



Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
Preußischer Kulturbesitz

**Hamburger
Bahnhof**
*Nationalgalerie
der Gegenwart*

Berlin, 8 September 2025

PRESS RELEASE

Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart

Invalidenstraße 50, 10557 Berlin

Tue, Wed, Fri 10 am – 6 pm, Thu 10 am – 8 pm, Sat + Sun 11 am – 6pm
Special opening hours Berlin Art Week 11.9. – 14.9.: Thu + Fri 10 am – 10 pm, Sat + Sun 11 am – 10 pm

Petrit Halilaj. An Opera Out of Time

11 September 2025 – 31 May 2026

A special exhibition of Nationalgalerie – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Opening: Wednesday, 10 September 2025, 7 pm

With his theatrical works of art, Petrit Halilaj creates space for freedom, queerness and desire. At the heart of this solo exhibition at Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart is the museum version of his first operatic work: “Syrigana”, which explores collective dreams and open worlds of self-invention. Alongside this site-specific work, the presentation in the expansive Rieckhallen brings together sculptures and installations from different periods of his practice. Giant flowers and moths, a flock of migratory birds, canaries, a fox, a rooster and a larger-than-life horse inhabit Halilaj’s immersive environments, which grapple with lived experiences of war, flight and exile as well as cultural repression. “Petrit Halilaj. An Opera Out of Time” opens on the occasion of Berlin Art Week and marks the first major institutional solo exhibition in Berlin of the artist, who lives and works in the city.

Moth sculptures made of carpets and brightly coloured fabrics clustered around flickering lightbulbs greet visitors before they step into a tunnel of dense branches. Halilaj’s installations at Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart resemble stage sets populated by more-than-human characters: insects, birds and foxes, musical instruments, archaeological artefacts and stars. Many of these staged situations are composed of branches, twigs, mud and dung, sometimes combined with fragments of found objects. The environments **RU (Aves Migrantis) (2017/2025)** and **Yes but the sea is attached to the Earth and it never floats around in space. The stars would turn off and what about my planet? (2014)** frame the beginning and end of the exhibition – Halilaj’s first institutional solo show in Berlin.

Halilaj’s practice is closely bound to the history of his native Kosovo and the consequences of cultural and political tensions in the region. **“An Opera Out of Time”** reflects this cultural and political context through the artist’s personal experiences: during the Kosovo War (1998–1999) he and his family were forced to flee. In **RU (Aves Migrantis)** dozens of bird-like sculptures perch among the branches, standing in for more than 500 neolithic artefacts unearthed in Runik, the village where Halilaj grew up. Most of these artefacts remain today in the Ethnological Museum in Belgrade. For his replicas, Halilaj worked from catalogue photographs and archival records listing the objects under the prefix “RU.” Through a peephole in the tunnel, visitors glimpse a canary-yellow women’s suit tailored for the artist in Kosovo – an object that merges memories of childhood with conversations on sexuality.

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At the tunnel's end, visitors encounter the installation **Shkrepëtima** (2018, Albanian for "flash" or "lightning"), first performed in the ruins of the House of Culture in Runik. Stage, curtain, backdrop and costumes were subsequently transformed into an installation that has since been presented in different constellations. The building, erected in the 1950s, once housed a library, theatre, cinema, agricultural cooperative and teahouse. Halilaj's performance wove together sculpture, installation, performance, music and archival research in collaboration with the local community to revive the memory of the former House of Culture. As a result of this collaboration, reconstruction of the building is set to begin at the end of 2025.

The video work **"The city roofs were so near that even a sleepwalking cat could pass over Runik without ever touching the ground"** (2017/2025) in the interstitial space introduces the legend of Adam and Eve's marriage in Syrigana – the starting point of the artist's first opera, whose museum version is presented in the following exhibition space. Unlike "Shkrepëtima", which in its installation form dispensed with sound, movement and theatrical light, "Syrigana" (2025) integrates these elements of opera. At its centre are a mobile theatre, the illuminated sculpture of a setting sun that shifts in interplay with the action, and radiant stars. Referencing the opera's world premiere in the hilly landscape of Syrigana, the audience area is carpeted with traditional Kosovar rugs. Visitors are invited to sit or wander through the stage set with its props and sculptural elements: a pear tree, an ocarina and frame drums. Five larger-than-life pear blossoms, familiar in Kosovo, symbolise queer love – whose very existence is increasingly threatened as conservative and retrogressive politics spread widely.. Costumes appear as sculptural figures or presences within the installation: the main characters, a fox and a rooster, look down on the scene of their wedding from a raised window. A full audio recording of the opera fills the exhibition space, accompanied by a projection of the libretto as surtitles.

The fabled site of Syrigana is a three-thousand-year-old village near Runik, Halilaj's hometown. Since 2016, Syrigana has been protected as an archaeological site encompassing prehistory, Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The myth of Adam and Eve's marriage in Syrigana is one of the local legends passed down over generations in the village teahouse. The opera's five acts recast the Creation as an epic queer love story between a fox and a rooster. Cast out of paradise, they arrive in the village by NATO peacekeeping helicopter (KFOR). The installation includes this helicopter as a prop based on children's drawings reminiscent of the "abetare" series, recently shown as part of Halilaj's rooftop commission Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2024.

The opera premiered on 29 June 2025 in Syrigana, performed under the open sky of a village in which ethnic Albanian and Serbian communities live in isolation from one another. At Hamburger Bahnhof, its elements are reconfigured in a site-specific installation. Developed in collaboration with the Kosovo Philharmonic, the libretto was created with Amy Zion, Doruntina Basha and Robert Schulz. It is based on a score by Lugh O'Neill, with vocal compositions by Nina Guo and choreography by Robert Schulz.

In the final exhibition space, on a pink lake made of soap amid a barren landscape of branches, stones and soil, stands a monumental white horse. Draped across its muzzle is a traditional belt, a shoka, embroidered

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with an inscription. A similar belt was worn by the artist's grandfather, an Albanian intellectual and resistance fighter renowned for his diplomacy and mediation between communities who was murdered in the waves of ethnic cleansing that took place in 1912 as Serbian forces invaded the region, then under Ottoman rule. The scene in **"Yes but the sea is attached to the Earth and it never floats around in space. The stars would turn off and what about my planet?"** (2014) points to a longstanding ethnic and cultural repression that culminated in the Kosovo War of the 1990s and insists on the continuation of poetry, imagination and mediation.

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During **Berlin Art Week**, from Thursday 11 September to Sunday 14 September, **all exhibitions at Hamburger Bahnhof will remain open until 10 pm daily.**

On Saturday, 13 September at 3 pm, an edition of the conversation series **"In Conversation"** with Petrit Halilaj will take place. Admission free.

In May 2026, on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Hamburger Bahnhof, performances of the opera "Syrigana" will be staged within the exhibition.

An accompanying volume in the Hamburger Bahnhof catalogue series is published by Silvana Editoriale, Milan, with a curatorial introduction by Catherine Nichols, a conversation between Amy Zion and Petrit Halilaj, and an essay by Lura Limani (12 Euro).

The exhibition is curated by Catherine Nichols, Curator at Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart. Curatorial Assistant: Emily Finkelstein, Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart
Education and Mediation: Claudia Ehgartner, with Assistant Sonja Azizaj, Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart

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The exhibition takes place as part of Berlin Art Week.