

PRESS RELEASE

Athens, 1 June 2017

NEON presents Adrián Villar Rojas' first major site specific installation in Greece at the archaeological site of the Hill of the Nymphs

**Adrián Villar Rojas: *The Theater of Disappearance*
National Observatory of Athens, Hill of the Nymphs
Commissioned and presented by NEON**

Exhibition Dates: 1 June – 24 September 2017

Press Preview: Thursday, 1 June, 12:30 – 14:00



Photography © Panos Kokkinias. Courtesy NEON

NEON is pleased to unveil the first site-specific, outdoor and indoor installation by Argentinian artist Adrián Villar Rojas in Greece, at the National Observatory of Athens (NOA), located on the archaeological site of the Hill of the Nymphs. Built in 1846, The National Observatory is the first scientific research institution in Greece, and consolidates nearly two centuries of astronomy since Greek independence in 1832.

Today, almost 160 years later, this commission sees Villar Rojas negotiating with an archaeological site for the first time as he radically alters both the indoor and outdoor space of the National Observatory, occupying an area of 4,500 square metres. The whole site undergoes a complete transformation - architectural, horticultural and emotional.

Villar Rojas is well known for large-scale sculptural installations that disturb the sites he engages with. Through his work, he interrupts the status quo of artistic practice and behaviour within a museum, a site of cultural heritage, a rooftop or public space. He creates unpredictable settings for the visitor to explore, places where we feel uncomfortable or are astounded by the alternative histories he suggests. Concerned with ideas of disappearance, extinction, the passage and volatility of time, Villar Rojas creates a new, and often disconcerting, visual language.

Through this site-specific intervention in Athens Villar Rojas asks, 'what does it mean to have the soil beneath our feet?' Villar Rojas says: "I come from Argentina, where essentially soil is a means of production. That which is beneath our feet does not represent us in the same way that it represents people in Greece, nor people in Turkey. I think we Argentinians equate soil with fertility and this of course is a geopolitical construct made by Europe, the Western world and the global economic powers in general. No doubt the strongest features of our national identity are our crops and cattle, endlessly provided by a 'God-blessed' soil upon flat grasslands whose only limit is the sky. It seems a bit of an exaggeration, but just drive from Buenos Aires to Rosario crossing the countryside in the centre of the 'Humid Pampas' and you will quickly understand why Argentinians are so proud of their land. So, when I arrived in Greece, I immediately understood that for Greeks what is below their feet was as constitutive of their national identity as it is for Argentinians, but in a completely different way. What was beneath their feet was culture: thousands of years of human civilizations."ⁱ

The artist has selected 46,000 different plants from 26 different species: a mix of graminaceous plants including bamboo, seeds and grains, and fruits and vegetables such as artichokes, watermelons, asparagus and pumpkins. Re-planted from nurseries side by side in this unorthodox way, all the plants must survive and co-exist for four months. The act of planting serves as a symbol of liberation, co-existence, struggle and reparation.

Villar Rojas disorientates the internal geography of the National Observatory. The viewer walks through narrow pathways leading through the areas of fertile soil but the physical borders of the area are not clearly defined allowing visitors to wander and lose their way. Outside the National Observatory the landscape undergoes a similar metamorphosis. Instead of digging down into the ground, Villar Rojas plants densely on top of it, in a constructed, artificial second level of soil.

The intensely fertile area gives way dramatically to a barren, polemical zone. Villar Rojas disrupts the usual dynamics of the National Observatory by utilizing a neglected space. Sculptural installations inside eleven variously sized vitrines expose the brutality of years of conquest and expansion and our quest for colonizing new territory on earth and beyond. The vitrines, with clear glass panels and black steel frames, stand pristine in

a wasteland, half dug out of the ground or hidden inside caves amidst rocks, soil and dirt. Navigating yourself around them is a challenge requiring real physical effort and results in an unpredictable encounter.

Inside the vitrines, cultural, historical and war artefacts, remnants of past civilizations, have been painstakingly researched and gathered by the artist then placed uncomfortably alongside relics from later times. *Victory of Samothrace*, the statue of a winged female figure, lies horizontally instead of upright. Marked with graffiti, posters and messages taken directly from the public space of Athens, she becomes a testament to a confused global identity. A replica of "Lucy", the collection of fossilised bones 3.2 million years old that revealed how evolution did not follow a straight line as ape developed into human; NASA's unmanned space rover that arrived on Mars in 2012 to assess whether the planet has ever supported life; a hand-sewn Apollo suit as worn by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin when they planted the American flag on the moon; boots, helmets and flags from the Malvinas' (Falklands) War. Inside the vitrines these symbols of conquest, expansion and evolution are re-activated.

The Theater of Disappearance in Athens becomes an open-ended investigation of cultural traditions, national norms and stereotypes, learned preconceptions, and received histories of conquest and exploration.

This project forms part of NEON's work to establish a link between contemporary culture and the historical and archaeological heritage of Athens. The exhibition is curated by Elina Kountouri, Director of NEON.

Notes to Editors

The Theater of Disappearance is an umbrella title and part of four separate exhibitions taking place in 2017 across Europe and the US through new independent commissions by all institutions involved. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (14 April – 29 October), Kunsthau Bregenz, Austria (13 May – 27 August), and the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles (22 October 2017 – 26 February, 2018).

Adrián Villar Rojas was born in 1980 in Rosario, Argentina. He studied Fine Arts at the Universidad Nacional de Rosario from 1998-2002. Adrián travels around the world and lives where his projects take him. His exploration of clay began in 2008 with the exhibition *What Fire Has Brought Me*, in Buenos Aires, following his inaugural solo exhibition, *Fire*, in 2004.

In 2009, Villar Rojas participated in the 2nd Biennial of the End of the World, Ushuaia, Argentina, where he first developed a site-specific, team-based project, *My Dead Family*, which was followed by *War Cannot Distinguish Love from Any Other Feeling*, for the X Cuenca Biennial, Ecuador, and *I Will Never Forget Brazil* for the 31st Panorama of Brazilian Art, at Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo. In 2011, Villar Rojas represented Argentina in the 54th Venice Biennial, ILLUMInations, with *Now I will be with my Son, The Murderer of Your Heritage* and was selected for SAM Art Projects, the Louvre Museum, where he presented *Poems for Earthlings* in the Jardin des Tuileries. He participated in The 2012 New Museum Triennial: *The Ungovernables*, and that same year, his installation *Return the World* was shown at dOCUMENTA(13), Kassel, Germany, and Kabul, Afghanistan. In 2013, Villar Rojas inaugurated the Sackler Gallery of The Serpentine, London, with *Today We Reboot the Planet*, and presented *The Innocence of Animals* in EXPO 1, at MoMA/PS1, New York; *Films Before Revolution* at Museum Haus Konstruktiv, Zurich, Switzerland; and was included in the 5th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art, Moscow. In 2014, he was commissioned a work for the inaugural exhibition of Foundation Louis Vuitton, Paris. Notable recent group exhibitions include the 12th Havana Biennial, Havana, Cuba; Sharjah

Biennial 12: *The past, the present, the possible*, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates and *Storylines: Contemporary Art* at the Guggenheim, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. In 2015, Villar Rojas presented his solo exhibition *Fantasma* at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm. He participated in the 14th Istanbul Biennial, *Saltwater: a Theory of Thought Forms*. In 2015 he received the Prix Canson and the Sharjah Biennial Prize by the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF).

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.

**Exhibition information**

Exhibition dates: 1 June – 24 September 2017

Opening Hours:

Thursday – Sunday, 11 am -9 pm

Free Entrance

Press Enquiries

Melissa Emery | SUTTON

E: melissa@suttonpr.com | T: +44 (0)20 7183 3577

www.neon.org.gr
