

Petrit Halilaj. *Shkrepëtima*

A project by the winner of the 2nd edition of the Mario Merz Prize

Curated by Leonardo Bigazzi

29 October 2018 – 3 February 2019

Opening: 29 October 7 pm

Fondazione Merz - Turin

Fondazione Merz is pleased to present *Shkrepëtima*, a newly commissioned solo exhibition by Petrit Halilaj (Kostërrc, Skenderaj-Kosovo 1986).

Of Kosovar origin, Halilaj is the winner of the art category of the Mario Merz Prize second edition, the biannual international award for art and music, inaugurated by the Fondazione Merz.

The exhibition in Turin is the culmination of an ambitious three-part project, curated by Leonardo Bigazzi. The first iteration was a performance event with the local community that took place on 7 July 2018 at the ruins of the Cultural Centre of Runik (Kosovo), the town where the artist grew up. From 20 July to 19 August 2018, an exhibition was presented at the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern (Switzerland), underlining the shared aims between Switzerland and Italy as reflected in the mission of the Mario Merz Prize. The third and final exhibition in Turin will be centred around a site-specific intervention and a new body of work resulting from the artist's time and experience in Runik.

Runik is the starting point of the project, where, between 1968 and 1983, several archaeological excavation campaigns revealed an important Neolithic settlement. Among the numerous artefacts, the ocarina, the oldest musical instrument ever found in the Balkans, was also discovered. The largest part of this collection of artefacts, including the ocarina, remains inaccessible to the citizens of Runik, having been loaned to the Belgrade Museum and never returned due to the war. In contemporary Runik there is no visible trace of this discovery since, after the war, many houses were built directly on the archaeological site. The absence of an official narrative has left room for the inhabitants of Runik to fantasize about their past in an attempt to tie it to a present in which there is a strong need to rebuild the cultural identity of their country.

In Albanian, Halilaj's native tongue, *Shkrepëtima* means "flash", "lightning bolt" or "a sudden and intense feeling." *Shkrepëtima* was also the title of a multi-ethnic magazine created in the 70's and 80's by teachers and students of Runik. Halilaj's project functions as a spark, a *Shkrepëtima*, seeking to initiate cultural awareness, collective memory, and investigating the historical roots of the town of Runik.

The performance in Runik, produced by Hajde! Foundation and Fondazione Merz, which involved 30 local performers, musicians and all the inhabitants of the village, looked to reactivate the link between the population and its culture in what remains a symbolic place for the town's memory.

The two exhibitions at the Zentrum Paul Klee and at the Fondazione Merz present 40 new drawings created by the artist after examining the documentary remains found at the Cultural Centre in Runik. The series function as

a conceptual storyboard for the performance and at the same time as a visual plot of the village's cultural history.

The exhibition at the Zentrum Paul Klee is centred around the two-channel video installation, *The city roofs were so near that even a sleepwalking cat could pass over Runik without ever touching the ground*, which records the anecdotal voices of a population whose history exists only in stories handed down orally.

The exhibition at the Fondazione Merz will present the completion of the entire *Shkrepëtima* project. Through a new site-specific intervention that will include video, sound, sculpture, drawings, and installations made during and after the performance in Runik, Halilaj aims to reconstruct the important link between the territory and its inhabitants, and rediscover the identity and origins of a forgotten culture.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue documenting the *Shkrepëtima* project, published by hopefulmonster.

EXHIBITION ITINERARY

The exhibition opens with the first of a new series of sculptures and monumental installations that re-contextualise the settings, costumes and stage props of the performance inside the exhibition space. The work is composed of the bed in which, at the beginning of the first act, a boy falls asleep dreaming of being able to give new life to the theatre of Runik. The bed is positioned above a platform that had the function of sliding it out of the building, suspending it in the theatre space. In the performance, the boy's dream becomes reality and the theatre is 'awakened' thanks to the sound of fifteen ocarinas, while mysterious birds-like creatures build a nest around his bed with elements taken from the ruins. The ocarinas, supported by elements extending from the bed in all directions, were created by the artist on the model of the Runik Ocarina, one of the oldest musical instruments ever found in the Balkans. A find of great symbolic value because, despite the requests for restitution on the part of the Kosovar government, it remains in Belgrade at the Museum of Natural History and therefore inaccessible to the citizens of Runik. Hundreds of fragments recovered from the rubble removed during the redevelopment project of the building are arranged organically from the ceiling to the bed. Tiles, bricks and wooden beams of the building, which were nothing more than useless, bulky rubble, find a function as historical testimony, becoming an expression of a precise will to remember the past in a context in which the desire for removal is very strong. Through his dreamlike and visionary language, Halilaj has achieved a surprising balance between the weight of the history of these fragments and the physical lightness arising from their suspension.

Inside the Fondazione Merz, a former 1930s industrial structure, the artist then reconstructed the proportions and volumes of Runik's Cultural Centre building using the wooden stage sets of the performance. Halilaj has managed to relate the two buildings and two very different realities, which certainly represent a point of reference for the communities that were born and grew around them. His intervention reminds us not only of the centrality of the places of memory in the construction of our identity, but also that their potential is not necessarily limited to a city or a nation, and can be expressed in various forms, generating a space of shared reflection.

The red curtains and the painted backdrops used in the performance are arranged along the longitudinal axis of the building and transform the exhibition space into a stage. On them alternate the stories of the second act, in which Halilaj re-enacts fragments taken from some of the most important Albanian dramas that were recited at

Runik by amateur companies. The texts were selected by the artist to question problematic issues concerning Albanian identity and some of the models that still regulate its social structure. The struggle for personal and collective freedom (*Toka Jonë*), female education (*Cuca and Maleve*), gender resistance (*Nita*), machismo and efforts to overcome a traditionalist and reactionary mentality (*Hakmarrja*). The stories are so strong that the curtains do not seem able to hold them back and the props escape to impose themselves on the spectators' gaze.

From above the birds, in the form of sculptures made with the costumes worn by the actors in Runik, observe the whole scene. Birds are a recurrent animal in the artist's imagination and works as a metaphor of the ability to be free and go beyond geographical boundaries and cultural barriers. Their fundamental role in the performance is to realise what does not seem possible and, like in the text fragment of the traditional song that closes the performance, make dreams come true.

The exhibition itinerary continues by entering the theatre building in virtual fashion. Here, a series of conceptual drawings and studies of the performance are presented on old documents found by the artist in the rooms of the Cultural Centre. These are commercial commercial and invoices that were part of the archive of the local Cooperative, testimony of a daily activity of a reality that no longer exists. Here we discover neolithic bird-like artefacts, jokes taken from theatrical scripts, studies for bird costumes, props used in the show. These drawings represent a conceptual storyboard of the performance and a visual portrait of the cultural history of the village in which the past meets the present.

On the lower level, a video is presented in which fragments of filming of the performance overlap with those made by the artist inside the ruins of the Cultural Centre before it was tidied up. A subjective reconstruction of the action that restores the objects that have animated the exhibition to their original function. The musical score consists of ANDRRA (Fatime Kosumi) and Christoph Hamann, in collaboration with Petrit Halilaj, and arises from a selection of sounds of stones, bricks, tiles and other materials found among the ruins combined with the sound of the ocarina.

By intervening directly on the processes of construction of the collective history of his community, bringing it closer to its origins, Halilaj also proposes a universal reflection on the potential of art and its power to transform reality. As is also suggested by the title of the project, which in Albanian means "flash" and, by extension, a sudden and intense thought that works as an activator of consciousness, *Shkrepëtima* is a "spark" able to restart a process of reflection on our identity. Only through a deep awareness of the past can we assume the right responsibility for building the future.

With the support of:



in partnership with:



We wish to thank the City of Turin and Kuhn & Bülow

EXHIBITION DETAILS

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Title | <i>Petrit Halilaj. Shkrepëtimi</i> |
| Artist | Petrit Halilaj |
| Dates | 29 October 2018 – 3 February 2019 |
| Venue | Fondazione Merz, via Limone – 24, 10141 Torino |
| Curators | Leonardo Bigazzi |
| Inauguration | 7 pm on Monday, 29 October 2018 |
| Opening times | Tuesday to Sunday, 11 am-7 pm |
| Prices | € 6 full, € 3.50 reduced (visitors aged between 10 and 26, senior citizens over 65, organised groups of at least 10 people, holders of the Pyou Card) - Free (children up to the age of 10, disabled visitors and person accompanying them, holders of the Abbonamento Musei and Torino + Piemonte Cards, Card Contemporaneamentitalia, ICOM members, journalists with valid badge or if accredited, friends of the Fondazione Merz and every first Sunday of the month) |
| Info: | tel. 011.19719437 www.fondazionemerz.org - info@fondazionemerz.org Fondazione Merz: T. |
| Press office: | International press enquiries: SUTTON: Melissa Emery, Melissa@suttonpr.com T: +44 (0)207 183 3577 Italian press enquiries: PCM Studio di Paola C. Manfredi: press@paolamanfredi.com – Tel. +39 02 36769480 Fondazione Merz: Nadia Biscaldi - press@fondazionemerz.org – T. +39 011.19719436 |

Mario Merz Prize

The International Mario Merz Prize was established with the desire on the one hand of commemorating Mario Merz, and on the other to launch a new project looking to the future of art and which, thanks to a wide international panel of experts, would make it possible to identify and highlight exponents in the field of art and in parallel enable composers to propose an innovative project for contemporary music.

Linked to the Fondazione Merz, the project aims to breathe life into a new network of exhibitions programmes and musical activities in Italy and Switzerland. The decision to twin two countries emerged from the characteristics of the two nations: both are centres of production and culture. Switzerland represents the origin and nationality of the artist, and Italy his adopted country and place in which he applied his creativity.

The Mario Merz Prize – which benefits from the collaboration of an organising committee and is supported by an authoritative international honorary committee – has itself been awarded the Medaglia del Presidente della Repubblica Italiana and enjoys the patronage of the Swiss Embassy in Italy, the Italian Embassy in Switzerland, the Regione Piemonte, the City of Zurich and City of Turin.

www.mariomerzprize.org

Petrit Halilaj

Born in Kostërc (Kosovo) in 1986, Petrit Halilaj lives and works in-between Germany, Kosovo and Italy.

His work is deeply connected with the recent history of his country, and the consequences of the political and cultural tensions in the region. But while confronting a collective memory, his work often originates from a personal experience and it is usually the result of an intimate process and a shared moment with someone he loves. His unique, and sometimes irreverent, way to playfully confront the essence of reality results in a deep reflection on memory, freedom, cultural identity and life discoveries.

His work has already been shown in several solo exhibitions at the New Museum in NYC, at Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milano, Kölnischer Kunstverein in Köln, at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, the National Gallery of Kosovo, Prishtina, the Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon, the Fondation d'Entreprise Galeries Lafayette, Paris, WIELS - Contemporary Art Center -, Brussels; as well as in group shows at the 57th Venice Biennale, Fondazione Merz in Turin, the MAK Center for Art and Architecture in Los Angeles, Palazzo Grassi in Venice, and the Westfälischer Kunstverein in Münster.

Petrit Halilaj was the first artist to represent Kosovo at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013. He won the special mention of the jury of the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017.