

Press release

Edi Rama | WORK

26 January – 9 March, 2019

Opening: Friday, 25 January 2019, 6–9pm

carlier | gebauer is pleased to announce *WORK*, the first solo exhibition of the Albanian artist and Prime Minister Edi Rama with the gallery. It will include a series of new drawings created on documents and notes, Rama creates during meetings and phone calls, as well as ceramic sculptures and a floor-to-ceiling wallpaper that emulates the wallpaper in his office at the Kryeministria in Tirana.

Edi Rama's drawing practice has developed in close parallel with his career as a politician. As curator Hans Ulrich Obrist notes, "art is not separate from politics in his view, but coextensive with it." Rama does not see art as a luxury, but as an essential element in a functional society, which he aptly summarizes in his assertion "culture is infrastructure, it is not mere surface." A clear example is his initiative to paint the facades of decaying communist bloc buildings after being elected Mayor of Tirana in 2000, an undertaking Rama has described as "a political action, with colors." Fellow Albanian artist and frequent collaborator Anri Sala captured in his acclaimed video work *Dammi i Colori* (2003). Although such a gesture could certainly be read as a beautification project, particularly during a time that many residential and commercial buildings were not connected to municipal electricity and water systems, it nonetheless had tangible effects that rippled through the social fabric: with the new colorful environs, people began to feel safer, crime declined, and residents started to take the bars off of their windows. On the painted roads, Rama noted that 90% of the residents began to pay taxes, as opposed to the customary 4%.

One of his first actions upon assuming office as the prime minister of Albania in 2013 was to tear down the barricades surrounding the Kryeministria. Now, upon entering the building visitors are greeted by the Center for Openness and Dialogue, which opened in 2015. The center contains a digital archive of the Prime Minister's office, a library, and exhibition spaces. According to its official website, the Center for Openness and Dialogue "seeks to become a laboratory that investigates the very threshold where different fields of art, politics, and research meet and their potentials overlap."

Upstairs in Rama's office, his desk teems with containers of brightly colored markers. Rama creates all of his drawings at work. While sitting in telephone conferences or meetings, he makes countless automatic drawings on printouts of his daily agenda, office notes, protocols, faxes, and other official correspondence on a daily basis. Created in an environment of state power, these drawings function as a form of psychic release and can be read as an abstract diary of sorts—a dynamic record of political life. These markings form an alternative system of communication, capturing a kind of excess or charge of the everyday life of an artist-politician that can't be conveyed through other means. A new wallpaper will be created for the exhibition at carlier | gebauer, inspired by the wallpaper in Rama's office, that was also shown as part of the Christine Macel's Venice Biennale in 2017. The new wallpaper is comprised of numerous, recent individual drawings: an accumulation of days, decisions, and reflections translated spatially. Some of Rama's drawings appear as lustrous, interlocking swirls of color—while others, like a letter to the office of Angela Merkel, resemble a surreal verdant landscape.

Created outside of working hours on the weekend in his studio, Rama's undulating sculptural works translate these explosive drawings into three dimensions. Presented on custom plinths that follow the outline of the sculpture, Rama's abstract automatic reflections take on an architectural dimension. The exhibition will also feature a new and never before exhibited series of yellow Post-it notes, stuck directly on to the gallery wall, which follow the same principle as the daily drawings.

Although the organic forms and vivid colors of Rama's drawings are visually seductive, it is the relationship between the hand and the mind in these works that is perhaps most central for Rama: "I began to understand that my subconscious was being helped or fed by my hand to stay calm while my conscious had to focus on demanding topics and help me avoid mistakes of misjudgment through shallow concentration," he explains, "Knowing this, later I deliberately took time to be alone and draw when difficult political decisions had to be made, the calm my hands could teach my head was vital."

Edi Rama (b. 1964) lives and works in Tirana. A former professor of painting at the Academy of Fine Arts and author of several books, his works have been exhibited in numerous solo, two-person, or group exhibitions including at the Venice Biennale (2017); São Paulo Biennial (1994); Haus der Kunst, Munich (2004); the Centre Pompidou, Paris (2010); the Musée D'art contemporain de Montréal (2011); Biennale of Marrakesh, Morocco (2015); The New Museum, New York (2016); and Kunsthalle Rostock (2019). Edi Rama began his political career in Albania as the Minister of Culture in 1998. He was the Mayor of Tirana from 2000-2011. Rama was elected Prime Minister of Albania in September 2013, following a landslide victory in the general elections, and his government has since embarked the path of reforms that aim to bring Albania closer to the European Union. He is currently serving his second term as Prime Minister.