HELLENIC REPUBLIC
Ministry of Culture

NEON

Athens, 23 November 2026

**PRESS RELEASE**

***Michael Rakowitz & Ancient Cultures***
**A Trilogy of Exhibitions Bridging Ancient Cultures and Contemporary Art**
**A collaboration between the Hellenic Ministry of Culture, the Acropolis Museum, the Ephorate of Antiquities of the City of Athens, and NEON.**

**Third part: Collaboration between the Ministry of Culture and NEON Organization**
***What You Leave Behind is Not What is Engraved | Michael Rakowitz & Ancient Cultures***
**Curated by Elina Kountouri, Director NEON**
**Old Acropolis Museum, Acropolis Hill**
**2026-2028**

The third part of the trilogy *Michael Rakowitz & Ancient Cultures* brings contemporary art into dialogue with the iconic monument of classical civilisation, at the renovated Old Acropolis Museum.

This is the first contemporary art exhibition to be presented on the Acropolis Hill and marks a major milestone in the longstanding collaboration between NEON and the Ministry of Culture.

The exhibition *What You Leave Behind Is Not What Is Engraved*, curated by NEON Director Elina Kountouri, is a new commission by NEON to artist Michael Rakowitz. It focuses on stories of diaspora and on how objects from different contexts generate new narratives.

**The Minister of Culture Lina Mendoni** mentioned: *"For the first time, following the renovation of the Old Acropolis Museum, the Sacred Rock of the Acropolis opens its doors to contemporary artistic creation. Within the same historic setting, a space for dialogue between the past and the present is being created. This valuable capacity of the past to embrace contemporary creativity offers a unique experience.*

*As part of its collaboration with the Ministry of Culture to present contemporary artworks in archaeological and museum sites, NEON inaugurates this new approach with the final part of Michael Rakowitz's trilogy, 'What You Leave Behind Is Not What Is Engraved'.*

*The title adopted by Rakowitz refers to Pericles' Funeral Oration, delivered in 430 BC in honour of the first fallen of the Peloponnesian War: 'For heroes have the whole earth for their tomb; and in lands far from their own, where the column with its epitaph declares it, there is enshrined in every breast a record unwritten with no tablet to preserve it, except that of the heart'*[1]

*Through materials, objects and personal testimonies of people who have experienced displacement and migration throughout history, Rakowitz's work explores questions of memory, identity, loss and displacement – universal themes that connect historical experience with the major social questions of our present.*

*Rakowitz's work brings to mind the images of the tents of Asia Minor refugees, who, following their displacement from their ancestral homes in 1922, found shelter here, on the Acropolis Hill.*

*I would like to thank NEON's founder, Dimitris Daskalopoulos, and the Organisation's Director and exhibition curator, Elina Kountouri, for this exhibition and for their longstanding collaboration with the Ministry of Culture."*

**Dimitris Daskalopoulos, Founder of NEON**, adds: *"The contemporary art exhibition presented here by the Ministry of Culture and NEON marks two historic firsts. It is the first exhibition to be held in the renovated Old Acropolis Museum and, at the same time, the first time contemporary art has been brought to the Sacred Rock of the Acropolis.*

*For NEON, this exhibition, in a place that forms part of the shared cultural heritage of humanity, marks the culmination of our longstanding collaboration with the Ministry of Culture. Our aim has always been to bring contemporary art into a creative dialogue with our*

[1] Source: Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Book II, "Pericles' Funeral Oration," trans. Richard Crawley, reprinted in Mitchell Cohen (ed.), *Princeton Readings in Political Thought: Essential Texts since Plato*, 2nd revised and expanded edition (Princeton University Press, 2018).

*heritage, offering audiences new ways of engaging with these unique archaeological sites. When ancient cultural heritage encounters contemporary art, the possibilities of contemporary creation are also expanded, revealing the enduring nature of art.*

*In this exhibition, Michael Rakowitz explores collective and personal memory, loss and restoration, the past and the future. And it would be difficult to imagine a more fitting setting than Athens, a city that for thousands of years has welcomed people and cultures, creatively incorporating their traces into its ever-evolving identity."*

**The exhibition**

The title of the exhibition paraphrases words attributed to Pericles in the Funeral Oration he delivered for those who died in the first year of the Peloponnesian War: (Thucydides (2022) *The Peloponnesian War: Selections from Book 2*). For Rakowitz, Athens is a place of spirals rather than grids, of overlapping histories, encounters and identities it is a place that brings together archaeology, architecture, personal testimony, and the material traces of displacement. The exhibition explores how fragments from different times, regions, and archaeologies combine so that memories survive and new communities are formed. The brick and clay are the central element, a building material associated with the home, which here is transformed into a material for constructing stories and a vessel of memory. From the foundation of a house, it becomes a trace of loss, but also a promise of a new beginning.

**Elena Kountouri, the Head of the Ephorate of Antiquities of the City of Athens** mentions: *"We are particularly delighted by the reopening of the Old Acropolis Museum, a building of exceptional historical and architectural significance, which is itself an important testament to the history of Greek archaeology. The Old Acropolis Museum is the first museum of Greece, originally intended to house the antiquities brought to light through excavations on the Acropolis Hill and is now embarking on a new chapter and taking on a new role.*

*With its upgraded facilities and its programme of archaeological and contemporary art exhibitions, the Museum is becoming a living space for knowledge, experience and dialogue. Michael Rakowitz's exhibition offers an exceptional opportunity to highlight the creative encounter between archaeological heritage and contemporary art, inviting visitors to discover new ways of engaging with both the history of this place and questions that remain relevant to our society today.*

*For the Ephorate of Antiquities of the City of Athens, the reopening of the Old Acropolis Museum marks a new beginning. Our aim is for it to remain an active cultural space, enriched by new exhibitions and narratives that bring to light the wealth of Athens' archaeological finds and the enduring significance of its history."*

According to **Elina Kountouri, Director of NEON** and curator of the exhibition *"Over the past 14 years, through NEON's work in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, I have been exploring the relationship between archaeological sites and contemporary artistic creation, not only as a subject of interdisciplinary study but as an active field of engagement that brings together diverse lived experiences, identities and memories. How can we, as visitors to an archaeological museum, and particularly to the Old Acropolis Museum, connect with a work of contemporary art that explores enduring stories of fragility, our own precarious condition in the present, and the language of a new form of survival?*

*The Old Acropolis Museum is a stone-built structure, remarkably simple in its architecture. The material Rakowitz also uses to connect with history is earth – clay and brick, not merely as building materials but as carriers of memory, stories and the legacy of different cultures and movements of people. The exhibition's title, 'What You Leave Behind Is Not What Is Engraved', is taken from a larger quote attributed to Pericles: 'What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments but what is woven into the lives of others'. It poses a central question: what do people leave behind, and what do they take with them when they are forced to abandon their homes?*

*We are deeply grateful to Michael Rakowitz for his absolute dedication and for the thought he has invested in creating a world of profound empathy and solidarity. We thank the Minister of Culture, Lina Mendoni, for the invitation and her vision in bringing contemporary art into the Old Acropolis Museum, as well as the Ephorate of Antiquities of the City of Athens for its collaboration and for hosting the exhibition in the Museum's galleries."*

Michael Rakowitz began developing his new work in Athens in early 2026, inviting different communities of citizens, refugees and members of the diaspora to participate in workshops and to create imprints of memory.

The first room features a short introductory video in which the artist speaks about the project, while the names of all the participants are displayed on the wall.

At main exhibition space stands a kiln inspired by a climbing kiln. This large scale sculpture is made with 11,000 bricks stamped with a dozen original imprints of cities and fabricators found on those that were carried back by refugees of the population exchange of the 1900.

As **Michael Rakowitz** mentions about the characteristic inscriptions *"the Asia Minor Greek communities used Greek letters to spell the Ottoman names of their respective cities and towns, and the Ottoman communities in Greece used Ottoman script to spell the Greek names. These transliterations offer insight to the syncretic and pluralistic societies that belonged in these different places, and the bricks themselves contain the clay found beneath the soil in those very places. The brick shifted its meaning from being foundation to debris. From home to diaspora."*

*The sculpture's structure references the kiln -a ceramic furnace- as a "promise that it can be used and to continue to make new bricks to make new homes that testify about those we have left, but for which we continue to long."* Rakowitz adds.

Within the kiln's arches are shelves of newly-made bricks, some made by Rakowitz inscribed with lyrics, historical documents from the population exchange, poems and words written in Karamanlidika, an extinct dialect of Turkish written in Greek characters used by the Turkish-speaking orthodox population of the Ottoman empire. They sit alongside other bricks made by the workshop participants with the artist, descendants of Asia Minor and Pontic Greek refugees, current refugees of Athens, migrants and asylum seekers from Ukraine, Palestine, the Philippines, Afghanistan, Iraq, Bangladesh, Morocco, Nigeria, and elsewhere. The bricks bear imprints of personal belongings that participants brought with them, keepsakes from their places of origin, or inscriptions with words that encapsulate the experience of displacement. Also on display are old bricks collected by the artist from the ruins of houses in Greek neighbourhoods of İzmir and Istanbul.

The kiln thus becomes a meeting place for different times and geographies, each brick carrying a different kind of trace: inherited, documented, impressed or made by hand.

In the final room of the exhibition stands a model of an empty Acropolis Hill as it was during the 4th millennium BCE. At the base of the model are testimonies from migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, handwritten during workshops at the Melissa Network of Migrant Women testimonies from people of different generations and backgrounds who were compelled to leave their homelands and sought refuge in Greece. This language of fragments expands in the bottom layer of the installation to include the ostraca, the broken pottery shards from the Ancient Agora of Athens. In the room the performance *Shetakha for Athens* will also take place, a narrative in which the artist explores themes of cultural heritage and memory through specific objects. Displayed on the wall is a series of the artist's drawings, objects of memory, and archival material comprising administrative and commercial documents, photographs and correspondence -records that bear witness to multiculturalism, loss and the need for continuity.

This collaboration between the Hellenic Ministry of Culture, the Acropolis Museum, the Ephorate of Antiquities of Athens, and NEON Organization initiates a deep and meaningful dialogue between contemporary works and ancient artefacts underscoring enduring themes of cultural heritage, loss and restitution, survival, and the ongoing creation of culture. At its core is the multidimensional work of internationally acclaimed contemporary artist Michael Rakowitz whose art engages with ancient Greek antiquities and artefacts from ancient civilisations of the southeastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

The first part of the trilogy was the exhibition ***Allspice | Michael Rakowitz & Ancient Cultures***, curated by Professor Nikos Stampolidis, Director General of the Acropolis Museum, and Elina Kountouri, Director of NEON. Set in the Acropolis Museum's Temporary Exhibition Gallery – where the absence of the Parthenon sculptures is acknowledged –unfolded a story of colonialism and the looting of cultural institutions, as viewed through Rakowitz's lens.

The second part of the trilogy presented ***The Lamassu of Nineveh*** (2018) a sculptural installation in the outdoor garden of the Acropolis Museum was originally commissioned for the Fourth Plinth in London's Trafalgar Square and is part of Michael Rakowitz's ongoing series *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*. Constructed from empty cans of Iraqi date syrup, the sculpture reconstructs the colossal 4.3-metre winged bull with a human face, the protective Assyrian deity that once stood at the entrance of the Nergal Gate in ancient Nineveh. The original monument, dating from around 700 BCE, was destroyed in 2015 by ISIS, along with many other artefacts in the Mosul Cultural Museum.

***What You Leave Behind is Not What is Engraved*** **| Michael Rakowitz & Ancient Cultures - Third part**

**Curated by Elina Kountouri, Director NEON**

**Old Acropolis Museum, Acropolis Hill**

**23 November 2026-2028**

**Parallel Programme**

**Conversation**

**Thurday 26 November | 18:30**

Michael Rakowitz in conversation with academic Will Stroebel | Moderated by Elina Kountouri, Director of NEON and curator of the exhibition.

Location | Acropolis Museum | Auditorium "Dimitrios Pantermalis"

Free Entrance

**Performance Shetakha of Athens | Michael Rakowitz**

**Saturday 28 & Sunday 29 November** | 11:00 & 13:00

**Saturday 5 December** | 11:00 & 13:00

Location | Old Acropolis Museum, Acropolis Hill

**Opening Hours:**

Winter hours 3

08:00 – 17:00

Last admission 16:30

Summer hours

08:00 – 20:00

Last admission 19:30

**Access information & tickets** at the website of Hellenic Heritage https://www.hh.gr/en/destinations/acropolis-of-athens/

**Admission is free on** March 6, April 18, May 18, the last weekend of September, on October 28, as well as on the first and third Sunday of each month between November 1 and March 31.

**More information**

neon.org.gr

Hellenic Heritage .hh.gr/destinations/acropolis-of-athens/

**Notes to Editors**

**Michael Rakowitz** (b. 1973, Great Neck, New York, USA) is an Iraqi-American artist working at the intersection of problem-solving and troublemaking. Rakowitz explores the displacement of communities and cultural heritage caused by war and imperialism, activating everyday objects and employing unconventional approaches. He lives and works in Chicago US, and he is a Professor of Art Theory and Practice in Nothwestern University, IL.

His work has appeared in venues worldwide including dOCUMENTA (13); P.S.1; MoMA and Tate Modern, among others. He was awarded the 2018-2020 Fourth Plinth commission in London's Trafalgar Square. From 2019-2020, a survey of Rakowitz's work traveled from Whitechapel Gallery in London, to Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in Torino, to the Jameel Arts Centre in Dubai. He was recently granted a commission on the topic of Archaeology and Migration Flows for the Municipality of The Hague.

**NEON** is a nonprofit organization that works to bring contemporary culture closer to everyone. It is committed to broadening the appreciation, understanding, and creation of contemporary art in Greece and to the firm belief that this is a key tool for growth and development.

NEON, founded in 2013 by collector and entrepreneur Dimitris Daskalopoulos, breaks with the convention that limits the contemporary art foundation of a collector to a single place. NEON's space is the city. It acts on a multitude of initiatives, spaces, and civic and social contexts. It seeks to expose the ability contemporary art has to stimulate, inspire, and affect the individual and society at large.

NEON constructively collaborates with cultural institutions and supports the programs of public and private institutions to enhance increased access and inventive interaction with contemporary art.

**Information for the Greek Press:**

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