Dan Byers, Tina Kukielski.)



11 Petrit Halilaj, Installation view of *Poisoned by men in need of some love* at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Chert, Berlin. Photo: Kristien Daem



12 Yvan Pestalozzi, *The Loziwurm*, 1972, re-installed outside of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. Photo: Josh Franzos



12 Image from "The Playground Project Exhibition", 2013 Carnegie International, Pittsburgh.

Sur la planète

PAR FRANÇOISE-ALINE BLAIN

KOSOVO

PREMIÈRE VÉNITIENNE

Depuis son accession à «la pleine souveraineté» en septembre 2012, la République du Kosovo a fait son entrée sur la scène artistique internationale. Après avoir participé l'an dernier à la biennale d'architecture de Venise, le pays aura, pour la première fois de son histoire, un pavillon à la prochaine biennale d'art contemporain de Venise (du 1^{er} juin au 24 novembre). L'artiste Petrit Halilaj (né en 1986) a été choisi pour représenter le pays.



PETRIT HALILAJ *The places I'm looking for, my dear, are utopian places, they are boring and I don't know how to make them real*, 2010

ALLEMAGNE

LA CAVE CACHÉE D'OTTO DIX

Il a été considéré par les nazis comme un «artiste dégénéré». En 1936, Otto Dix, figure de la Nouvelle Objectivité, s'est installé à Hemmenhofen, près du lac de Constance, entamant ainsi une «émigration intérieure». C'est là, dans la maison – où il a vécu jusqu'à sa mort, en 1969 – transformée en musée depuis 1991, que des ouvriers ont mis au jour dans la cave, derrière une bibliothèque, six fresques réalisées sur le thème du carnaval. Ces œuvres seront accessibles au public en juin, au moment de la réouverture du musée.

SUISSE

ZURICH RECHERCHE SES ŒUVRES

5176: c'est le nombre d'œuvres d'art qui auraient été égarées par la ville de Zurich. La commune suisse vient en effet de procéder au premier inventaire complet en près d'un siècle de sa collection de 35 000 pièces. Résultat: 15% seraient manquantes. Confiante, la mairie pense pouvoir retrouver la plupart d'entre elles, aujourd'hui dispersées dans plus de 500 lieux à travers la ville. La collection est estimée à 121 MFS (100 M€).

Papier erobert den Raum

Zeichnungen hängen heute nicht mehr nur gerahmt an der Wand. Eine Ausstellung auf Schloss Moyland lotet ihre Grenzen aus. Und stellt sechs junge Künstler mit großem Potenzial vor.



Petrit Halilaj springt über seine wild verteilten romantischen Himmelspaneelle. Heiner Franzen bringt seine zarten „Charactors“ akribisch auf Kopfhöhe an.

Susanne Schreiber
Bedburg-Hau

In der Haut möchte man nicht stecken. Ausgestreckt liegt der monumentale Pappmaché-Gorilla am Boden, während ihm Dutzende von kleinen Männchen aus Hasendraht und Heißkleber das Fell abziehen, um seine Haut zu Markte zu tragen. Geschäftig und routiniert pumpen die Arbeiter Augenflüssigkeit ab, brechen Zähne aus und seilen Ohrschmalz in Tonnen ab. Das tote oder nur schlafende Tier, man weiß es nicht genau, wirkt wie ein organisches Bergwerk, das systematisch ausgebeutet wird. Winden, Seile, Stege und Kräne im Miniaturformat gehen auf Illustrationen der aufklärerischen „Encyclopédie“ von Diderot und d’Alembert zurück.

Das raumfüllende Papierkunstwerk und seine Vorzeichnungen von Matthias Böhler und Christian Orendt dürfen sich im Museum Schloss Moyland zum Publikumsliebling entwickeln.

Während die einen über das Millimeter fein geschnittene, borstige Fell aus 4000 Seiten Schwarzkopien staunen mögen, erkennen die anderen die augenzwinkernd vorgetragene Kritik an unserer gnadenlosen Ausbeutung von Rohstoffen, Mensch und Tier.

„Give us, Dear“ des Künstler-Duos Böhler und Orendt ist das spektakulärste Werk in der gehaltvollen Sonderausstellung „Supervisions. Zeichnen und Sein“. In der Ausstellungshalle vor dem Wasserschloss Moyland mit der Beuys-Dauerausstellung präsentiert Kuratorin Stefanie Heckmann fünf jüngere Künstler und eine Künstlerin.

Gemeinsam ist allen das leidenschaftlich genutzte Medium der Zeichnung. Das schließt inzwischen das lustvolle Ausgreifen in den Raum mit ein. Nur auf einem Bogen Papier innen Verborgenes ausloten, ist nicht mehr. Das zeigte schon 2004 die vom Siemens Arts Program initiierte Schau „Gegen den Stich“ in Baden-Baden.

„Supervisions ist eine Ausstellung über die Macht der Imagination“, bringt Heckmann die verschiedenen Haltungen auf einen Nenner. „Ich ernähre mich durch Kraftvergeudung“, hatte der in Moyland mit großartigen



Stiftung Museum Schloss Moyland/Maurice Dornen

Zeichnungskonvoluten präsente Joseph Beuys einmal bekannt. Das treffe, so Heckmann, auch auf den 26-jährigen Kosovaren Petrit Halilaj zu.

In Moyland hat Halilaj die Himmels-Paneele aus einem Tag-Nacht-Zyklus einer älteren Arbeit nicht zum ursprünglich gegenläufigen Kreislauf angeordnet. Statt der romantischen Wolkenschau über den Köpfen der Besucher hat Halilaj die Teile wild über den ganzen Raum verteilt, wie Segel einer gescheiterten Hoffnung. Auch der geistige Freiraum des Kosmos ist nur mehr in Bruchstücken zu haben, im Kosovo allemal. Immerhin hat Künstlerinomade Petrit Halilaj die Ehre, Kosovo auf der Biennale von Venedig zu vertreten. Man darf gespannt sein, was dem Meister der Gesten dazu einfällt.

So konstruktiv Halilajs Zeichnungen wirken, so emotional sind sie aufgeladen mit biografischen Fragen nach Heimat, Geborgenheit und einer Utopie. Extrem persönlich sind auch die Blei- und Filzstift-Notate, mit denen Heiner Franzen einen ganzen Raum im Raum füllt.

Franzen, derzeit Professor in Braunschweig, lässt eine 20 Meter lange, schmale Hausarchitektur ins Museum

bauen, ohne Fenster, innen grell beleuchtet. Dort hinterlässt er auf Kopfhöhe ungezählte Zeichnungen. Kaum etwas von den zart konturierten schnellen Verdichtungen, Figuren und „Charactors“ vermag der mit seinem Werk nicht vertraute Besucher sofort entziffern.

Aber darum geht es auch nicht. Die oft aus Filmen genommenen, verformten Bilder „wollen nicht nur inhaltlich gelesen werden, sondern auch formal“, betont der Künstler beim Aufbau. Und verweist auf den Bildrhythmus im langen Gang. Franzen installiert quasi einen allwissenden, auktorialen Erzähler in seinen Bildgeschichten und dekonstruiert diesen gleichzeitig. Franzens Zeichnungen machen Gedanken, Gefühle und deren Fluchtpunkte sichtbar. Das Haus simuliert Hirn und Hirnströme – und der Besucher darf ganz nah kommen.

Auf die mal humorvolle, mal ironische Verbindung von Wort und Bild greifen sowohl Eva von Platen als auch David Shrigley in ihren Zeichnungen zurück. Film, Werbung und Comic hinterlassen bei beiden Spuren.

Shrigley, der „Chronist des Alltäglichen, der das Absurde und Übersehene wahrnimmt“, erobert sich den Ausstellungsraum zusätzlich mit Skulpturen. Eva von Platen, Professorin in Nürnberg, stellt in ihren Fundstücken gehaltvolle Fragen und hinterfragt die gezeichnete oder collagierte Absurdität des aktuellen Welttheaters akustisch/filmisch.

„Viele Arbeiten“, so Kuratorin Stefanie Heckmann, „thematisieren ironisch das Scheitern an der Materie, an der Kommunikation, aber auch das Scheitern der Gesellschaft.“ Eine Gesellschaft, die sich derzeit durch den Zwang zum Wachstum beinahe kollektiv in den Burnout arbeitet. Die Künst-

ler allerdings reagieren mit befreitem Lachen. Sie halten sich an den irischen Dichter Samuel Beckett: „Wieder scheitern. Besser scheitern.“

Dem Künstler in seinem vorsprachlichen Bildfindungsprozess ungefiltert zuschauen zu können – gerade das macht für die meisten Sammler den Reiz der Zeichnung aus. Das Medium erlebt, seit die Gemäldepreise für die Liebhaber der Auktionen in die Höhe schießen, eine Renaissance in Galerien und Messen.

Jede Größe bis hin zum wandfüllenden Format kommt zum Einsatz, der Materialmix, die Art des Strichs und das jeweilige Konzept verdichten sich auf Papier zu „Laboratorien im Kopf“, wie Stefanie Heckmann es beschreibt.

Begehrt sind Originalzeichnungen auch deshalb, weil sie immer noch bezahlbar sind. Winzige Gedankenblitze der Eva von Platen starten in der Berliner Galerie Wien/Lukatsch bei gerade einmal 100 Euro, erst ihre mächtigen DIN-A1-Blätter liegen bei 2 400 Euro. Jennifer Chert bietet Zeichnungen von Petrit Halilaj in ihrer Galerie für Preise ab 2 000 Euro an. Matthias Held von haldart in Berlin gibt die zwischen Figuration und Abstraktion changierenden Zeichnungen von Heiner Franzen weiter für Summen zwischen 1 100 und 2 500 Euro.

Etwas höher dagegen notieren bereits die Preise für David Shrigley. Die Berliner Galerie BQ setzt seine Acryl-Gouachen mit 2 900 Euro an, die großen Monotypiesind gerahmt für 5 200 Euro zu haben. Keine Summen, die einen Freud der Spontaneität in Verlegenheit brächten.

„SUPER Visions. Zeichnen und Sein“ Bis 30. Juni 2013 im Museum Schloss Moyland, Am Schloss 4, 47551 Bedburg-Hau; www.moyland.de

Mit Spürsinn auf der Jagd nach Qualität

Zeichnungen Alter und moderner Meister faszinieren den Kunsthändler Thomas le Claire. Ein Porträt.

Frank Kurzhals
Hamburg

Thomas le Claires feine Beobachtungsgabe, sein großes Wissen und seine reflektierte Leidenschaft lassen sein Gegenüber stets am „Abenteuer Zeichnung“ teilhaben. Der international renommierte Händler von Altmeisterzeichnungen versteht es, seine Begeisterung für Zeichnungen auf Gesprächspartner überspringen zu lassen.

Auch in den seit 30 Jahren regelmäßig publizierten Katalogen der Kunsthandlung sind die Beschreibungen und Zuordnungen präzise und kenntnisreich. In vielen Texten ist zu spüren, mit welcher Intensität und Freude hier gearbeitet, nach Qualität gejagt wird.

Und ab und zu gelingen auch Entdeckungen. Der verschollen geglaubte Karton der „Germania und Italia“ des Nazareners Friedrich Overbeck, den die Graphische Sammlung München von ihm erwarb, ist dafür ein schönes Beispiel.

Doch auch le Claire sieht, dass es immer schwieriger wird, herausragende Altmeister-Arbeiten auf Papier anzubieten. Der internationale Markt ist übersichtlich geworden bis ausgedünnt, gute Arbeiten zu finden, wird immer aufwendiger. Und die Auktionshäuser sind eine ernste Konkurrenz, seitdem das Internet die Öffentlichkeit weltweit an deren Angeboten teilhaben lässt.

Deswegen hat sich Thomas le Claire vor einiger Zeit schon dem frühen 20. Jahrhundert geöffnet. Hier sind immer noch wahre Schätze zu heben.



Lovis von Corinth: Farbintensives „Blumenstillleben“ von 1923.

Le Claire/DIE REPROFOTOGRAFEN

Der 34 Positionen umfassende aktuelle Katalog bietet Arbeiten von Degas, Vuillard, Hodler, Cuno Amiet und Klimt bis hin zu Wilhelm Lehbruck an. Besonders beeindruckend ist die 1924 entstandene meisterliche Pastellzeichnung „Der Birkenweg im Garten des Künstlers in Wannsee“ von Max Liebermann für 90 000 Euro, die aus Schweizer Privatbesitz stammt. Und auch mit Ernst Ludwig Kirchners „Selbstbildnis, zeichnend“ von 1906 für 125 000 Euro, in dem Kirchner mit starkem Strich

sein Psychogramm auf das Papier drückt, ist das Angebot definitiv im kunsthistorisch abgesicherten frühen 20. Jahrhundert angekommen.

Als le Claire 1982 in Hamburg mit seinem Kunsthandel begann, gab es in Norddeutschland kein großes Händlerinteresse an Altmeisterzeichnungen. Auf die Idee zu der Spezialisierung auf Alte Meister kam le Claire, als er während seines Studiums der Betriebswirtschaft und der Kunstgeschichte in Hamburg ein Volontariat bei Sotheby's in

London machte. Hier war es schon längst selbstverständlich, Arbeiten auf Papier als ein eigenes und wichtiges Sammelgebiet zu würdigen.

Mit seiner Frau, der Kunsthistorikerin Gianna le Claire und zwei Mitarbeitern steuert er von der noblen Hamburger Elbchausee aus seine Aktivitäten. Der Pariser Salon du Dessin (10.-15.4.2013) ist seine wichtigste Messe. Dort wird le Claire unter anderem ein dramatisch-farbintensives Blumenstillleben von Corinth aus dem Jahr 1923 für 460 000 Euro zeigen.

Daneben hat Thomas le Claire noch einen anderen Vertriebsweg für sich wiederentdeckt. Es sind die jährlichen Ausstellungen bei einem befreundeten Galeristen in New York. Denn in New York sitzen diejenigen, die seine raren Blätter der Zeichenkunst schätzen – und sie sich leisten können.

Die Bereitschaft der Amerikaner, deutsche und europäische Zeichenkunst zu sammeln, nimmt laut le Claire zu. In New York ist das Netzwerk der internationalen Sammler und Kuratoren wesentlich dichter als in Deutschland. Ein Netzwerk, das sich auszahlt.

Frägt man le Claire, was ihn am Kunsthandel fasziniert, dann schwingt in seiner Antwort auch eine kleine Sehnsucht mit, die über den Kunsthandel hinausgeht. Eine Sehnsucht nach einer bildungsbürgerlichen, aus seiner Sicht fast versunkenen Kultur, in der die Zeichenkunst und Malerei vergangener Jahrhunderte in kultivierten Haushalten noch eine Rolle spielte. Wer ihn in der respektabel-großbürgerlichen Villa in Hamburg besucht, wird das spüren.

Branchengeflüster

Kunstammer-Kostbarkeiten in Hülle und Fülle

Es ist ein Ereignis der Superlative: Nach zehn Jahren ist die Wiener Kunstammer mit ihren weltweit einmaligen Schätzen höfischen Kunsthandwerks wiedereröffnet: In 20 Sälen sind auf 2700 Quadratmetern 2200 großartigste Objekte der Habsburger-Sammlung im kunsthistorischen Museum ausgestellt. Die Fülle an kostbaren Elfenbein- oder Bergkristallarbeiten, Bronzen, Steinschnitt- und Goldschmiedekunst ist überwältigend. Neben Cellinis berühmtestem Salzfass der Kunstgeschichte macht auch ein Tafelaufsatz aus Kristall und Edelstein in Form eines Reihers staunen. Hier liegt die Messlatte für alle Händler, die demnächst solche Kostbarkeiten in Maastricht anbieten; hier schult der Kunstfreund seinen Blick. Würden die Kosten bei der letzten Neupräsentation 1935 noch schamlos von 100 000 auf 189 000 Schilling überzogen, konnte Generaldirektorin Sabine Haag das Budget von 18,5 Millionen Euro, davon 80 Prozent aus öffentlicher Hand, einhalten. Die Präsentation verzichtet auf die Kunstammer-Ordnung nach Materialien. Chronologisch folgt sie den Habsburger Herrschern seit Ferdinand III. Um den Besucherstrom zu kanalisieren, gibt es Zeitfenster zur Besichtigung. Belohnt wird man mit dem Besten, was Steinschneider, Bildhauer oder Goldschmiede im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert in Florenz, Augsburg oder Nürnberg hervorgebracht haben. get



Heiner Klauß/Teich/da

Endlich wieder zu bewundern: Die Allegorien der vier Jahreszeiten.

Wolfgang Tillmans

02. März bis 07. Juli 2013

Die Ausstellung Wolfgang Tillmans wurde vom Moderna Museet, Stockholm, in Kooperation mit der Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf entwickelt.

K21 Ständehaus Düsseldorf
www.kunstsammlung.de

Stiftung Kunst, Kultur und Soziales der Sparkasse West
Die Landesregierung Nordrhein-Westfalen
Handelsblatt

REVIEWS

ST. GALLEN, SWITZERLAND

Petrit Halilaj

KUNST HALLE SANKT GALLEN

The installation *It is the first time dear, that you have a human shape* (all works 2012) opened this solo show by Kosovar artist Petrit Halilaj. One might be tempted to describe it as a sort of neo-Povera assemblage made up of imposing hollow metal structures that wind around the floor of the exhibition space, from which spill quantities of stone, some of it ground fine. Contemplating these large objects at greater length, one gradually began to realize that their forms are reminiscent of jewelry: a necklace, a pin, a pair of hoop earrings, and a pair of drop earrings. The form of the pin seems to recall a bug or spider, its body a basin that collects white powder; the necklace is made up of many metal crates, uncovered and containing very small, lightly colored stones. The earrings collect in their grooves an almost impalpable material, like dry pigment, red for the hoops and yellow for the drop earrings.

Purely on the level of the visual, this exhibition, "Who does the earth belong to while painting the wind?!", might have seemed to be about symbols of the feminine and the primeval relationship between women and the earth. But the press release revealed another, autobiographical dimension to this work, relating to the war that shook the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. The rubble in question comes from Kosovo; these are bricks and stones that once formed the house where Halilaj lived, the home his family had to abandon when war broke out and which they discovered in ruins upon their return. The sculptural forms allude to the jewelry the artist's mother buried when she had to flee. And so Halilaj's art becomes an occasion to contemplate and transcend these events, moving toward a more hopeful future.

Another room contained the video that lent the exhibition its title. Its first seconds show fleeting images of the artist at age thirteen, followed by views of a sunny countryside, rich with fruit trees, flowers, and butterflies. Deft editing has united an extremely brief fragment of a video shot by a Swedish journalist reporting on the story of Halilaj's



Petrit Halilaj, *It is the first time dear, that you have a human shape* (detail), 2012. steel, stones, dimensions variable.

family at the end of the war with new footage by the artist. His mother also interred along with her jewelry a number of drawings that little Petrit himself had made up through the age of twelve. These drawings could be found in the third and final room of the exhibition, floating in the air on metal threads clustered between the jaws of another large sculpture, *Several birds fly away when they understand it*. This piece resembles an enormous mole cricket that has dug up the drawings from the oblivion to which they had been condemned in the earth. Even without knowing its backstory, one could easily understand this as an

exhibition in which nature is seen as a matrix and a reserve of energy, capable of projecting into the future a potential charged with all the richness and pain of the past. That the work's emotional tenor emerged in such a spontaneous way from the artist's lived experience is a reminder of how one's power of understanding can rise above the terrors and uncertainties of the human condition.

—Marco Tagliaferro

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

MILAN

Fabio Mauri

PALAZZO REALE

Fabio Mauri was an intellectual par excellence, and while the twentieth century all too readily supplied the subjects of his politically engaged work, it was the age of Enlightenment that provided him with a model of ethical responsibility. Although he was born into an extremely well-to-do family and thus able to observe his era without the compromises dictated by material need, his privileged background served only to heighten his sense of obligation. He became determined to act as a witness to his time with all its misfortunes as a sort of custodian of the world's memory, a sentinel keeping watch against its deviations from the path of good.

Deviating from the good signifies turning onto the path of evil, and Mauri, who was born in Rome in 1926, experienced firsthand the constrictions and disasters of Fascism and Nazism. When, in the early 1970s, he began to think that the collective memory of this experience was vanishing and that its spores remained alive in the air unobserved, he decided to warn his contemporaries against a repetition of the century's tragedies. For twenty-five years, beginning with the first appearance of *Ebrea* (Jewess), 1971—a complex installation/action that simulates the everyday world of the Shoah's victims and executioners through a room filled with objects whose titles tell us they are derived from the skin, hair, bones, and teeth of human beings, as if they had been discovered in a concentration camp—Mauri was engaged, with didactic obsessiveness, in an investigation of the seductive apparatus of evil, revealing its grotesque, demonic side, its "cloven-footedness."

Innumerable performances and installations followed, almost all of which are well documented in this first large-scale survey of his work, "Fabio Mauri: THE END," masterfully curated by Francesca Alfano Miglietti. These range from *Che cos'è fascismo* (What Is Fascism), 1971—the staging of an anthology of "youth competitions" intended to inculcate the young with Fascist ideology—to *Che cos'è la filosofia. Heidegger e la questione tedesca. Concerto da tavolo* (What Is Philosophy. Heidegger and the German Question. A Table Concert), 1989. The latter, also presented this year at Documenta 13, focuses on the figure of the intellectual fascinated by evil and at the same time seduced by a certain quotidian vulgarity; it takes the form of a people's banquet based on traditional German foods amid a succession of philosophical readings and classical music. Perhaps the most famous of Mauri's works is *Il muro occidentale o del Pianto* (The Western or the Wailing Wall), 1993,



Fabio Mauri, *Ebrea* (Jewess), 1971. Photo: M. P. 10

PETRIT
HALILAJ
BY
GIOVANNI
CARMINE

Petrit Halilaj does not shy away from using his personal biography as a source for his work. The

Kosovo-born artist's childhood memories, centred on the drama of war and the subsequent refugee tragedy, are the motor for the creation of complex and often monumental installations. For those affected by these recent historical events, the search for an understanding of home and cultural identity is still a significant theme today, and Halilaj makes it tangible for everybody by mixing world history with a very personal definition of his own identity.

A perfect example was the installation at the last (6th) Berlin Biennale, in 2010, where he occupied the ground floor of the KW Institute for Contemporary Art with a gigantic wooden skeleton of a building: *The places I'm looking for, my dear, are utopian places, they are boring and I don't know how to make them real* (2010). This was the 'ghost' of the house that his family was supposed to inhabit in his homeland; his brothers and his

father worked with Halilaj on its construction. The artist, who is in his mid-twenties, uses simple materials such as earth and wooden slats, but also live chickens and found objects from the archives of vanished museums in Kosovo, to illustrate this permanent quest. Operating close to the aesthetic of Italian Arte Povera, combined with a sense of Land Art, the artist searches for the spectacular without losing track of a fundamental simplicity. Despite his youth, Halilaj's exhibitions are precisely conceived narrations, in which the fictional—sometimes even the science-fictional—infiltrates the real sociopolitical context of the works on show. Not many artists know how to move an audience and awaken their emotions without becoming pathetic: and this is only one of the qualities embodied in Halilaj's work.



Nel mese di luglio la Neue Kunst Halle di San Gallo ospita la prima personale in territorio elvetico di Petrit Halilaj, artista balcanica che si è distinto negli ultimi anni per un lavoro intelligente imperniato sul concetto di identità culturale e storia personale e collettiva. *Michele Robecchi*

Un tratto predominante dell'arte balcanica è un interesse intrinseco per la storia e di come questa definisca il presente. Si tratta di un fenomeno comprensibile, soprattutto se si ricordano le vicende che hanno caratterizzato l'ultimo trentennio della penisola, ma se questa forma di rivendicazione culturale presenta un interesse inevitabile nella prima ondata di artisti emersi dopo anni di semi-isolamento culturale (come testimoniato da Manifesta 3 nel 1999), ha avuto d'altro canto l'effetto di diventare quasi formulaica nelle mani dei numerosi artisti della generazione successiva.

Il lavoro di Petrit Halilaj (*1986, Kosovo), pur attingendo da quella che si può definire in maniera apparentemente contraddittoria una nuova tradizione, si discosta nettamente da questo discorso. Sentimenti come nostalgia e incertezza per un'identità in continuo mutamento sono affrontati in una maniera che anche nei momenti più drammatici lascia affiorare un delicato ottimismo. Un aspetto preponderante del lavoro di Halilaj è infatti un'attenzione particolare nei confronti della natura e del paesaggio, e di come questi si riconfigurano all'interno di un contesto culturale. «Cleopatra», 2011, è un'installazione composta da 18 teche che l'artista ha recuperato dall'ex Museo di Storia Naturale di Prishtina, dove sono state conservate in condizioni di semi-abbandono dopo che la struttura è stata convertita in un museo etnografico. Gli stessi insetti, prevalentemente farfalle, sono riproposti in grandi dimensioni in una serie di proiezioni che ne enfatizzano il brutale trattamento a cui sono state sottoposte per preservarne la delicatezza. In un sovrapporsi di riferimenti, si assiste ad una messa in discussione l'idea primaria dell'istituzione museale come paradigma della conservazione, ma anche ad un'azione di riappropriazione di un patrimonio storico-naturale relegato in favore di una tematica considerata più urgente.

In modo analogo il concetto di decontestualizzazione come momento di rivalutazione è anche al centro di «Kösterrc», 2011, dove 60 tonnellate di terra proveniente dalla città natale dell'artista sono state trasportate per mezzo di un tir fino ad Art Basel, riempiendo maestosamente lo spazio della galleria, creando letteralmente un monumento alla terra natia. Anche se Land Art e Arte Povera sono da un punto di vista esclusivamente formale facilmente associabili ad Halilaj, il suo vocabolario è il frutto di una ricerca interiore, che lo porta ad attingere dalla dimensione più ordinaria della sua biografia e quella del suo paese per esprimere un irraggiungibile equilibrio interiore, come la mostra a San Gallo conferma con successo.

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BRAND NEW



Petrit Halilaj

Laura Cherubini

FOR PETRIT Halilaj family bonds are important, especially because he has two families: one natural and one he defines as his surrogate Italian family in Bozzolo, near the Mantua. In Bozzolo lives Angelo's family, who Halilaj met during the Kosovo War. During the week the artist attends the Brera Academy of Fine Arts in Milan, but during the weekend he goes home to Bozzolo. Fundamental to this Kosovar artist is to understand Italy through his affection for others. For his graduate show, he dressed-up and acted like a dog in a costume made by the women of an Italian family. Prior to wearing it, the costume had been used as bedding by his dog. Animals are an important part of one's family. Halilaj used to play with hens as child. Invited to a show in an Istanbul theme park, he (who had never been to a theme park due to the war) created

a coop to share with the chickens. This initial performance was the germ of the idea that became the chicken shuttle—a coop made in the shape of a spacecraft.

Halilaj spoke with his sister about their (real) family's house, about how difficult it was to build and how it grew up with them, constantly being remade out of a hodgepodge of added materials. In conversation, his sister Blerina told him that the family intended to move to Prishtina, which, after the war, was finally developing with lots of migrant settlement in the capital. The artist explains: "Initially, I wanted to see things from a different point of view. I needed to see things from above and needed a comfortable building for bourgeois hens. The hens would switch from a regular henhouse to a mansion painted Yves Klein Blue inside, as if they were under the open sky. In the end, me

and my sister Blerina's dream was seeming to come true, when we agreed to build it with my brothers and my father in a conversation via Skype."

Halilaj's contribution to the Berlin Biennale shows the frame of the house planned to become the new family home in Prishtina. Berlin will host documentation of this enterprise, including the family, with the wooden structure as skeleton or negative of the actual house in Prishtina, which acts as the positive. The new house will be the copy of the old. The chicken-coop shuttle was tested in the show "Back to the Future" at the Prishtina Contemporary Art Center in 2009. To give hens a shuttle for a home is not unlike giving them the ability to fly, given their natural inhibition.

Previously, Halilaj intertwined art and life at Chert Gallery in Berlin. In 2008 he created a make-

shift display with pipes and furniture, transforming the gallery into a domestic space where he hosted his father. The exhibition space first became a home and then an exhibition space. For a second, this time solo show at Chert in 2009, a giant nest cradled vitrines that displayed household objects the artist made from memory. Given how today's global world is characterized by the fundamental elements of mobility and instability, Halilaj's work confronts the link between being rooted and uprooted. The shuttle-coop itself symbolizes the nodal point where roots and nomadism meet within the wandering identity of all migrants.

(Translated from Italian by Umberta Genta)

From left: They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens, 2008. Installation views at Art is my Playground, Terzshane, Istanbul. Photo: Alexis Zavialoff. Bourgeois Hen, 2009. Matita su carta, legno, 75 x 40 cm. Courtesy Chert, Berlin.

Petrit Halilaj was born in 1986 in Skenderaj, Kosovo. He lives and works between Prishtina, Mantova and Berlin. Selected solo shows: 2011: Kunstraum Innsbruck; 2009: Center for Contemporary Art Prishtina, Kosovo; Chert, Berlin. Selected group shows: 2010: Berlin Biennale; "Drinnen and Draussen," Chert, Berlin; "Petrit Halilaj, Heike Kabish, Carla Scott Fullerton," Carlos Cardenas, Paris and Chert, Berlin. Laura Cherubini is an art critic based in Rome and Milan, where she teaches at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts.

by QUINN LATIMER

June 17, 2011

Art Basel

ART BASEL, Basel

15 June–19 June, 2011

Share

How does one write about an art fair? Dear reader, I am being sincere. If one is not an art market journalist gleefully scribbling down the cost of a collector or celebrity's (or celebrity collector's) pre-preview purchase of huge German neon painting, my question is less rhetorical than the subtext of missives sent off to editors after their anxious writers have made the rounds. For a fair like Art Basel—the high, giddy priestess of art fairs—to say the work hung in the white booths is good is redundant. Of course it's good. It's insane. So. Where do we go now? Let's talk about some works, yes, and I'll even break it down by section.

Art Statements

It's the curated section devoted to solo presentations of young, promising artists. Perusing it can help identify specific trends—or not. It is a small selection, after all. Still, I noted a turn away from the spare, chic formalism of past years: there were less white plinths and folded c-prints strewn across booth floors, more vivid color and essayistic video and weird, joyful pomp. If there was one booth that caught my eye and seemed an apt metaphor for the fair's crush of art, it was Petrit Halilaj's exceptional Statement for Chert, Berlin. Titled *Kostërre (CH)* (2011), the work—which filled Chert's entire booth, leaving its gallerists to hover in the lane just outside—comprised a perfect wave of dirt about to break. At its crest was a hint of grass, like tufts of green-blue hair.

The earthy smell of the soil (60 tons of it) and the sod was oddly gratifying, and the work simultaneously conjured weight and levity, stillness and speed. The soil was excavated from the hill in Kosovo where the artist was born, then brought to Switzerland on a truck. Like the artist's larger body of work (he has an evocative earthwork in the current "based in Berlin" exhibition wonderfully titled *Astronauts saw my work and started laughing*), *Kostërre (CH)* limns absence and longing, migration and transnational politics, the natural world and an erotic, corporeal intimacy.

Elsewhere, California artist Jimmy Raskin's witty, joyous installation of sculptural objects and works on paper for Miguel Abreu, New York, mined Rimbaud's "Drunken Boat" and thus evoked nineteenth-century Paris by way of aughts-era Los Angeles, and was a real pleasure. So was Kathryn Andrews's creepy and manic clown antics for David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Traces of a less typically Angeleno noir were to be found in Alejandro Cesarco's Baloise Art Prize-winning video-and-image installation *The Streets Were Dark with Something More Than Night or The Closer I Get to the End the More I Rewrite the Beginning* (2011), an essayistic investigation into the mystery narrative both textual and cinematic.

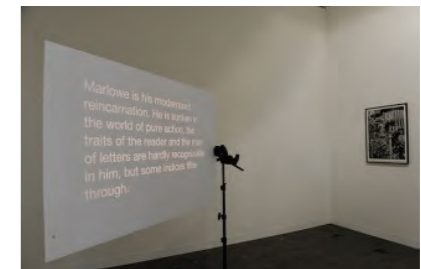
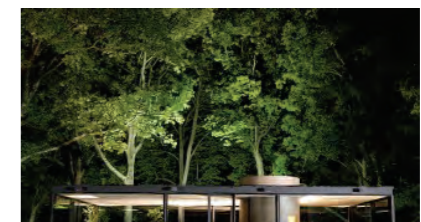
Art Unlimited

Cesarco's film portion of his work was narrated by Lawrence Weiner's patient growl, which connected to an odd fact about this year's curated Unlimited section: it features a strange preponderance of a certain type of Grand Old (Art) Men. The Dia Foundation has a field day, in fact. Many of its vaunted stable—Carl Andre, Fred Sandback, James Turrell, Robert Rauschenberg—had sprawling works, old and new, on view. All lovely, of course, but I was more taken with a spate of recent films that expertly enumerated on history and culture, portraiture and self-portraiture, perception and reflection.

To that end, Sarah Morris's 35-minute cinematic opus *Points on a Line* (2010) was perhaps the most accomplished work in the vicinity: a gorgeously shot and paced meditation on Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson's high Modernist American buildings and various themes herein. Like a high art *Days of Heaven*, in which the minutely observed cultural cosmos and elite replaces Terrence Malick's evocative prairie, the film captures gorgeous glass surfaces, shadows skimming the greenest grass, keys wobbling in locks, hangers trembling in perfect closets, shelves lined with Bauhaus books, and Eames furniture, of course. Its pulsating soundtrack by Liam Gillick manipulates you expertly, providing the narrative line that sees you to the end, when butterflies begin blurring an orchard. Culture, wealth, fragility, aseptic purity—if one remained

1 Petrit Halilaj, *Kostërre (CH)*, 2011.

2

3 Kathryn Andrews, *Larry Walters' Plan*, 2011.4 View of Alejandro Cesarco, *The Streets Were Dark With Something More than Night or The Closer I Get To the End the More I Rewrite the Beginning*, Art Statements, Art 42 Basel, 2011.

unsure of Morris's stance (celebration or critique?), the film was still a triumph, and entrancing.

Less mannered by far was Minerva Cuevas's *Disidencia* (2008–2010) whose score and subject stands in exact contrast to Morris's work. There are few signs of resistance at Art Basel this year (the ridiculous "political" histrionics of Allora and Calzadilla's *Scale of Justice Carried by Shore Foam* (2011) notwithstanding), so her film of signs of resistance in Mexico was more than welcome. Its quixotic score and bright palette—blue skies, yellow caps of marching workers, pink flags of marching mothers, vivid political graffiti and trash heaps—was decidedly un-ponderous. Also excellent: Deimantas Narkevicius's gorgeous music video for his teenage son's emo band in Lithuania; and Matthew Buckingham's film installation *Caterina van Hemessen is Twenty Years Old* (2009), which explores a 1548 self-portrait by Ms. Van Hemessen housed in the Kunstmuseum Basel, and, through its lens, feminism, perception, self-definition, and reflection.

The Fair

As I traversed one of the many lanes that crisscrossed the Messe's enormous girth, I spotted an armed guard, standing alert alongside some blurry paintings. Always a sign of the spectacular. And indeed it was: the tony Marlborough Gallery had laid down hardwood floors in the their booth and a small Francis Bacon survey. I immediately coveted *Three Studies of Isabel Rawsthorne* (1966) as well as a bright tangerine triptych.

Elsewhere, Bortolozzi, Berlin, boasted a booth of greats: Carol Rama, Dahn Vo, and David Hammons's excellent *Cigarettes* (1994), a red tapestry studded with hand-rolled cigarettes, evoking a spectral and dissolute smoker in bed. Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, meanwhile, had an adroit constellation of *Semina* school works by Jess, Wallace Berman, and Bruce Conner that had a notable *frisson* despite the recent bag of exhibitions showcasing such work. Nearby, the L.A. Louver showcased some lovely blues: a cerulean John McCracken resin slab and a David Hockney pool on paper, in opulent turquoise. In the same color scheme, Pace was showing a fantastic untitled Agnes Martin painting from 2004 that featured thick, even Riviera stripes. I want.

If Rosemarie Trockel's knitted "studies" (*Study for Blue Ribbon*, (2005) and *Study for Four Corners* (2004)) at Berlin and London's Sprüth Magers also filled me with greed, I was more surprised to be stopped in my tracks by an enormous Baselitz painting at Michael Werner, New York. *Adler im Bett (Eagle in Bed)* (1982) featured the resting titular figure with a huge yellow beak, the dirty-white bedclothes rumpling the surface of the painting like sheets. Who knew he could be so great? I wandered further into the booth and was struck by the amazing show of painting on view. Most of it hewed to the Big German Painter variety, so I was grateful to come across a last, small, moody Peter Doig painting in wintry oceanic hues. His *Surfer* (2004) looked down, conjuring melancholic reverie and the smell of salt water. I imagined this figure coming off an early summer session that included Halilaj's expert wave of dirt in the exhibition hall next door. Such reflexive connection-making is entirely symptomatic of the art fair experience: as in life, the sheer crush of information and art puts your mind in the mode of narrator and narrative-maker. If Doig's lovely surfer riding Halilaj's solid break was improbable, still the image—and the neat bow it tied around my last few days—set my art-mired mind at ease.

Quinn Latimer is an American poet and critic based in Basel, Switzerland. Her writing has appeared in *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *Boston Review*, *frieze*, *Kaleidoscope*, and *The Paris Review*.



11 Peter Doig, *Surf*, 2004.

- 1 Petrit Halilaj, *Kostërrc (CH)*, 2011. 60 tons of dirt and grass. Courtesy of Chert, Berlin.
- 2 Jimmy Raskin, *The Return of the Drunken Boat*, 2011. Painted wood, stainless steel, paper, mixed media. 60 inches x 122 inches x 40 inches. Courtesy of Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.
- 3 Kathryn Andrews, *Larry Walters' Plan*, 2011. Stainless steel, rented costume. 93 inches x 48 inches x 25 inches. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, New York.
- 4 View of Alejandro Cesarco, *The Streets Were Dark With Something More than Night or The Closer I Get To the End the More I Rewrite the Beginning*, Art Statements, Art 42 Basel, 2011. Courtesy of Murray Guy, New York.
- 5 Sarah Morris, *Points on a Line*, 2010. Still from video. Color. 35 minutes 44 seconds. Courtesy of Parallax.
- 6 Allora and Calzadilla, *Scale of Justice Carried by Shore Foam*, 2011. Polystyrene, synthetic polymer foam. Photo by Florian Kleinfenn.
- 7 Deimantas Narkevicius, *Ausgeträumt*, 2010. Still from HD video transferred to 35 mm film. Color, sound. 6 minutes.
- 8 Matthew Buckingham, *Caterina van Hemessen is Twenty Years Old*, 2009. 16mm film installation with sculptural elements. 12 minute loop, silent. Dimensions variable.
- 9 Francis Bacon, *Three Studies of Isabel Rawsthorne*, 1966. Oil on canvas. Triptych, each 14 inches x 12 inches.
- 10 John McCracken, *Akitanai*, 1985. Polyester resin, fiberglass and plywood. 24 1/2 inches x 22 1/2 inches x 7 inches. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA.
- 11 Peter Doig, *Surf*, 2004. Oil on canvas. 23 x 17 inches. Courtesy of Michael Werner Gallery, New York.

Roman Ondák's "Enter the Orbit"

KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH, Zürich

Art Basel roundup

ART BASEL / NEW JERSEY / KUNSTHALLE BASEL / MUSEUM FÜR GEGENWARTSKUNST, Basel

"based in Berlin"

ATELIERHAUS MONBJOUPARK / KW INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART / NATIONALGALERIE IM HAMBURGER BAHNHOF / NEUER BERLINER KUNSTVEREIN (N.B.K) / BERLINISCHE GALERIE, Berlin

KÜNSTLER DER BIENNALE

Petrit Halilaj: Bretter auf Wanderschaft

Wie reagieren Hühner auf Migration? Was ist Heimat? Diese Fragen stellt sich der aus dem Kosovo stammende Künstler Petrit Halilaj. Für die „Berlin Biennale“ baut er die Hülle seines ehemaligen Zuhauses in dem Dorf Runik nach, das im Krieg zerstört und später wieder aufgebaut wurde. Dabei spielt der 1986 geborene Künstler auf den Verlust von Heimat an und auch auf die permanenten Standortwechsel, die heute von Menschen gefordert sind. Halilaj schickt Alltagsdinge wie Bretter, Hühnerkot oder Haushaltsgegenstände auf die Reise.

Als Halilaj 13 Jahre alt war, floh die Familie nach Albanien. Im Flüchtlingslager fielen die Zeichnungen des Jungen zum ersten Mal auf. Er studierte Kunst in Italien und pendelt heute zwischen Runik, Berlin und dem italienischen Bozzolo. Immer wieder taucht in seinen Arbeiten ein raketenförmiger Hühnerstall auf, ein Symbol für Heimat, Schutz und Gemütlichkeit, ein Ding in utopischer Form, das an unterschiedlichen Orten landet und dem, der es betrachtet, die Idee einflüstert, Heimat einmal aus einer anderen Perspektive zu sehen. In den Kunst-Werken wird er die große Halle und das gesamte Erdgeschoss bespielen. Birgit Rieger ▷



Petrit Halilaj: „Photo documentation of the land research Prishtina“, '01

DOVE ESISTE LA VERA CASA DI PETRIT?
LA CASA DI FAMIGLIA 'COSTRUITA' A BERLINO PER
LA BIENNALE. LA CASA DI FAMIGLIA IMMAGINATA
A PRISTINA SU UN NUOVO TERRENO
(MA PIÙ GRANDE DEL 20 PER CENTO)

testo • text Vincenzo Latronico

WHERE IS PETRIT'S REAL HOUSE?
THE FAMILY HOME 'CONSTRUCTED' IN BERLIN
FOR THE BIENNALE. THE FAMILY HOME
IMAGINED IN PRISTINA ON A NEW SITE
(BUT 20 PERCENT BIGGER)

Petrit Halilaj è nato a Skenderaj (Kosovo) nel 1986; vive e lavora tra Berlino, Mantova e Runik, Kosovo. Ha studiato all'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, a Milano. Molti dei suoi lavori sono dedicati alla famiglia, a ricordi o a persone a lui vicine. Ha trascorso l'infanzia in Kosovo durante la guerra, un conflitto che è stato il punto di partenza di molte sue riflessioni.

• Petrit Halilaj, born in Skenderaj (Kosovo) in 1986, currently lives and works between Berlin, Mantua and Runik (Kosovo). He studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Brera, Milan. Many of his pieces are dedicated to his memories, his family or other people close to him. He grew up in Kosovo during the war, which became the starting point of many of his reflections.



Quando un curatore invita un giovane artista a partecipare a una delle Biennali più importanti del mondo, offrendogli, oltre a spazio e visibilità, un budget di produzione più che sostanzioso, è quasi naturale che questi pensi, fra sé e sé, che con quella cifra ci si potrebbe costruire una casa. Dev'essere più o meno quanto ha fatto Petrit Halilaj, giovane artista kosovaro invitato dalla curatrice Kathrin Rhombert a occupare lo spazio principe dell'ultima Biennale di Berlino: ha costruito una casa.

L'ha costruita in Kosovo, poco fuori Pristina, in un terreno comprato per l'occasione: l'ha costruita per ospitarvi la sua famiglia; l'ha costruita identica alla casa precedente, in ogni dettaglio architettonico e strutturale: identica, ma più grande del venti per cento. È la casa di prima, cresciuta insieme ai suoi abitanti.

Halilaj l'ha costruita, sì, ma senza esporla. Alla Kunst-Werke – sede storica della Biennale, nel cuore di quella che è stata Berlino Est – è infatti esposto, della casa, lo scheletro: tutto il complesso di ponteggi, assiti e impalcature che sostengono la costruzione delle pareti, la posa dei pavimenti, l'erezione dei muri portanti. La struttura occupa l'intero ambiente, ed è al contempo approssimativa e precisissima, estesa per oltre 8 metri in altezza e 13 in larghezza. Seguendo il tracciato dei pilastri e delle travi, tenute insieme da chiodi e tracci di fil di ferro, lo spettatore riesce a ricostruire i volumi, il riquadro di un garage, il contorno di una scala, un terrazzo: ogni cosa è evidente, seppure soltanto abbozzata dal profilo di legno.

Attraversando lo spazio – scavalcando le assi di contorno sul pavimento – alzando lo sguardo in quella che sembra una casa trasparente e vuota, una casa implicita, delineata solo nel suo perimetro e negli incroci dei piani all'interno – si ha la percezione oscillante di trovarsi o in un cantiere o nel mezzo di una scultura minimalista delle più astratte. La si ha, perlomeno, fino a quando non si nota che in giro per lo spazio scorrazzano delle galline. Queste sono un elemento ricorrente del linguaggio di Halilaj: in molti titoli le definisce "galline borghesi", ne fa una figura dell'urbanizzazione forzata, di un'identità scissa fra l'origine rurale e la modernità acquisita in fretta. Alcune di esse riposano nel pollaio di legno improvvisato in un giardinetto contiguo allo spazio della Kunst-Werke; altre covano le uova deposte nelle intercedepini fra le assi. Forse si schiederanno.

C'è una metafora molto evidente, al cuore di questo progetto di Halilaj:

l'impalcatura rende possibile fisicamente la costruzione della casa esattamente come il contributo della Biennale la rende possibile economicamente. Questa metafora, a propria volta, è impiegata per veicolare una delicata forma di critica istituzionale: l'artista ha preso le energie del sistema dell'arte dirottandole a proprio vantaggio; ha offerto all'istituzione solo uno scarto del processo di produzione, riservandone il prodotto a favore dei propri cari.

Questo intervento approfondisce, inoltre, la ricerca che Halilaj porta avanti da tempo (vedi Domus 930, novembre 2009) un'indagine del rapporto sbilanciato fra due baricentri distanti, del problema dell'assenza. L'assenza dal Kosovo d'origine, lasciato per seguire una carriera; l'assenza, in fondo, dalle città adottive di Milano e Berlino, per via del senso di sradicamento e quasi di esilio che prova chi si sente, comunque, fuori casa. Anche quest'opera, fra abitazione effettiva ed esposizione dei resti, vive di due baricentri, senza poter dire di esistere completamente in un unico posto; anche quest'opera parla di un senso di lontananza incolmabile.

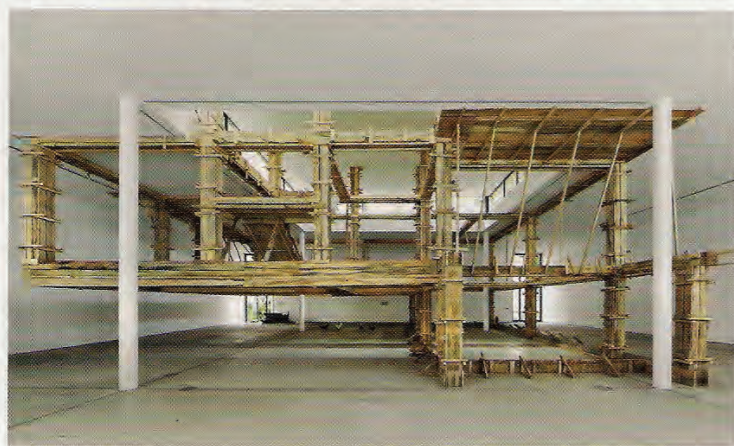
Di questo senso di lontananza parla l'opera di Halilaj: nell'installazione *Objekte n'Kumpir*, per esempio, aveva ricostruito, seguendo la memoria e con materiali grezzi e approssimativi, gli oggetti che ricordava di suo nonno, esponendoli in una teca nascosta in un nido; il video *They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens II* documenta la costruzione, presso l'abitazione di famiglia, di un pollaio a forma di razzo spaziale, un modo di annullare le distanze, di costruire ponti. I due lavori, assieme a una serie di altri disegni collegati al progetto della casa o a esso contigui, occupano tutto un altro piano della K-W, sopra la struttura della casa e sotto un terzo piano lasciato completamente vuoto, bianco, abbacinante: solo da una finestra aperta nel muro si

scorge il tetto dello spazio principale, da cui sfiorano alcune propaggini dell'impalcatura in legno, come un tetto che esce dal tetto e in ciò perde qualcosa di sé, e resta uno scheletro.

Eppure, ripensandoci, si avverte quasi una nota cupa, nella realizzazione del progetto di Halilaj. Alla base dell'impalcatura sono allineate delle macerie, lungo quello che doveva essere il tracciato di un muro; altri detriti compongono un monticello di fianco al pollaio. L'ingresso, soprattutto, reca il segno più netto: è chiuso da tre assi, dai simboli di un cantiere. Per accedere alla mostra i visitatori sono costretti a passare da una scaletta che li porta ad attraversare i sotterranei della sede espositiva. È un intervento di impatto molto violento, poiché nulla spiega che non si tratta di lavori effettivamente in corso alla K-W. Per chi si avvicina al lavoro di Petrit Halilaj è, inoltre, un intervento che segnala un'incompletezza, un cantiere in corso. La casa, in realtà, non è stata costruita.

Il terreno a Pristina è stato acquistato, i lavori iniziati, le impalcature montate: il cantiere, però, è stato bloccato dalle autorità locali, per la mancanza di autorizzazioni. Queste erano impossibili da ottenere, perché il comune in cui Halilaj ha comprato il terreno manca, dalla guerra, di un piano regolatore. L'ondata di blocchi forzati che c'è stata è un ottimo segnale della decisione di contrastare l'abusivismo, che rischiava di fare del Kosovo un'altra vittima dell'urbanizzazione sregolata; una delle conseguenze di questo ottimo segnale è stata la demolizione degli esordi della nuova casa Halilaj. Le macerie sono esposte a Berlino insieme alla struttura che doveva rendere possibile la costruzione, a due-mila chilometri da lì.

Se si escludono queste macerie, si potrebbe dire che l'opera di Petrit Halilaj non sia mutata, con il fallimento



In apertura e nelle pagine precedenti *Bourgeois Hens* (2009), per la mostra "the future", Stacion, Center for Contemporary Art, Pristina, Kosovo (per gentile concessione dell'artista/Chert, Berlino); *Bourgeois Hens* (2009) (copyright dell'artista; per gentile concessione di Petrit Halilaj e della Poli, Mantova); la maquette della casa di Halilaj sovrapposta alle terre, durata della ricerca del lotto su cui costruire queste pagine: vedute dell'installazione *places I'm looking for, my dear, are utopian, they are boring and I don't know how to real* per la Biennale d'Arte di Berlino (Uwe Walter, 2010; per gentile concessione dell'artista; copyright dell'artista/Chert, Berlino); *Senza titolo* (schizzo della struttura della casa), 2010, per l'installazione alla Kunst-Werke, Berlino (copyright dell'artista).



del suo progetto: la struttura esposta è identica a come sarebbe apparsa se la casa fosse stata effettivamente costruita. Questo è vero, però, solo del suo aspetto: a livello simbolico, perdendo la sua natura come doveva essere (quella di un richiamo, implicito e residuale, a qualcosa di lontano e inaccessibile, a un'intimità dell'artista così distante dal centro dell'arte berlinese), ne ha guadagnata un'altra. C'è sempre un bipolarismo fra un involucro presente e un contenuto – la casa – assente: solo che questa non è distante, ma irrealizzata. E raggiungerla non è "un sogno" in senso metaforico (perché la realtà, del lavoro e della formazione professionale, ha portato Halilaj altrove), un posto da cercare con un missile di legno: è un sogno in senso letterale, un sogno che, per ora invano, Petrit Halilaj ha tentato di far diventare vero.

I luoghi che cerco, cara mia, si intitola l'opera, *sono posti utopici. Sono luoghi noiosi*, prosegue il titolo, *e non so come farli diventare veri*.

Ero in automobile con Petrit Halilaj per preparare questo articolo, attraversando la Germania da Berlino verso sud. A un certo punto abbiamo discusso di come questa sua opera si relazionasse col resto della Biennale, di cui secondo molti era uno dei momenti più interessanti. La Biennale, intitolata "Ciò che aspetta là fuori", è stata segnata dalla prevalenza di opere di intenti dichiaratamente politici. In rapporto con queste, mi sembrava che il lavoro di Halilaj – pur accennando, in modo elegantemente implicito, a temi legati all'identità culturale e politica, al suo status di migrante – riuscisse ad astrarre in maniera molto potente da ciò: la sua rilevanza civile non comportava una rinuncia in termini di elaborazione estetica o di fantastica. Ho chiesto a Petrit Halilaj cosa pensasse di questa mia impressione, e se secondo lui quell'opera avesse una dimensione politica. Non mi ha risposto.

Più avanti nel viaggio siamo stati fermati da un'auto della polizia per un controllo di routine. Dei passeggeri dell'auto – targata Parma – era l'unico non italiano; non appena ha detto di venire dal Kosovo, uno degli agenti ha commentato: "Allora abbiamo un problema". Siamo stati condotti in centrale, ogni bagaglio, borsa e anfratto dell'automobile è stato perquisito; abbiamo potuto riprendere il viaggio solo dopo due ore di controlli. "Mi hai chiesto se vedevo una dimensione politica nel mio lavoro", mi ha detto, qualche chilometro dopo, Petrit Halilaj. "Ecco". **Vincenzo Latronico**

• When a curator asks a young artist to take part in one of the world's most important biennials and offers him a more than substantial production budget as well as space and visibility, he might well think that he could build a house with such means at his disposal. That must be roughly what came into the mind of Petrit Halilaj, a young Kosovan artist invited by the curator Kathrin Rhomberg to occupy the main space at the latest Berlin Biennale. In fact he built a house.

He built it just outside Pristina, in Kosovo, on a site purchased for the occasion. He built it for his family, identical to their previous house in every architectural and structural detail – except for the fact that it was 20 per cent bigger. It was the first house to grow with its inhabitants. Halilaj built it but he did not display it. The skeleton of the house is on show at the Kunst-Werke, the biennial's traditional venue in the heart of what was East Berlin, with all the timber framework and planking that supports the walls, floors and load-bearing structure. It fills the whole space and is both approximate and extremely precise, rising to a height of more than 8 metres and 13 wide. By following the layout of the pillars and beams, held together by nails and pieces of wire, visitors can imagine the rooms, a square garage, the outline of a staircase and a terrace. All is clear but only roughly sketched out by the wooden outline.

As you step over the planks on the floor to cross the space, you raise your gaze in what looks like an empty and transparent house. It is implicitly a house, delineated only in its perimeter and where the storeys meet inside, provoking the wavering impression of either being on a worksite or immersed in the most abstract of minimalist sculptures. That is, at least, until you realise that there are hens running around. These are a recurrent presence in Halilaj's language. In many titles he calls them "bourgeois hens", turning them into a figure of forced urbanisation, an identity torn between rural origins and fast-acquired modernity. Some of them rest in a wooden henhouse rustled up in a small garden adjacent to the Kunst-Werke space; others sit on eggs laid in the gaps between the planks. Perhaps they will hatch.

There is a clear metaphor at the heart of Halilaj's project. The framework makes the construction of the house physically possible just

as the biennial's contribution makes it financially feasible. This metaphor is used, in turn, to communicate a delicate form of institutional criticism: the artist drew on the energy of the art system and turned it to his own account. And he only gives the institution a discarded part of the production process, keeping the product to benefit his loved ones.

In addition, this work pursues the exploration that Halilaj has been conducting for some time (see Domus 930, November 2009), into the unbalanced relationship between two distant barycentres and the issue of absence. In other words, absence from his home in Kosovo, abandoned to pursue a career, and what is actually an absence from his adoptive cities of Milan and Berlin, because those who feel they are away from home experience a sense of being uprooted and almost exiled. This work – the real house and the display of what is left – also feeds on two barycentres, without being able to say it fully exists in one place. This work also speaks of a sense of unbridgeable distance.

Halilaj's work recounts this sense of separation. In the *26 Objekte n'Kumpir* installation, for example, he used his memory and rough materials to reconstruct objects that reminded him of his grandfather, displaying them in a glass case hidden in a nest. The video *They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens II* records the construction of a henhouse in the shape of a space rocket at his family home, a way of cancelling distance and building bridges. The two works, together with a number of drawings linked to the house project or close to it, occupy another whole floor of K-W, above the house structure and beneath a third storey left totally empty and dazzlingly white. The roof of the main

space can only be glimpsed through a window opened in the wall, with some parts of the wooden framework pushing up like a roof coming through the roof. In doing so, it loses something of itself and remains a skeleton.

Yet, on reflection, you realise quite a gloomy note hangs over the execution of Halilaj's project. There is rubble lined up at the base of the framework, along what was to be the line of a wall, while more detritus forms a mound beside the henhouse. The entrance bears the clearest sign: it is blocked by three planks, the symbols of a worksite. Visitors to the exhibition are forced to enter via a small ladder that takes them through the basement of the exhibition venue. This has a heavy impact because there is nothing to explain that the detour isn't due to real works underway at K-W. For those approaching Petrit Halilaj's work, it also signals incompleteness, work in progress. In actual fact, the house has not been built. The site in Pristina was purchased, work commenced and the framework was erected, but the worksite was halted by local authorities because it had no permits. Permission could not be obtained because the area has had no town plan since the war. The surge of similar forced halts is a perfect sign of the decision to counter unauthorised building, which was threatening to turn Kosovo into another victim of uncontrolled urbanisation. One of the results of this crackdown was the demolition of the beginnings of Halilaj's new house. The rubble is exhibited in Berlin along with the framework that was to permit its construction 2,000 kilometres away.

Apart from this rubble, we could say that Petrit Halilaj's work has not changed with the failure of his

In basso a destra e nella pagina accanto: vedute dell'installazione *They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens*, 2008, "Art is my Playground", Tershane, Istanbul (foto Alexis Zavioloff, gentile concessione dell'artista/Chert Berlino; copyright dell'artista). In basso a sinistra: scorcio dell'installazione *26 Objekte n'Kumpir*, 2009, per la sesta edizione della Biennale d'arte di Berlino (foto Uwe Chert, Berlino).

• Below right and opposite page: installation views of *They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens*, 2008, "Art is my Playground", Tershane, Istanbul (photo by Alexis Zavioloff, of the artist/Chert Berlin; copyright artist). Below left: installation view of *26 Objekte n'Kumpir*, 2009, 6th Berlin Biennale Contemporary Art (photo by Uwe Chert, Berlin).



project. The framework exhibited is identical to what the house would have looked like had it been built. This is true, but only in terms of its appearance. Symbolically, losing its intended nature (an implicit and residual reference to something far away and inaccessible, to something familiar to the artist and so far from the Berlin art centre), it has gained another. There is still the bipolarity between a present envelope and an absent content, the house. Except this house is not far away but un-built. And reaching it is not a metaphorical "dream" (because the reality of work and professional training took Halilaj elsewhere), or a place to be sought with a wooden missile. It is a dream in the literal sense, a dream that Petrit Halilaj has tried to make real, but as yet without success.

The title reads: *The places I'm looking for, my dear, are utopian places, they are boring and I don't know how to make them real.*

I was driving across Germany travelling south from Berlin with Petrit Halilaj, preparing this piece. At some stage we discussed how this work of his related to the rest of the biennial, of which many believe it to be one of the most interesting elements. The Berlin Biennale, entitled "What is Waiting Out There", featured a majority of works with openly political intentions. With regard to these, I thought that Halilaj's work – despite an elegantly implicit hint of themes linked to cultural and political identity and his status as a migrant – remained strongly detached from this: its civil importance did not involve a renunciation of aesthetic or fantastic elaboration. I asked Petrit Halilaj what he thought of my impression and whether he thought this work had a political dimension. He did not answer.

Later on, the police stopped us for a routine check. He was the only non-Italian among all the passengers in the car – which had a Parma registration plate. As soon as he said he came from Kosovo, one of the policemen said, "In that case, we have a problem." We were taken to the police station and every suitcase, bag and corner of the car was searched. We resumed our journey after two hours of checks.

"You asked whether I saw a political dimension in my work," Petrit Halilaj remarked a few kilometres down the road. "There's your answer."
Vincenzo Latronico



PETRIT HALILAJ

STATEMENT

Warum liebst du mich? Was ist liebenswert an mir? Warum kannst du deine Liebe zur Kunst nicht verbergen? Du bist der schlechteste Scherzbold, und wenn ich lache, dann nur, weil ich an Bushs Rede denke. Falls ich heute in China bin und die Büronummer wähle, sind dann alle 100 000 000 000 Büros in deinem Museum besetzt? Sind alle Sekretäre und Assistenten an der Arbeit? O.k., kannst du meinen Bericht erledigen? Ja, es gibt da ein Werk, das nur Hunde verstehen. Sie fühlen es, die Menschen sehen es bloss. Mehrere Vögel flattern davon, als sie dieses Werk verstehen. Wie viele Minuten lang stehst du, dein Blick, dein Geist, dein Körper vor einem Kunstwerk? Wie stark kannst du absorbiert sein, ohne einen Moment lang egozentrisch zu werden? Warum denkst du nicht an jene Momente? Was sind sie? Wo sind sie? Warum willst du dauernd vergessen, wer du bist und was du weisst? Wo sind all die andern? Auf der anderen Seite des Fensters ist kein Balkon. Du fällst aus dem zehnten Stock auf den Zement, und die Schwerkraft lässt nach. Was? Ja, ja. Das einzige Mal, dass ich ausserhalb meiner selbst dachte, war ich am Fliegen. Und all die Dinge, die du isst? Ich weiss nicht, wo die hingehen. Sie werden bestimmt zu Kräften. Du bist nutzlos, und das ist nicht natürlich. Es macht dich zum Aussenseiter. Du wirst zu jemand anderem, den niemand mag, dem niemand zuhört. Ah! Fast hätte ich vergessen, dir zu sagen, dass ich an dich denke, dass ich an dich glaube, aber du wirst sterben, weil du nicht mehr an die toten Momente glaubst. Fessle mich, meine Liebe!!!



Was ist Ihr neuestes Projekt oder an welcher Ausstellung arbeiten Sie gegenwärtig?

Ich arbeite an einem Projekt für die Berlin Biennale. Dieses ist möglicherweise die Realisierung von etwas, an dem ich seit Langem arbeite. Es ist schwierig, zum jetzigen Zeitpunkt etwas dazu zu sagen, weil vieles noch offen und unklar ist. Aber es sollte daraus ein neues Haus in Priština werden, wo ich hoffe, mit meiner Familie zu wohnen.

Welches ist Ihr liebstes unrealisiertes Projekt?

Ich habe noch keines. Ich hatte das Glück, realisieren zu können, was ich realisieren wollte. Oder vielleicht war das, was ich wollte, einfach einfach genug, um realisiert werden zu können.

Wer sind Ihre persönlichen Vorbilder oder was hat Sie am stärksten beeinflusst?

Ich glaube nicht, dass ich welche habe. Es gibt viele Leute, die mir wichtig sind und deren Meinungen und Ideen ich teile. Es sind keine Helden, aber sie haben mich beeinflusst.

Welche anderen Bereiche, abgesehen von der Kunst, inspirieren Sie am meisten?

Ich würde nicht «inspirieren» sagen, aber ich interessiere mich für vieles ausserhalb der Kunst. Bis jetzt gibt es kein Fachgebiet, in dem ich gerne ein «Experte» wäre.

Wie stellen Sie sich die Kunstwelt im 21. Jahrhundert vor?

Diese Frage würde ich gerne Hans Ulrich Obrist stellen.

Haben Sie ein Manifest? Verkünden Sie es!

Ich habe keines, aber mein Grossvater hat eines, das mir gefällt: «N'koft e hajrit ishalla asht kysmet, po n'koft qi s'asht e hajrit ishalla sa kysmet.» Das bedeutet ungefähr: «Hoffen wir, dass es geschieht, falls es Gutes bringt. Hoffen wir, dass es nicht geschieht, falls es nichts Gutes bringt.»



Petrit Halilaj:

- 1: *They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens* (2008, Aquarium, Bügeleisen, Motor, Federn)
- 2: *They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens II* (2009, Holz, Farbe, Elektrizität, Hühner)
- 3: *Un gallo borghese che voleva essere un pappagallo fino a quando ha potuto capire che poteva essere un gallo. E la sua moglie.* (2010, Zeichnungen auf Papier, Holzrahmen)



They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens, 2008. Installation view, "Art is my Playground", Istanbul, 2008. Courtesy: Chert, Berlin.



HERE AND THERE

BY BARBARA CASAVECCHIA

A space-shuttle coop and its crew of hens, photographic portraits of bourgeois chickens, a gang of biddies to share the pen with... second-rate birds, incapable of flight, that artist Petrit Halilaj – whose new work will be presented at the Berlin Biennale – uses as a metaphor for a rural world in migration that aspires to live in the city. A society caught between nostalgia and ambitions, which the artist reconciles in his surreal projects.

P.: MAYBE I DO BELIEVE IN DREAMS,
 - IN FANTASY.
 - IN MIRACLES OR I DON'T KNOW, BUT.
 - I DO HAVE THE DESIRE TO DEDICATE MY ATTENTION.
 - AND BE THERE IN THE MIDDLE OF YOU.
 - AND NOT FORGET YOU.
 - BUT YOU MUST NOT CHANGE ANYTHING IN YOUR LIFE.
 - I LIKE TO TALK AND I DO BELIEVE IN WHAT WE TALK ABOUT.
 - PERSONALLY, I DO SEE IT AS A LEVEL, WHICH GIVES ME THE POSSIBILITY TO SEE SOMETHING ELSE, BEYOND THAT, THEN COMES THE OTHER PART OF THE WORLD, WHICH MAKES THE WHOLE.
 (...)
 - I BELIEVE THAT WE CAN CREATE OUR OWN WORLD.
 (...)
 - ... IF WE HAD A MOMENT TO BUILD A SPACE SHUTTLE...
 - WHAT WILL REMAIN IS OUR EXPERIENCE.



They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens II, 2009.

Installation view "Back to the future", Contemporary Art Center, Pristina. Courtesy: Chert, Berlin.

*Communication seems to be lacking as well, a conversation between two voices, those of Petrit Halilaj and his sister Blerina (published in issue 19/2009 of *Gagarin*, a ten-year-old Belgian magazine entirely dedicated to printing unpublished texts by artists), distills the roots of his work, which fluctuate between *here* and *there*. In this alternating rhythm, the *here* is all the places where Halilaj has moved: first Italy, in the Mantuan countryside and Milan, where he studied at Brera Academy; then Berlin, where he has lived since 2008 and is working on the special project "Artists Beyond" for the next Biennale, curated by Kathrin Rhomberg. *There* is Runik, the village in Kosovo, near Skënderaj, where he was born in '86 and where he witnessed the horrors of the conflict with Serbia. Runik is where his family lives, having rebuilt the house that was burnt down during the war.*

In Halilaj's projects – sculptures, installations, pen or ink drawings – here and there are mixed together. They are accompanied by texts scribbled on notebook pages, in which the artist recreates the private dimension of a diary and the poignant one of speech, his own kind of speech, with mistakes that mingle different languages and identities. Sometimes they serve to portray the nostalgia of the emigrant, who dreams of finding everything just as he left it, because if his starting point remains the same, then the parallel life he has embarked upon will not irredeemably diverge from it. Other times, they play hide-and-seek with the awareness that his own life is led elsewhere, and, perhaps, "always out of place", as Edward Said titled his autobiography (*Out of Place*, 1999).

In *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), Svetlana Boym, a Russian artist and writer, professor of comparative literature at Harvard, dissects this feeling, which is composed of *nostos* (going home, the return to one's native land) + *algia* (ache, melancholy, longing). And rather than its link to the past, she stresses the yearning for a present that threatens to disappear. "At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense,

nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time". Boym distinguishes between "restorative nostalgia", which attempts to reconstruct and shield the lost home and period; and "reflective nostalgia", often ironic, more closely linked to the personal timeframe, which prefers the fragments of memory and refuses to let emotion obliterate critical reflection. Moreover, she intertwines them and compares them with two categories formulated by philosopher Reinhart Koselleck: the space of experience, which serves as a past present, and the horizon of expectation, which is a present future. "Nostalgia, as a historical emotion, is a longing for that shrinking 'space of experience' that no longer fits the new 'horizon of expectation'".

For Halilaj, who is still very young and immune to analytic compartmentalization, experience is a key word. It allows him to open up channels of communication with the public, but above all to overcome the gaps in his link to the world of Runik, building bridges between different phases in his life and different generations of his family. So that, at times, the home here and the home there, or rather, the allegories of them, can fit together. Before Chert gallery opened in Kreuzberg, in September 2008, Halilaj had the opportunity to fit out the spaces with plumbing, a tub and shower, a gas stove, beds, furniture and lamps to create a domestic environment for a meeting with his father: a sort of "no-man's-land", both real and fictional, where they could talk and listen to each other for a



Untitled (space shuttle in the garden), 2009.

Courtesy: Chert, Berlin.

week. An easily grasped device to use with a parent visiting from afar, in order to explain – without too many words – what one is doing and where, what an installation is, what relationship one wants to establish between art/work and life. Subsequently, the same materials, rearranged on-site as part of the inaugural show "The Lamb's Mother in the Creche?", became the abstract stage set of their relationship.

A similar mechanism was used again by Halilaj a few months later at Artissima 2008, where he asked to be allowed to create “a room of his own” in the gallery’s booth: a space closed off behind a door, packed with artwork, projects and personal belongings. To anyone who knocked and entered, he would begin explaining – once again in the intimacy of a *tête-à-tête* – who he was and what he was working on; putting himself at the center of the frame, in the role of a first-person narrator, but also using walls and locks to protect and circumscribe



Bathroom wall, water pipes, shower rail, 2008. Installation view, “The Lamb’s Mother In The Creche?”, Chert, Berlin, 2008. Courtesy: Chert, Berlin.

Right - **Bourgeois Hen**, 2009. Courtesy: Chert, Berlin.

the space of that experience. Many of the pieces discussed there grew out of the project *They Are Lucky to Be Bourgeois Hens* (for “Art Is My Playground”, a group show organized in 2008 by Tershame at the Küçük Çiftlik amusement park in Istanbul), which in the meantime evolved into a unified cycle of works. Reflecting the rather ramshackle, carnivalesque ambience of the old funfair, Halilaj separated off an area with red barriers, “furnished” it with a few knick-knacks and sculptures with iron birds’ feet, and then shared it, for days (and nights), with a group of chickens, the animals he played with the most as a boy, imitating their clucks and cackles. An innocuous scrap of a zoo, where the creature in the cage, at times ignored by the public, is the artist himself – as in Kafka’s story “The Hunger Artist” (“Ein Hungerkünstler”, 1922). And so the chicken coop also becomes a metaphor for integration in a different context, where one is necessarily alien, literally of a different race, while in the text “Fucking hell, the sun blinds me...”, the hens, once friendly with each other, begin scuffling, then succumb to uniformity (“It doesn’t exist in nature. They just want to be like other religions. Why?”), while some consider the possibility of mating with other species. Halilaj gave the title *Bourgeois Hen* to a number of drawings, mounted in frames and on wooden objets trouvés, from a recent series that depicts haughty pullets and cockerels, all puffed up with conceit, or roosting within minimalist structures, seeming to mock the dreams of a comfortable urban life shared by so many Kosovars, thousands of whom flock to the city from the countryside. As it appears his family is planning to do, taking off for Pristina, and as he himself did, taking off for here. *They Are Lucky to Be Bourgeois Hens II* was also the title of the second exhibition at Chert, last September; Halilaj presented an igloo/cradle of interwoven branches, surrounding an illuminated showcase full of “humble” objects (*26 Objekte n’Kumpir*, 2009) such as clogs, a walking stick, frames, utensils – an exact replica of the things his grandfather crafts to keep himself busy and “to dont/ talk with his/ son”; thus a useful tool, like his first installation, for re-establishing a dialogue about family dynamics. Accompanying it is a video that documents the surreal chicken coop the artist conceived and convinced his friends, relatives, and neighbors to build in Runik: it is shaped like a space shuttle, the perfect means of transport for moving back and forth between two worlds, as if designed for birds who can’t get off the ground by themselves. The last chapter in the saga, *They Are Lucky to Be Bourgeois Hens III*, is the installation made for the solo show “Back to the Future” (2009, curated by Albert Heta) at the Stacion contemporary art center in Pristina, which brought the “rocket” physically into the exhibition circuit, along with the chicken coop and its occupants. As Foucault wrote (*Des Espaces Autres*, 1967): “The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates”.

DI BARBARA CASAVECCHIA

Un pollaio-space shuttle e il suo equipaggio di galline, ritratti fotografici di polli imborghesiti, una combriccola di chioce con cui condividere il recinto... volatili di serie B, incapaci di volare, che per l’artista kosovaro Petrit Halilaj – il cui nuovo lavoro sarà presentato alla Biennale di Berlino – sono metafora di una realtà contadina in migrazione, che aspira all’inurbamento. Una società fra nostalgia e aspettative, che l’artista riconcilia con i suoi surreali interventi.



La conversazione a due voci *Communication seems to be lacking us as well* tra Petrit Halilaj e la sorella Blerina (uscita sul n. 19, 2009, di *Gagarin*, rivista belga che da un decennio pubblica solo inediti d’artista) estraie la radice pendolare, tra *qui e là*, del suo lavoro. A ritmi alterni, il *qui* sono i luoghi dove Halilaj ha deciso di trasferirsi: prima l’Italia, tra campagna mantovana e Milano, dove ha studiato all’Accademia di Brera; poi Berlino, dove abita dal 2008 e sta lavorando al progetto speciale “Artists Beyond” per la prossima Biennale, curata da Kathrin



They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens II and **They are Lucky to be Bourgeois Hens III**, 2009. Installation view “Back to the future”, Contemporary Art Center, Pristina. Courtesy: Chert, Berlin.

Rhomberg. Il *là* è Runik, il paesino del Kosovo, vicino a Skenderaj, in cui è nato nell’86 ed è stato testimone degli orrori del conflitto con la Serbia. A Runik risiede la sua famiglia, che vi ha ricostruito la casa bruciata durante la guerra. Nei progetti di Halilaj – sculture, installazioni, disegni a penna o inchiostro – *qui e là* si rimescolano. Ad accompagnarli ci sono testi scarabocchiati su fogli da taccuino, con i quali l’artista ricrea la dimensione intima del diario e quella accorata del parlato, il proprio, con strafalcioni a cavallo di lingue e identità diverse. A volte, gli servono a mettere in scena una nostalgia da emigrante, che sogna di ritrovare tutto così come lo ha lasciato, perché, se il punto di partenza continua a permanere immutato, la vita parallela imboccata non divergerà irrimediabilmente. Altre, giocano a rimpattino con la consapevolezza che la propria esistenza si svolge comunque altrove e, forse, “Sempre nel posto sbagliato” (*Out of Place*, 1999), come Edward Said ha intitolato la sua autobiografia.

Nel libro *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001; confluito in parte in *Nostalgia. Saggi sul rimpianto del comunismo*, Bruno Mondadori, 2003), la studiosa di letterature slave comparate ad Harvard, artista e scrittrice russa Svetlana Boym disseziona questo sentimento, fatto di *nostos* (andare a casa, tornare al paese) e *algia* (dolore, malinconia, desiderio). E lo considera non tanto legato al passato, quanto in tensione verso un presente a rischio di sparizione. “Al primo sguardo, la nostalgia è la mancanza di un luogo, ma in realtà è lo struggimento per un tempo diverso – il tempo della nostra infanzia, i ritmi più lenti dei nostri sogni. In un’accezione più ampia, la nostalgia è una ribellione contro l’idea moderna del tempo, il tempo della storia e del progresso. Il nostalgico desidera cancellare la storia e trasformarla in una mitologia privata o collettiva, rivisitare il tempo come se fosse uno spazio, rifiutando di arrendersi alla sua irreversibilità”. Boym distingue tra una “nostalgia restauratrice”, che vorrebbe ricostruire, blindandoli, la dimora e il tempo perduti; e una “nostalgia riflessiva”, a tratti ironica, più legata al tempo individuale, che preferisce i frammenti del ricordo e impedisce alle emozioni di cancellare la riflessione critica. Inoltre, le intreccia e confronta con due categorie formulate dal filosofo Reinhart Koselleck: lo spazio dell’esperienza, che funge da passato-presente; e l’orizzonte di aspettativa, ovvero un futuro-presente. “Così la nostalgia, come emozione storica”, scrive, “è il desiderio di quello ‘spazio’ sempre più ristretto dell’esperienza che non corrisponde più al nuovo ‘orizzonte di aspettativa’”.

Per Halilaj, ancora molto giovane e immune dalla compartimentazione analitica, *esperienza* è una parola chiave. Gli consente di mantenere aperti i canali di comunicazione con il pubblico, ma soprattutto di risarcire e colmare le lacune del legame con il mondo di Runik, gettando ponti tra fasi diverse della propria vita e generazioni diverse della famiglia. Così che, a volte, la casa di là e quella di qui, o meglio le loro allegorie, possano coincidere. Prima che la Galleria Chert aprisse a Kreuzberg, nel settembre 2008, Halilaj ha potuto attrezzarne i locali con tubature, vasca da bagno e doccia, cucina a gas, letti, mobili e abat-jour per allestire uno spazio domestico destinato a un incontro con il padre: una sorta di “terra di nessuno”, insieme reale e *fictional*, dove potersi parlare e ascoltare per una settimana. Un congegno comprensibile, da far esperire a un genitore venuto da lontano per arrivare a spiegarli – senza troppe parole – cosa si stia facendo e dove, cos’è un’installazione, che rapporto si vuole istituire tra arte/lavoro e vita. A posteriori, quegli stessi materiali, riorganizzati *in situ* come parte della mostra inaugurale “The Lamb’s Mother in

Top - **Bourgeois Hen**, 2009. Courtesy: Chert, Berlin.



Above - **Bathroom wall, water pipes, shower rail**, 2008. Installation view in Chert booth at Artforum Berlin 2009. Courtesy: Chert, Berlin.

the Creche?”, sono diventati la quinta astratta della loro relazione.

Un meccanismo analogo, Halilaj l’ha riproposto pochi mesi dopo ad Artissima 2008, dove ha chiesto di ritagliare “una stanza tutta per sé” nello stand della stessa galleria: uno spazio chiuso dietro a una porta, gremito di opere, progetti e oggetti privati. A chi bussava ed entrava, si metteva a raccontare, di nuovo nella dimensione intima del *tête-à-tête*, chi fosse e a cosa stesse lavorando; ponendosi al centro della cornice, in prima persona e nei panni dell’io narrante, ma anche proteggendo e circoscrivendo con muri e serrature lo spazio di quell’esperienza.

Molti dei lavori discussi in quell’occasione nascevano dal progetto *They Are Lucky to Be Bourgeois Hens* (per “Art Is My Playground”, una collettiva organizzata nel 2008 da Tershame nel parco dei divertimenti Küçük Çiftlik di Istanbul), che nel frattempo si è evoluto in ciclo coerente di opere. Rispecchiando l’atmosfera un po’ circense e sgangherata, da fenomeno da baraccone, del vecchio luna park, Halilaj ne ha perimetrato un’area con transenne rosse, l’ha “arredata” con poche suppellettili e sculture dalle zampe anisodattili in ferro, scegliendo poi di condiderla, per giorni (e notti), con un gruppo di galline, gli animali con i quali più giocava da piccolo, imitandone il chiochiare. Uno scampolo innocuo di zoo dove, a finire in gabbia, più o meno ignorato dal pubblico, è l’artista stesso – come succedeva a “Il di giunatore” di Kafka (“Ein Hungerkünstler”, 1922). Così il pollaio diventa anche la metafora dell’integrazione in un contesto diverso, dove si è per forza alieni, letteralmente di un’altra razza, mentre nel testo *Cazzo il sole mi scotta...*, le gallinelle, un tempo amiche, iniziano ad azzuffarsi, per poi soccombere all’omologazione (“Non esiste nella natura loro / Vogliono solo essere come altre religioni / Perché?”), mentre qualcuna considera la possibilità di accoppiamenti con altre specie. Halilaj ha intitolato *Bourgeois Hen* alcuni disegni, montati su cornici e *objet trouvé* in legno, di una serie recente che ritrae galline e galletti boriosi, tronfi come palloni gonfiati, o appollaiati in strutture minimaliste, e sembra sfottere le aspirazioni agli agi della vita in città di tanti Kosovari, che a migliaia lasciano le campagne per inurbarsi. Come pare voler fare anche la sua famiglia, puntando su Pristina, e come del resto ha fatto lui stesso puntando sul *qui*. *They Are Lucky to Be Bourgeois Hens II* è anche il titolo della seconda mostra da Chert, lo scorso settembre; Halilaj vi ha presentato un igloo/culla di rami intrecciati, con all’interno una vetrina illuminata piena di oggetti “poveri” (*26 Objekte n’Kumpir*, 2009) come zoccoli,

un bastone, cornici, utensili – replica esatta di quelli che il nonno è solito fabbricare per tenersi occupato e “to dont/ talk with his/ son”, e quindi strumento utile, come l’installazione d’esordio, a riattivare un dialogo attorno alle dinamiche famigliari. Ad accompagnarlo, un video di documentazione sul pollaio surreale che l’artista ha progettato e convinto parenti, amici e vicini a costruire a Runik, a forma di space shuttle: la navetta spaziale, mezzo di trasporto ideale per chi voglia fare la spola tra due mondi, come per dei volatili che non sappiano staccarsi da terra. L’ultimo capitolo della saga, *They Are Lucky to Be Bourgeois Hens III*, è l’omonima installazione realizzata per la personale “Back to the Future” (2009, a cura di Albert Heta) al centro d’arte contemporanea Stacion di Pristina, che ha fatto traslocare fisicamente il “razzo” nel circuito espositivo, insieme al pollaio e alle sue occupanti. Scriveva Foucault (*Des Espaces Autres*, 1967): “Il naviglio è l’eterotopia per eccellenza. Nelle civiltà senza battelli i sogni inaridiscono, lo spionaggio rimpiazza l’avventura, e la polizia i corsari”.

Opposite - **They Are Lucky to Be Bourgeois Hens**, 2008. Courtesy: Chert, Berlin.

