

DRITON
SELMANI

Curated by Hana Ostan Ožbolt

PLACES WE
LEAVE BEHIND

Slovene Writers' Association

15.05 —
6.06. 2019

Artwork Index

1. *Call It Fate, Call It Karma*, 2015
Custom made shoe, trousers. 140 cm in diameter, height 220 cm
2. *I Surrender*, 2018
42 x 28 cm plastic bag
3. *Our Past is Our Common Future*, 2019
Site-specific installation, vinyl cut letters on van
4. *These Stories*, 2018
Single channel video Installation
Duration: 7min 23sec, Screening ratio: 4:3, Sound: stereo
5. *Tears Don't Cry*, 2019
Site-specific installation, three chairs, old broom Dimensions:
250 x 250 cm
6. *I, WHY, WHY?*, 2012
Embroidery on textile, dimensions 100 x 70cm on white frame
7. *Tell me where I am from?*, 2012
Needle embroidery on textile. Dimensions: 90 x 60 cm framed embroidery map,
9 mixed media framed drawings on paper. Dimensions: 32 x 24 cm
8. *Untitled*, 2018
Handmade knife, Rubber eraser
Dimension: 21 x 5 x 6 cm
9. *These Stories*, 2018
Single channel video Installation
Duration: 7min 23sec, Screening ratio: 4:3, Sound: stereo
10. *Places We Leave Behind* / Installation view: Slovene Writers' Association, Ljubljana — Slovenia



A blue plastic shopping bag is displayed inside a clear acrylic case. The bag is centered and has the text "I Surrender but with my own flag" written on it in black marker. The case is mounted on a wall with two screws at the top.

I
Surrender
but with my
own flag



**OUR PAST IS OUR
COMMON FUTURE**

LJ-CN-695



And I don't believe both not going to the Moon.



Places We Leave Behind

In May 2019, I had the privilege to organize Driton Selmani's first solo exhibition in Ljubljana, Slovenia. After meeting him for the first time a couple of months before (in the summer of 2018 at a portfolio review event in the Netherlands) I was immediately taken away by his work and artistic persona. Direct, witty, smart and self-confident, he was screaming for attention—just like his work. I was still finishing my master's thesis at that time and working as an emerging freelance curator, eager to find different ways to organize exhibitions outside the established gallery spaces in Ljubljana. Aiming to bring contemporary art closer to the general public while striving for the cultural enrichment of public spaces, I initiated HOOST, a series of emerging artists' exhibitions outside the gallery/institutional premises. In its framework, I organized and curated exhibitions as well as presentations of the younger generation of artists from November 2018 onwards, Selmani's presentation being the last one. What follows was written for that particular exhibition and has been updated for this publication.

In finding the right location (not a "white cube") for the exhibition, I decided to collaborate with one of the main Slovenian literature festivals, Slovenian Book Days. In its 24th edition, the space of language gained its reverberation for the first time also within the field of contemporary art; often marked by traditionalism, the festival's organizers decided to widen its frame. I positioned Selmani's exhibition in the house of the Slovene Writers' Association, the famous building in which the Slovene consciousness as a nation and state was built and established. The Association was originally founded in 1872 in Ljubljana to support writers and their families, and was later dissolved in 1915 by the Austrian authorities to be re-established in 1920. In the early 1980s, the Slovene Writers' Association (a member of the Writers' Association of Yugoslavia) became more involved in social questions: particularly issues concerning nationality, creative freedom and political pluralism (during this period a commission for the protection of writing and thinking functioned within the framework of the Association, and—with help from external experts—participated in measures to change the Constitution). It played an important role in Slovenia gaining independence.

The exhibition *Places We Leave Behind* was set and intervened in the building, the daily routines of the people working there and its immediate surroundings, using it as a pavilion of sorts. Also, considering the opening of all the national pavilions in the Venice Biennale within a month (beginning of May 2019), the "Slovenian" house temporarily became "home" not solely to contemporary art, but also to the artworks of an artist who comes from the youngest country in Europe.

Kosovo, marked by much political and social unrest in the final quarter of the last century, received its partial independence only after the 1998-99 Kosovo War followed by becoming the Republic of Kosovo. Nowadays, it is one of those countries that is not recognized by all. It is precisely the inability of positioning that establishes itself as a weakness and strength at the same time – the in-between position (of Kosovo) as a place of establishing dialogue. The exhibition *Places We Leave Behind* was set and intervened in the building, the daily routines of the people working there and its immediate surroundings, using it as a pavilion of sorts. Also, considering the opening of all the national pavilions in the Venice Biennale within a month (beginning of May 2019), the “Slovenian” house temporarily became “home” not solely to contemporary art, but also to the artworks of an artist who comes from the youngest country in Europe. Kosovo, marked by much political and social unrest in the final quarter of the last century, received its partial independence only after the 1998-99 Kosovo War followed by becoming the Republic of Kosovo. Nowadays, it is one of those countries that is not recognized by all. It is precisely the inability of positioning that establishes itself as a weakness and strength at the same time – the in-between position (of Kosovo) as a place of establishing dialogue. This is, for instance, discussed by the playful earliest piece in the exhibition *Tell me where I am from?* (2012) which remains just as fresh today as when it was first created. Selmani, studying art in England at the time, was frustrated by the fact that his country was always omitted when he wanted to order things from Amazon or purchase plane tickets (and he had no place to fly to when he wanted to fly back home) and he asked other students to draw Kosovo without looking at the map. The exhibited series of drawings were produced with the artist’s mother as the creator of the embroidered map, which shows Kosovo as a blue patch the color of the sea, embracing the European continent.

At the forefront of Selmani’s diverse art practice (everything from objects, videos, installations, photographs, and interventions in public space) stand the issues of constructing (national) identity, the duality between the individual and collective, and memory and history. There is doubt about all types of reality. His creative process is driven by the confrontation with his personal history expressly marked by the history of the country in which he grew up. From the early work, *I, Why, Why?* (2012), an embroidery made by the artist’s mother that was positioned in the entry hall of the house (let us point out that the Albanian word “vaj” sounds like the English “why” and means mourning), the visitor moved to the work *Untitled* (2018) in the conference room.

Places We Leave Behind

A handmade knife with an eraser at the end of its handle that does not merely act as a representation of the contrast between creating/destroying, but rather leads us to consider whether something can be erased and forgotten? Or started again? The artist designated the piece as a self-portrait into which he has stored and archived his feelings, but it can also be understood in a much broader manner—as a metaphor of the Balkans over the past decades. The personal and the political cannot be separated from each other, and even if one can define this as one of the characteristics of the vital Kosovo art scene, which has recently received widespread international attention (Manifesta 14 to be hosted in Prishtina in 2022) Selmani integrates the social and the political subtly and poetically in his work. He is transparently direct only when he wants to be.

In *Call it fate, call it karma* (2015), a single big shoe becomes the touch point of the two yellow legs of a trouser. A shoe—tailor-made to suit neither the right nor the left foot—is therefore obliged to be shared by both. To imagine a deformed foot that would become such when fitted with this type of footwear is painful, but also pointless and utterly useless as also Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei writes. Why would one want to wear a shoe that is neither left nor right, but merely and only – in-between? It seems that this in-between “post-ideological” shoe, as the only possible means of survival, presupposes a constant search for balance. In a period of political correctness and the inability to name things with their right name, the latter appears to be monstrously topical. Yet at the same time, it draws attention to the complexity of the position from which we are constantly looking for a path to converse with wavering balance. The voice from the video *These Stories* (2018) was almost omnipresent. On view in an intimate surrounding of an old white van (white van / black box) in the garden of the house, the work also combines two different moments, two events from the same period: the original clips from the Apollo 11 mission and the audio narration of Sadik Cena, born in 1956, a close relative of the artist. His story relates to the same period when NASA’s mission to the Moon took place. At the time, many Kosovo families, including that of the artist, experienced a radical change with the arrival of electricity to their village. By combining two stories, global and local, Selmani questions their significance and importance, creating a single History. Intimacy is revealed in Selmani’s projects through minimalist gestures and, in recent times, also through more noticeable interventions into the public space. He is quietly drawing attention to what is no longer, and increasingly loudly to what is arising. He uses everyday objects and (more or less) public spaces as surfaces for humorous or ironic sayings, quotations, and public acknowledgement. Precisely playfulness and humor are characteristic of his art practice as a whole.

The seemingly fleeting jokes, that can be totally lost among the innumerable adverts of the media landscape, are crying out for attention as black on white—disclosing uncertainty, hopes, and fears. If those on the surfaces of cars or vans, that drive off to unknown places after the closing of the exhibition are transient, the series entitled Love Letters, which has been in the making since 2018 remains forever. Not only because of love but largely also due to the surface used to make the notations—plastic, which is much more enduring and long-lasting, even more so than love. The series of Love Letters is made up of hundreds of plastic bags, which the artist initially kept in line with the requirements of a contemporary consumer after each purchase from one of the local shops. Now, however, he constantly collects, stores and uses them to pass on his messages, I Surrender But With My Own Flag (2018) being one of them. The monolithic remains of a world of the past are in Selmani's work mixed with the current values of an unstable everyday life. They point to the barely noticeable vibrations of human relationships and how all our paths accidentally cross, regardless of where we have come from and where we are going. Selmani also created three new interventions for the Ljubljana exhibition. I Cannot Be Myself All the Time (2019) was "moveable" a white van parked in one (or the other) of the streets near the Association. Our Past Is Our Common Future (2019) was positioned in the garden behind the house: at the same time, as already mentioned, the work acted as a "black box" within which the video These Stories (2018) could be viewed. Tears Don't Cry (2019) was imagined to be the last work of the exhibition; a site-specific installation located in the rarely used basement of the house where people never gather where visitors are otherwise never allowed.

Three chairs and one broom floating above them in search of constant balance—a whole lot of shared magic. I had the chance to collaborate with Selmani again, when I co-curated the group show Double Wall of Silence at the Ljubljana-based Škuc Gallery. Through a selection of works by five international artists who explore or play with presence and absence, existence and non-existence, the exhibition focused on the silenced and the power of the unspoken—on silence as a form of language and narrative. In just a couple of months' time (from May to December 2019) I noticed Selmani's artistic practice change and evolve; he is a seeker and a fortune teller, who uses every opportunity to convey his playful, ironic and often confessional messages, whether in the use of everyday objects or interventions in public space. But—his one-sentence pronouncements or seemingly fleeting jokes mostly reveal constant doubt and represent hopes and fears—collective and intimate—heavily marked by the country in which he grew up. Only Time Will Tell (2019) read as an inscription glowing in the inner courtyard of the Škuc Gallery. In the light of the unpredictable times we live in, there will be places which we will leave behind...and only time will tell.



I, WHY, WHY ?, 2012

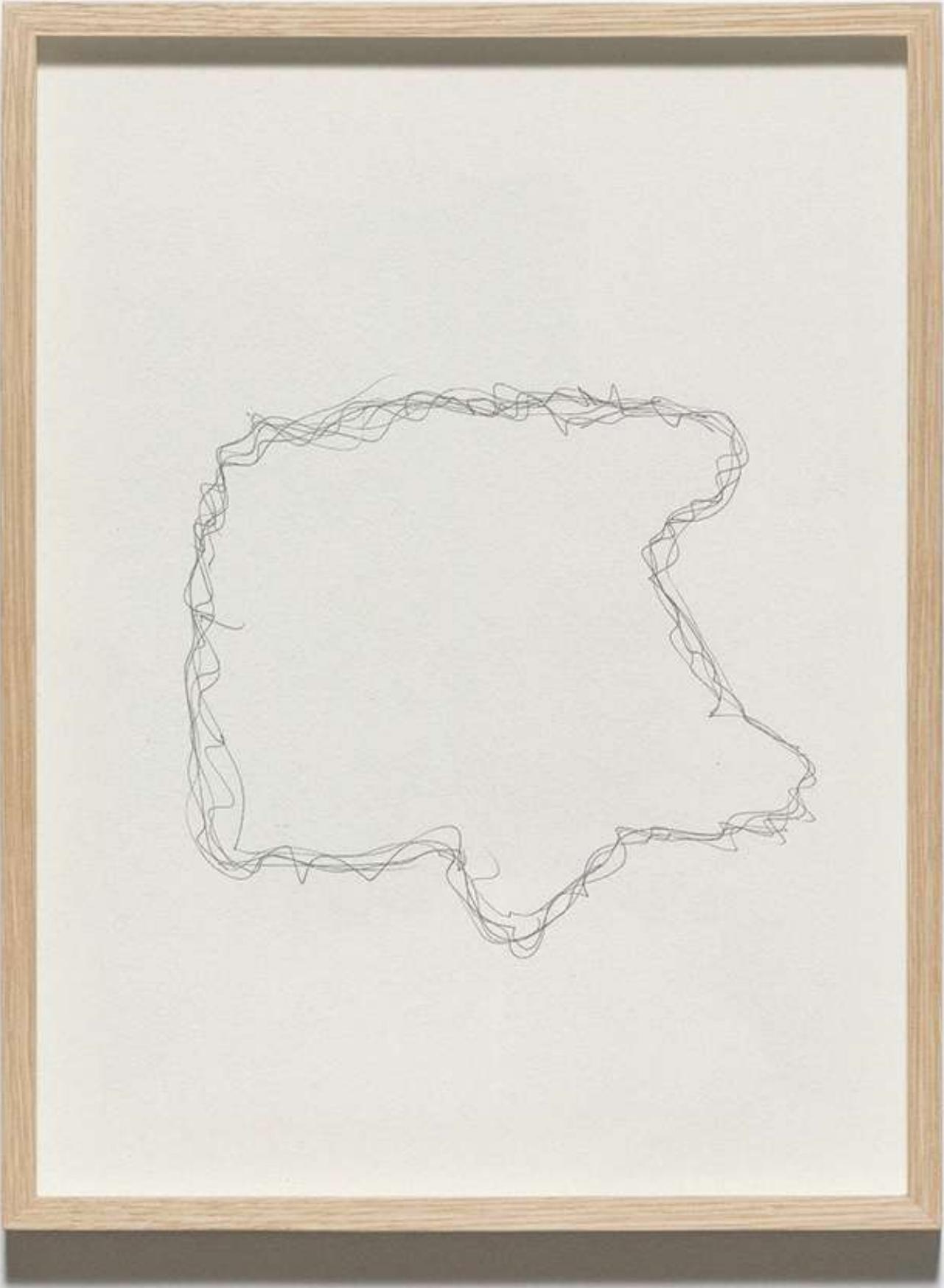
Embroidery on textile on white frame, 100 x 70 cm

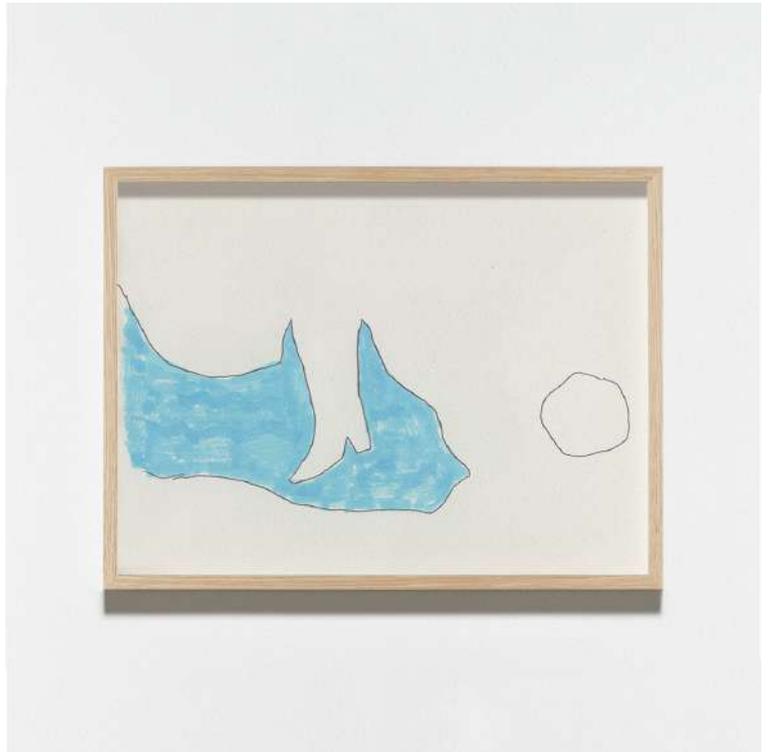
Installation view: Places We Leave Behind exhibition, Ljubljana

Photo: Jaka Babnik









Tell Me Where I Am From?, 2012
9 mixed media framed drawings on paper
32 × 24 cm
Photo: Kristina Bursać





Untitled, 2018

Handcrafted knife, rubber eraser

21 x 5 x 6 cm

Installation view: Places We Leave Behind exhibition, Ljubljana

Photo: Jaka Babnik





Driton Selmani

Driton Selmani (b. 1987)

Lives and works in Prishtina & Doganaj.

Selmani approaches the idea of perceived reality by deconstructing formations of social, political, and cultural topics that have been embodied around him. At a young age, he was told to worship a country that no longer existed, which caused him to form a basis of skepticism towards any supposedly given reality. He later used this as a beneficial tool to reconstruct his beliefs into visual artifacts. In 1999, old simulacra have been replaced by new simulacra; the ornaments of a previous space have been refurbished in order to unfold with new meanings but also new uncertainties. Selmani confronts himself as a spectator of this "ongoing event", and positions himself as an actor, enacting his performances based on his personal histories, beliefs, and doubts. He has exhibited at solo and group exhibitions in Stacion Center For Contemporary Art Pristina, Ludwig Múzeum in Budapest, Kunstraum Niederosterreich Vienna, Casa São Paulo, Mediterranea Biennial 16 Ancona, U10 Belgrade, 5th Marrakesh Biennial, Amsterdam Light Festival, , Fabbrica del Vapore Milan, Bregenz Biennale, Exchiesetta Polignano a Mare, National Art Gallery Tirana, Thessaloniki Center of Contemporary Art, Eugster || Belgrade, Norrköping Light Festival, La Maison des Arts Brussels, MMSU Rijeka, Škuc Gallery, MAXXI Museum, Kunstmuseum Basel, Museum of Contemporary Art, 18th Talinn Print Triennial, Skopje & 14th Manifesta in Prishtina 2022 among others...

Hana Ostan Ožbolt

Hana Ostan Ožbolt (b. 1991) is a freelance curator, writer, and director of the ULAY Foundation based between Ljubljana and Vienna. In recent years, she has worked in contemporary art (private galleries and the NGO sector) in Ljubljana and Berlin, among others, for Aksioma – Institute for Contemporary Art and Galerija Gregor Podnar. She was the initiator of HOoST, a framework aimed at supporting and promoting emerging artists while organizing their exhibitions outside the institutional frame. She has curated among others Driton Selmani: *Places We Leave Behind* (House and Garden of the Slovenian Writers' Association, Ljubljana 2019); *Double Wall of Silence* (Škuc Gallery/Hestia Belgrade 2019- 2020, together with Anja Obradović); *Home and Abroad* (Ljubljana/online, 2020-2021, together with Roman Uranjek); *Ulay: From Berlin to Paris* (Richard Saltoun Gallery Online, London, 2021); *ULAY WAS HERE* (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2020-2021, together with Hripsimé Visser and Reiner Wolfs). Hana is the initiator and mentor of the educational programme *Academia Nuts* (co-organized by the ULAY Foundation and Fotopub), and regularly publishes and lectures on contemporary visual art.

15.05 — 6.06. 2019

PLACES WE
LEAVE BEHIND