

FLYING OVER THE ABYSS Η ΥΠΕΡΒΑΣΗ ΤΗΣ ΑΒΥΣΣΟΣ

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CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRE OF THESSALONIKI -
STATE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

NEON



ΚΡΑΤΙΚΟ ΜΟΥΣΕΙΟ
ΣΥΓΧΡΟΝΗΣ ΤΕΧΝΗΣ
STATE MUSEUM
OF CONTEMPORARY ART



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THESSALONIKI CENTER
OF CONTEMPORARY ART

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CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRE OF THESSALONIKI

Tuesday - Wednesday - Thursday - Saturday - Sunday 10:00-18:00

Friday 10:00-22:00

Monday Closed

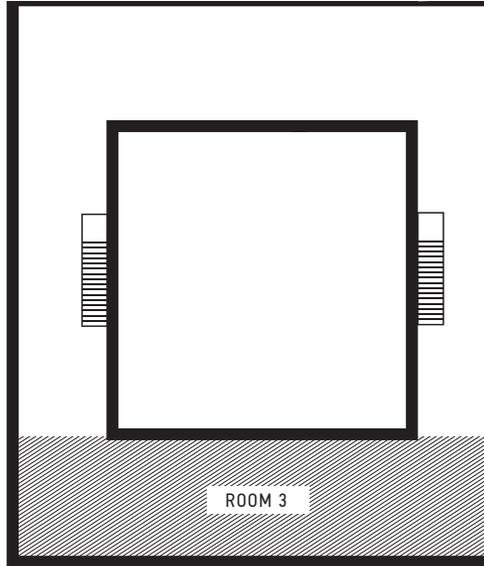
All works exhibited are courtesy of the D.Daskalopoulos Collection.

Our warmest thanks to the D.Daskalopoulos Collection and Nikos Kazantzakis Museum for their generous loans to the exhibition.

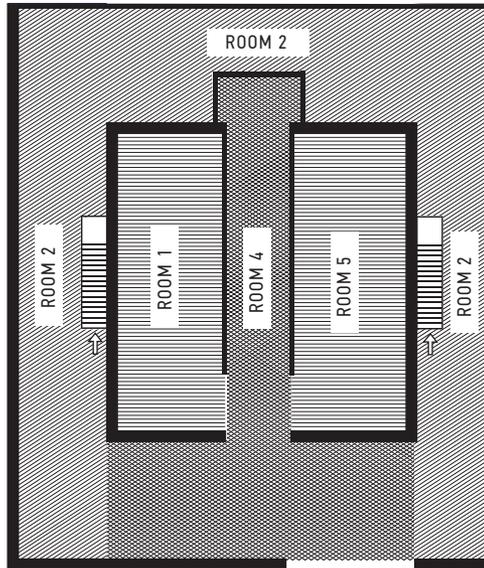
Marina Abramović
Alexis Akritchakis
Matthew Barney
Hans Bellmer
Lynda Benglis
John Bock
Louise Bourgeois
Heidi Bucher
Helen Chadwick
Savvas Christodoulides
Abraham Cruzvillegas
Robert Gober
Asta Gröting
Jim Hodges
Jenny Holzer
Kostas Ioannidis
Mike Kelley
William Kentridge
Martin Kippenberger
Sophia Kosmaoglou
Sherrie Levine
Stathis Logothetis
Ana Mendieta
Maro Michalakakos
Doris Salcedo
Kiki Smith
Costas Tsoclis
Mark Wallinger

CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRE OF THESSALONIKI

Suggested exhibition route according to room numbering



1st floor



Ground floor

Tracing a human being's natural course from life to death, the exhibition *Flying over the Abyss* follows, in a way, the flow of the universal text of *The Saviors of God* by that great Cretan, Nikos Kazantzakis. It neither illustrates, nor narrates. The text, concretely actual and precious, in its original manuscript, does remain complete in its roundness and maximum in its creative artistry. Unravelling comes along the harrowing of the other, not alienated, yet refreshing moments of the contemporary artistic creation.

In the exhibition, works by Greek and international artists share in, pointing out the trauma of birth, the luminous interval of life and creativity, and death. The transcendence, the flapping within or over the "abyss", has been an ontological issue from Aristotle to Epicurus, and up to Kazantzakis, having maintained an indissolubly contemporary argument to those who ponder. And, of course, great is the importance of this ontological search and the elements of doubt it encompasses in the course of art history and the development of a visual artist, either it is expected from Raphael or Rothko, or even for that matter, from the anonymous performer who pushes, sans audience, his own method in the streets of the city.

A transcendence, as we lead through the first decades of the third millennium, at its limits, with the fears violence create nowadays, the impoverishment of the populace, the paucity of traditional social structures, the lack of vision. Whatever the victory, the transcendence must be that of defeating the "ἐπέκειντα" (going beyond). The significance of an artwork is defined by the allure of its relationship with ascendancy.

The Museum of Contemporary Art of Crete hosted the exhibition in its premises and those of the Ibrahim Khan Mosque, Fortezza with the warmest of feelings. For the exhibition, much is owed to the efforts and thought of Dimitris Paleocrassas. We thank him.

Gratitude is expressed to Elina Kountouri, Director of the NEON Foundation, as well as to Ioanna Vryzaki for her contribution.

Acknowledgments are due to the Kazantzakis Museum, the President of its Board, Stelios Matzapetakis, as well as to its Director, Varvara Tsaka, for lending us the manuscript of *The Saviors of God*.

Last but not least, sincere thanks are owed to Mikaela and Dimitris Daskalopoulos for their trust and love.

The exhibition, with Rethymnon, first, and, then, Thessaloniki as its environs, yet utterly predestined towards all peoples, is presented merely as an invitation to a journey which advocates transcendence.

Maria Marangou

Artistic Director, Museum of Contemporary Art of Crete

In an interview with *Tahydromos* magazine, published March 2, 1957, Nikos Kazantzakis when asked by the journalist, Yolanda Terencio, “are you content?”, he responded, “I am happy because I can work; for I have no ambition, no hatred; for my heart is uncontaminated. When working spiritually, one never gets ill, never gets old – that is the secret: alas, should one give up one’s work. Five minutes past one’s death, the brain is still functioning”.

What does Nikos Kazantzakis share in common with the contemporary artistic creativity? Coming to the city of Thessaloniki for the first time, NEON Organization, presents the exhibition *Flying over the Abyss*, at the Contemporary Art Centre of Thessaloniki commencing a dialogue on the power of time, the meaning of moral obligation, the luminous interval between birth and death. The exhibition draws upon Kazantzakis’ rebellious personality, stance and faculty of speech, as expressed in his *The Saviors of God*, by presenting the emblematic artworks of 28 contemporary artists who, in their turn, clashed against the stereotypical thought of their times. It is the first time that the manuscript of *The Saviors of God* by Kazantzakis is presented in Thessaloniki.

The mild, dreamlike handwriting in the manuscript of *The Saviors of God*, being presented in the exhibition, is bridged with Louise Bourgeois’ traumatic childhood, the experiential video installation of Marina Abramović, the in-between journey of William Kentridge and Alexis Akrihakis’ tendency for escapism. For this very bridge of thought, kudos should be acknowledged, along with expressed gratitude, to Maria Marangou, Artistic Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Crete, as well as to art historian, Dimitris Paleocrassas, co-curators of this transcending effort. Gratitude is much ad to the Board of the State Museum of Contemporary Art and, certainly, to the Municipality of Thessaloniki for their hospitality. We would also like to express our warmest thanks to the Nikos Kazantzakis Museum and, especially, the President of the Museum, Stelios Matzapetakis, for lending the manuscript of *The Saviors of God*. For the access permission to the D.Daskalopoulos Collection, treasured tank of thought and enrichment, much is owed to Ioanna Vryzaki. For the excellent cooperation, we extend our warm gratitude to Syrago Tsiara, Director of Contemporary Art Centre of Thessaloniki, Margarita Dima from the D.Daskalopoulos Collection, as well as the NEON team, Afroditi Bontzorlou, Eftychia Tsakou and Irene Kalliga.

NEON anticipates, through the *Flying over the Abyss* exhibition, to make the unsuspecting visitor, the one who is, perhaps, not acquainted with the works and the course of action of the creators of contemporary art, encountered with the subtle power of spiritual and pragmatic generation, thus exhorting to one’s reading anew of one’s “luminous interval”.

Finally, we wholeheartedly thank Dimitris Daskalopoulos, inspirer and founder of NEON and the D.Daskalopoulos Collection, whose secret in art is to “alas, should one give up one’s work”.

Elina Kountouri
Director, NEON

In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates repines in Diotima's tutelage for the inner meaning of love, while she explains to him that all mortal beings strive, even if they haven't realized they ought to transcend their perishable nature by producing a being anew. Transcendence over mortality gives meaning to any creative deed of human being, the moment the ineluctable of common predestination is understood.

As per Kazantzakis' words in *Ascesis: The Saviors of God*:

We come from a dark abyss. We end up in a dark abyss. The in-between luminous interval, we call Life... But, as soon as we get born, commences the try to create, to compound, to make matter into life.

Should one espouse the above mentioned premises, one would, perhaps, apprehend the perpetual anguish of the peoples of Arts and Letters to seal their ephemeral traversal in life with a trace indissoluble, to which generations next will have the need to trace back to give meaning to their existence bygone.

The exhibition *Flying over the Abyss*, co-curated by Dimitris Paleocrassas and Maria Marangou, constitutes an open field of creative concurrence where Nikos Kazantzakis' philosophical pursuance meets with the responses of contemporary artists on the adventure of human life; birth, love, creation and death being its pivotal moments. In this particular circumstance, we couldn't but wish more than a continuance of the exhibition's journey from the Museum of Contemporary Art of Crete to the Thessaloniki State Museum of Contemporary Art, and more specifically to the space the Center of Contemporary Art takes action, that of Warehouse B1 at the port of Thessaloniki.

We are truly grateful that we will share with the public of our city -and not even- for an apt period of time, from November 2015 to February 2016, this exceptional thematic choice of artworks from the D.Daskalopoulos Collection of internationally renowned artists, based on the narration both curators of the exhibition notched within the framework of NEON's Program "Paths".

The coalescence of forces is the only realistic and fecund way to confront one's adversities. Even so, such is the case of this current exhibition, in which such a creative transcendence of necessity occurred, for which I feel the need to express my gratitude to the work-team structured especially for this particular purpose from both organizations, and, especially, to the founder of NEON, Mr. Dimitris Daskalopoulos, as well as to the organization's Director, Ms. Elina Kountouri. For the manuscript lending of Kazantzakis' *Ascesis*, we ought to wholeheartedly thank the President of the Nikos Kazantzakis Museum, Mr. Stelios Matzapetakis.

Syrago Tsiara

Art Historian – Director, Center of Contemporary Art

Casting about for the meaning of life, death, onus, responsibility, while comprehending the values of paramount importance along with the significance of predestination, one ought to free one's mind, it being controlled by the body, the matter. One ought to be an ascetic in constant struggle with the mind.

Kazantzakis did hold such power, which allowed him, through constant struggling for truth, not only to "see" and philosophize upon the sublimation of matter to intellect, to spirit, yet, also, to impress it upon one of his magnum opi, *The Saviors of God* ("Ascesis").

This work of his touched all but the sensitive souls and inspired many a generation of artists in the fields of music, theater and the visual arts, which, subsequently, bestowed upon us exceptional creations of art.

NEON's exhibition *Flying over the Abyss*, previously presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Crete, now tours at the Contemporary Art Centre of Thessaloniki which in collaboration with NEON Organization for Culture and Development D.Daskalopoulos, is delighted to host superior works by great artists, distinguished for their gamut and cultural value. An exhibition, whose thematic approach gets inspired by this illustrious work of the celebrated Cretan author.

As President of the Nikos Kazantzakis Museum, I would like to express our happiness for the opportunity which is given to all of you to enjoy this magnificent exhibition, and even, on a more personal matter, my elation that the Museum has had the opportunity to support this initiative.

Stelios Matzapetakis

President, Nikos Kazantzakis Museum

“Anyone facing the abyss shouldn’t be surprised if he can fly”¹

Humans. Fallible and faulty. Can soar to the miraculous. At the same time and over time. For that flash of a trajectory from birth to death. Borne to a *carte blanche* upon which is imprinted all subsequent inky messy stains. The First Exit is a bloody one, the first red wet trauma of many more to be rehearsed. The theater of the Abyss is about to begin.

“We come from a dark abyss, we end in a dark abyss, and we call the luminous interval life. As soon as we are born the return begins, at once the setting forth and the coming back; we die in every moment. Because of this many have cried out: The goal of life is death! But as soon as we are born we begin the struggle to create, to compose, to turn matter into life; we are born in every moment. Because of this many have cried out: The goal of ephemeral life is immortality! In the temporary living organism these two streams collide: (a) the ascent toward composition, toward life, toward immortality; (b) the descent toward decomposition, toward matter, toward death.”²

There are two choices, options that can be exercised even in the instantaneous distance between two consecutive seconds: one may dive into or one may fly over the abyss. That pendulum measures time in the passage of life. A path whose inevitability towards a... certain end makes one achingly struggle for moments frozen in time; momentous bursts of life-affirming creativity inscribed in eternity. That primeval force of creativity that births us into the world needs to be reenacted in explosions of the miraculous that will console us with the illusion of shimmering immortality. It is all biology after all, a human being is an animal designed to the pinnacle of evolution, towards joining a soul mate in elemental procreation. Luckily or not, us humans are equipped to do this through an act of love. It’s the evolutionary differentiation of our biological nature. And more than that.

In short, because after all it is a nanosecond brief instant of Life: we enter this world through the trauma of birth; we struggle with the cumbersome baggage of our psychic heritage that has been saddled on us involuntarily. And once in a while we marvel at others’ or our moments of creativity, serendipitously conjoined with the spirit of the eternal. At the twilight of that life, we hopefully might, just conceivably come to peace with returning to the abyss.

For the time being, let us partake of the greatness of infinitely more immortal words:

“This ultimate stage of our spiritual exercise is called Silence. Not because its contents are the ultimate inexpressible despair or the ultimate inexpressible joy and hope. Nor because it is the ultimate knowledge which does not condescend to speak, or the ultimate ignorance which cannot. Silence means: every person, after completing his service in all labors, reaches finally the highest summit of endeavor, beyond every labor, where he no longer struggles or shouts, where he ripens fully in silence, indestructibly, eternally, with the entire Universe. There he merges with the Abyss and nestles within it

¹ Title of a work by Martin Kippenberger, “Wer sich dem Abgrund stellt, soll sich nicht wundern, wenn er fliegen kann”, 1983.

² Kazantzakis Nikos, (2012-09-04). *Saviors of God* (Kindle Locations 481-486), Kindle Edition. Simon & Schuster. Translation Kimon Friar.

like the seed of man in the womb of woman. [...] How can you reach the womb of the Abyss to make it fruitful? This cannot be expressed, cannot be narrowed into words, cannot be subjected to laws; every man is completely free and has his own special liberation. No form of instruction exists, no Savior exists to open up the road. No road exists to be opened. Every person, ascending above and beyond his own head, escapes from his small brain, so crammed with perplexities. Within profound Silence, erect, fearless, in pain and in play, ascending ceaselessly from peak to peak, knowing that the height has no ending, sing this proud and magical incantation as you hang over the Abyss.”³

Dimitris Paleocrassas

Art Historian - Curator

³ *ibid* 1191 – 1198.

ROOM 1

GENESIS / TRAUMA

1. Hans Bellmer

1902-1975

La Demi-Poupée, 1972

Wood and paint

40 x 120 cm

Edition 2/9

Hans Bellmer's *La Demi-Poupée* is one of the very rare versions of his iconic doll sculptures still in existence. The first of these dolls was made in 1933 but is now lost. It was, however, amply documented in Bellmer's well-known photographic works from this period. In these photographs the artist would manoeuvre the distorted limbs of the doll into a wide range of angles and positions before photographing it, with the intent of imparting an aura of grave dysfunction in the wake of some painful and catastrophic dismemberment. Dolls of course function as a signifier of childhood but their Poupée renditions, in both their sculptural and photographic forms, evoke deeply rooted social (and perhaps personal) psychoanalytical traumas.

2. Louise Bourgeois

1911-2010

The Birth, 2007

Gouache on paper

59.7 x 45.7 cm

Louise Bourgeois' drawing *The Birth*, 2007, is a work representative of her lifelong preoccupations with the female body as the locus of both trauma and creativity. Her upbringing in the midst of a highly dysfunctional family is a texture book example of the ravages that parenthood can inflict on sensitive young souls. Her whole oeuvre is an attempt through art creation, to become reconciled to that trauma which begins with birth. In the drawing both the image itself and the signifying title evoke the primeval fact of human existence. Her signature usage of the colour red, as can be seen in many of her late drawings, adds visceral impact to the raw physicality of the traumatic yet creative act of procreation.

3. Heidi Bucher

1926-1993

Türfalle, Obermühle (Ahnenhaus), 1980-82

Mother-of-pearl, latex, wood, textile

33 x 20 x 8 cm

Heidi Bucher's practice consistently persevered with one performative mode of art production. She would embalm architectural features of houses' rooms, such as doors, cupboards or even whole rooms, in gauze sheets soaked in rubber. The sheets would solidify and acquire the imprint of the object, only to be then released and acquire their newly found life as artworks. The process constitutes a sequential emptying and birthing of life, a metaphorical breathing in and out of a life force: the rooms were once inhabited by humans, whose presence is squeezed out by the casting process only to acquire a new life inscribed in the artwork for posterity. It should be noted that her particular affinity to rooms and their elements is at least partially explained by her incarceration in mental health hospitals.

In *Türfalle, Obermühle (Ahnenhaus)*, 1980-82, Bucher has cast yet another architectural element, a doorknob from the house she grew up in, an object that is poignantly loaded with symbolism. The act of opening a closed door is rife with emotional content: behind a closed door lurks a dark unknown... perhaps the abyss of one's inner soul? Or alternatively an escape towards a new beginning? And especially since this is the parental abode, also perhaps the process of unlocking the dark rooms that contain the trauma of childhood? The trauma that all humans are fated to struggle with throughout their lives.

4. Mike Kelley

1954-2012

Glorious Wound, 1986

Acrylic on cotton with wig

203 x 119 cm

Mike Kelley is known for his psychoanalytical excavations of deeply held and hidden traumas that usually emanate from a twisted childhood. He plumbs the depths of the psyche to uncover those slashes of pain in the mostly unfulfilled hope that they might therapeutically heal. His *Glorious Wound*, 1986, is a frozen signifier of that most elemental part of the human anatomy, a vagina, the site of procreation and of the act of sex. Its red outline radiates the aura of trauma, while at the same time the 'Glorious' of the title attempts to sweeten the pain. Towards the same aim he also caps the red-brimming wound with a spray-painted clown's wig, in the bittersweet hope that the gravity of the situation might be alleviated.

5. Mike Kelley

1954-2012

Untitled, 1990

Two rag dolls sewn together

77 x 33 x 8 cm

Mike Kelley is known for his psychoanalytical excavations of deeply held and hidden traumas that usually emanate from a twisted childhood. He plumbs the depths of the psyche to uncover those slashes of pain in the mostly unfulfilled hope that they might therapeutically heal. *Untitled*, 1990, is composed of two children's dolls that are conjoined together in some sort of twisted mutation. According to psychoanalysis, with which Kelley was very familiar, the newly-born's trauma of separation from its mother is a defining moment. The child subsequently tries to re-establish its "broken" relation with the mother/womb, by interacting with a plush toy that comforts it. It is the first tentative step in the child's arduous path of social interaction. In a poignant gesture, the artist metaphorically re-enacts this process by sewing two rag dolls together, i.e. re-connecting.

6. Sophia Kosmaoglou

b. 1970

The Carcass (Yellow Stop Sign), 1997

Colour print mounted on wood

135 x 100 cm

A destructive explosion: the moment sharply after the forceful impact of a woman's vanity bag of make-up against a tarmac road on whose surface one can subtly make-out a yellow STOP sign. The title's 'Carcass' is a forceful stand-in for the female body on which violence has been traumatically wreaked, the body that must be continuously dolled-up. Kosmaoglou, always sensitive to issues of female identity, seems to be addressing the oppression of the female body and shouting STOP!

7. Sherrie Levine

b. 1947

After Courbet: 1-18, 2009

18 postcards on mat board

50.8 x 40.6 cm

Sherrie Levine's *After Courbet: 1-18*, 2009, is another example of this American artist's longstanding conceptual strategy of appropriating pre-existing important works by male artists from the realm of art history. In this case, she has framed 18 postcards from the museum shop at the Musee d'Orsay, Paris, which depict the famous Gustave Courbet painting *Origin du Monde* from 1866. The original

painting was an ode to creativity, artistic or otherwise, and created a scandal at the time. Levine's appropriative strategy is twofold and consists of making the artistic decision to select a particular image, in this case a painting by Courbet, or even more significantly for her practice, its already appropriated museum postcard, and reframe it. In fact, Levine based the listed dimensions of her work as the size of the frame as opposed to the postcard, thereby underscoring her process: she made the cognitive selection and then framed it, i.e. contextualized it in the larger frame dimensions. This strategy speaks to questions of the origin of creativity, the role of the artist in a world already full of images, as well as to our consumption of great works through the process of reproduction. Last but not least, it is a full frontal assault on our eyes forcing us to view where we came from.

8. Stathis Logothetis

1925-1997

Triptych (Τρίπτυχο), 1972

Acrylic on canvas, in three parts

Each: 150 x 75 cm

This iconic Logothetis work, formerly in the historic Desmos Gallery Collection, is one of the works that originated from his famous multi-day performance at the seaside resort of Porto-Rafti in 1975. During those days he buried pieces of **fire**-colored canvas in the **earth**, submerged them in the **water** of the sea and then dried them by hanging them in the **wind**: the four Pre-Socratic elements of Greek philosophers. He then wrapped the canvas around his body, sew it and subsequently incorporated it on stretchers. The resulting works, such as this one, emanate a feeling of wounded trauma that has partially healed, metaphorically creating bodily witnesses of scarred tissue, abject remnants that pose as memories of traumatic events. It is also worthwhile noting the connection with Kazantzakis in the context of this exhibition: the great Cretan writer defined his unique concept of *Razza* (which translates poorly as Race) as the agglomeration of archetypal influences of ancestry, upbringing, history, culture, geography, all influential baggage that impacts on an individual's psyche. As such, it is fascinating to observe that Logothetis is creating art through his sublimation of Ancient Greek philosophy, a component of his *Razza*.

9. Ana Mendieta

1948-1985

Untitled (Blood Sign #1), 1974

Super-8 colour, silent film transferred to DVD

running time 4 minutes 40 seconds

Edition 4/6

Ana Mendieta's soft but yet jagged gestures elicit a poetry of sorts. With the baggage of her Cuban and Catholic heritage, she integrates indigenous magic and religious ritual into the shamanic role of

Earth Goddess she assumes. In the current work, she smears blood on the wall delineating her own body and morphs her own selfhood as an artist painting. At the end she writes in blood "There is a devil inside me". The shocking, bloody gesture harks back to shamanic sacrifices, but clearly heralds another magical event of traumatic birth: I, The Artist am being born.

ROOM 2

LIFE STRUGGLE: AN AFFIRMATION

10. Marina Abramović

b. 1946

Cleaning the Mirror #1, 1995

Five-channel colour video installation with sound and five television monitors

284.5 x 62.2 x 48.3 cm

Artist's proof 2/2, edition of 3

Marina Abramović, the high priestess of Performance Art, has consistently persevered over the decades of her practice in situating her selfhood in circumstances exposed to bodily harm and/or danger, tests of endurance or emotionally laden patient meditation. The extremes of physical and psychological endurance are deeply mined to expose uncharted lodes of emotional states. As with Kazantzakis, the dark fear of voyaging into the abyss is to be overcome, or at least, negotiated with in a never-ending life struggle. In this video installation she is viewed while painstakingly attempting a Sisyphean task of cleaning a skeleton. Abramović was inspired to perform this from Tibetan Buddhist rituals where monks are obliged to dance or sleep with corpses. The aim of this exercise is to attain familiarity with death, the great leveller. In many ways, and Kazantzakis certainly spoke of a few, the whole of life can be viewed as a struggle against the fear of one's mortality. Viewed from that perspective, the artist is battling with the bones of her own inner self, a body that shall inevitably lose its flesh and decay. However, the flash of this creative act of struggle has been captured for posterity forever.

11. Louise Bourgeois

1911-2010

Anatomy, 1990

Portfolio of twelve prints: eleven etchings and one multiple

Ten etchings: 49.5 x 35.5 cm; one etching: 63.5 x 45.8 cm; multiple: 28 x 21.5 cm

Edition of 44 plus 10 artist's proofs

Louise Bourgeois' 12 prints of *Anatomy*, 1990 is a work representative of her lifelong preoccupations with the female body as the locus of both trauma and creativity. Her upbringing in the midst of a highly dysfunctional family is a texture book example of the ravages that parenthood can inflict on sensitive young souls. Her whole œuvre is an attempt through art creation, to become reconciled to that trauma which begins with birth. In these anatomical drawings, this struggle comes forcefully to the fore through the depiction of twisted, distorted, disjointed limbs upon which psychological violence has been wreaked. The inner body has been invaded, the psychological space has been violated. Something has been torn apart, a soul had to yield...

12. Helen Chadwick

1953-1996

Ego Geometria Sum: The Labours, 1982-83

Set of ten black and white hand-tinted photographs mounted on card

Each: 29.3 x 21 cm

Helen Chadwick was a British pioneer whose œuvre revolves around issues of identity and representation of the body and in particular seen through a feminist lens. She is considered to have influenced strongly through her legacy the later British group of artists that became known as YBAs (Young British Artists) in the 90's.

The story of the making of this photographic series and its accompanying sculptural installation (the latter not exhibited here) is a richly complex one that provides great insight into the creative process. She initially constructed 10 sculptures each of which corresponded to a seminal event in her life at a specific age reaching until her 30 years when she created the work. As such, one may witness the development of her life from when she was born until the age of thirty and each sculpture's size corresponds to the size of her body at that age: a sculpture of an incubator, her pram at 10 months old, her bed at 6 and $\frac{3}{4}$ years and so on, the growing trace of a life sadly cut off by death at the age of 42. On each sculpture she has superimposed photographs of her nude body evoking the nostalgic essence of a real life human being and its stations in life.

After making the sculptures she proceeded to create the photographic series presented here in a performative manner that highlights the *Labours* of her life: naked she physically wrestled with each sculpture and photographed herself in the process. The title also functions as a double entendre for the pains of a woman giving birth. Her face is never visible though, the pains are too much to divulge

publicly... In essence she is struggling in her assertive naked body with her artistic creations and her own identity as a female artist — the birth pangs of her own becoming. She forcefully puts to the fore the elemental questions of being: who am I, where did I come from, what am I doing in life, can creativity be the outlet that gives meaning to life?

13. Robert Gober

b. 1954

Untitled, 1988

Silver gelatin print

Image: 16 x 24 cm; sheet: 20 x 25 cm

In *Untitled*, 1988, Robert Gober meets *The Blair Witch Project*. Gober's photograph predates the thriller film by many years but they both share that haunting atmosphere of knee wobbling fear. The woods are a metaphorical stand in for a location that harbours, since prehistoric man, the primal fear of a threatening but yet unseen spooky presence. Once again, Gober conjures the mental landscape of a troubled, nightmarish childhood. The disembodied hanging dresses serve to accentuate the sense that something awful has, or is about to happen. It is an abyss where the ghosts of inner demons have the upper hand.

14. Robert Gober

b. 1954

Untitled, 1992-6

Photolithograph on folded French duotone paper

58 x 35 cm

Edition 37/40

In *Untitled*, 1992-6, Robert Gober has undergone a rather transformative performance. He appropriated a page of the New York Times, most of which was devoted to one of those typical advertisements for Saks Fifth Avenue, that temple of retail consumerism. The ad featured a pristinely white-gowned bride, the embodiment of joyful nuptials. But not all is well on the marital bliss front... how did that article on top of the ad sneak in there? Its title "Vatican condones discrimination against homosexuals" is a jarring affront to the wholesomeness of the ad. And for the cognoscenti of Robert Gober, the face of that innocent bride is the face of the artist himself!

15. Robert Gober

b. 1954

Untitled, 2000

Lithograph, screen print, mixed media on paper

55.9 x 81.3 cm

Edition 42/47

Gober's prison windows have had a migratory life throughout his œuvre. They have posed as minimalist prints such as *Untitled, 2000*, but have run the gamut all the way to actual 3-dimensional light installations of the same topic. All, however, are silently powerless signifiers of the dread of an imprisoned existence, a prison constructed in a tortured soul. It is the dark room in which one is forced to encounter the demons of the inner self; a stage set for playing out the Abyss. The prison window, the iconic emblem of bodily and mental constraint, sucks out the freedom of its occupier and leaves just enough light through to vainly sustain the illusion of hope.

16. Robert Gober

b. 1954

Untitled, 2002

Four-colour lithograph on arches cover paper

Plate: 119 x 81 cm; sheet: 130 x 91 cm

Edition 51/65

The totality of Robert Gober's work can be thought of as a series of re-created appropriations of everyday objects that constitute a domestic environment, although in his case an often severely distorted, traumatic, and dysfunctional one. Such mundane objects as sinks, childrens' cribs and dollhouses, stacks of newspapers, are handcrafted and presented in a puzzling, discomfiting manner which leaves one wondering about what has gone seriously wrong. In Gober's world, something as simple and pure as a slab of butter becomes imbued with dark sexual undertones. The superficiality of the surface of the domestic object is subverted by an underlying sense that haunts us - a ghost presence of traumatic dysfunction and loss. The calm and stability of the domestic environment that normally nurtures a child, is supplanted by the inner fear of maladjustment. Something has gone horribly awry... and that has a lot to do with the artist's early life growing in a stifling environment of strict Catholicism and its strictures on sexual identity.

In *Untitled, 2002*, the artist uses as his loaded point of departure an existing architectural element, the exterior staircase entrance to the basement of the house (handcrafted by his father) where he was brought up. Not coincidental, the entrance is boarded up - dysfunctional. To the locus of primal children's fears -the basement entrance- are added other scary items: branches and tree trunks in the woods eerily echoing the wooden material of the (creaking?) staircase. Crowning this house of fears is the prison window, the iconic emblem of bodily and mental constraint which leaves just enough light through to vainly sustain the illusion of hope.

17. Jim Hodges

b. 1957

Untitled (Everything So Alive Lively Living), 2006

Ink saliva transfer on paper

152.4 x 111.8 cm

Jim Hodges went through a struggle to create this artwork... he started out by painting his signature-style exquisite spidery motifs on a large sheet of paper, but then painstakingly performed a Sisyphean act of lovely courage: he wetted each and every part of that painting with his own saliva by licking to such a degree that he was able to blot the painting onto a second sheet of paper. The resulting smeared surface of the second surface is the artwork on which one may slowly decipher the lyrical words of a joyful life-affirming message: 'Everything so Alive Lively Living'. The self-robbing performance of licking, saliva being an essential life force, has imbued the paper surface with breath.

18. Kiki Smith

b. 1954

Untitled, 1980-2

Four lightboxes

Dimensions variable

Kiki Smith came of age as an artist in the years that the AIDS epidemic inflicted its toll on humanity broadly and the artistic community particularly. A generation of budding young artists was violently confronted with the fearsome inevitability and goriness of death, an eventuality that is normally absent from the aspiring minds of fearless youth. The workings of the body's inner organs with their diseased bloody liquids entered everyday consciousness in an acute and anguishing fashion. The vulnerabilities impinged by the threat to mortality are sharply exposed to the fore of human existence. In *Untitled*, 1980-2, Kiki Smith bathed her arms and hands in blood, had artist and AIDS activist David Wojnarowicz photograph the choreographed dance of intertwining arms and constructed the present lightboxes.

19. Kiki Smith

b. 1954

Untitled, 1992

Graphite, on metho-cellulose with hand-dyed Nepalese paper

160 x 47 x 138 cm

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confronted with the fearsome inevitability and goriness of death, an eventuality that is normally absent from the aspiring minds of fearless youth. The workings of the body's inner organs with their diseased bloody liquids entered everyday consciousness in an acute and anguishing fashion. The vulnerabilities impinged by the threat to mortality are sharply exposed to the fore of human existence. The disembowelled innards of *Untitled*, 1992, are silently hanging from the ravaged belly of a figure which however, is miraculously struggling to maintain an upright, alive position. It is still or at least for the moment, persevering in selfhood.

ROOM 3

CREATIVITY INTO ETERNITY

20. Matthew Barney

b. 1967

Drawing Restraint 9, 2005

35mm color film with sound

[Part of *Drawing Restraint 9* installation]

Edition of 10 plus 2 artist's proofs

Matthew Barney is the quintessential artist embodying the limitless propensity of the individual towards creativity. In his case, raw, anarchic, unbridled creativity to the extreme or in one word... insanity. But the miracle of it is that the insanity is modulated just subtly enough to actually make some sort of tangential, free-associative sense of the visual smorgasbord that unfolds in his films. As the world of chaos reels before the eyes of the viewer, some sort of very, very tentative structure seems to appear, might one sense a shimmering mirage of narrative?

Matthew Barney's world is a fairy castle on the top of the hill to which the intrepid strive to gain entry - not easy going... The key to the heavy doors is the understanding that the artist has constructed a language and world of his own space and parameters. In Barney's World, things make sense (or at least a modicum of it) by referencing each other in arbitrary connections and loose repetitions. It is a mythical world where fantastic beasts of the artist's imagination roam freely, where fragmented figments of his imagination ricochet off each other. Yes, one may draw attention to the references that Barney makes in *Drawing Restraint 9*, 2005: whaling and the affinity of the Japanese soul to it, Japan's defeat at World War Two, the geopolitical importance of that other leviathan, the oil industry. But those serve as just props in Barney's constructed stage settings on which his visual poetry sings. The Grand Theater Master that he is, he seems to be saying only one thing: sit back and enjoy! And indeed one can only marvel with jaw-dropping awe at this infinite expression of creativity.

21. John Bock

b. 1965

Astronaut, 2003

Digital Video (PAL)

running time 20 minutes 6 seconds

John Bock's œuvre usually springs from his performances as a point of departure but then embarks on a multi-layered production of performance to film to environments and installations. The most remarkable aspect of his process and especially for the purposes of this exhibition is the high-octane volume of raw, unbridled creativity it emits. It bristles and pops with the expression of sheer, unadulterated, ultra-spontaneous craziness which purposely fails to build a narrative structure but to the contrary throws up cosmic chaos.

The current film *Astronaut*, 2003, is such an example par excellence. There is no linear storyline to it except a seemingly haphazard agglomeration of happenings with the artist himself as protagonist. His rampant imagination appears to have gone amok in diffuse, vague gestures which only on occasion elicit some connections, for example as in the moments he strums the spider web as if accompanying the haunting soundtrack by *The Cure*. One cannot but marvel at this miracle of expressed creativity, the only bulwark humans have against mortality in this world: the staying power of art.

22. Abraham Cruzvillegas

b. 1968

Autoconstruccion Room, 2009

An installation composed of 15 unique sculptures

Dimensions variable

In this monumental installation Cruzvillegas utilizes as his point of departure the harshness of the socio-economic realities of the urban landscape of Mexico City where he grew up. In the shanty-towns of his native neighborhood, people pressed by the scarcity of materials, use and endlessly recycle whatever objects may be found or culled from their immediate surroundings to build structures for living. Poverty-stricken people at their wits' end because of their inability to buy materials, display a stunning ability of improvisational ingenuity in assembling haphazard modes of habitation. Objects keep on being piled onto others and constructions grow organically as if willed into existence by some sort of self-generating power of creativity whose cycle never ends. This automatic process is given artistic embodiment in the installation with its organic elements, which serve as a poignant witness of the marvelous and unlimited capacity of mankind towards unbridled creativity and growth.

ROOM 4

TOUCHING THE OTHER

23. Lynda Benglis

b. 1941

Tres, 1976

Wire mesh, cotton bunting, plaster, sprayed aluminum and copper

61 x 152.4 x 30.5 cm

Greek-American Lynda Benglis first came to the fore in the 60's with work that challenged the patriarchal structure of the art world of the times and centered around issues of femininity and in particular the unique manner of the female touch in handling sculptural materials. In a humorous riposte to the then preeminent Abstract Expressionists and Jackson Pollock who poured painting on canvas on the floor, she poured painting or liquid materials on the floor that would create sculptures. Her oeuvre from that time onwards consisted in a very sensitive and novel exploration of the qualities of materials and how they can be utilized in creating art with a light touch away from the heavy-handed macho handling of her contemporary male artists. Her practice, however, does not exhaust itself in new ways of giving form to sculpture; rather the end products were not only fresh in appearance but also highly evocative of a vague and diffuse organic entity in existence. Life has been breathed into sculpture and frozen in time.

In *Tres*, 1976, she has followed the somewhat standard practice of her sculpture-making of the time: she rolled pieces of canvas around a metallic mesh into limb-like structures, knotted them into shape and then plastered and spray-painted them. The end result is evocatively life-like by positing an organic presence frozen immortally for all eternity. The limb structures appear to be caught in an existential struggle, in a dysfunctional deadlock situation of a cosmic Gordian Knot. More poignantly, in the context of this exhibition room, they also signal an arduous relation of disconnection or an effort at connection: limbs knotted together... will the Knot be tied for eternity or will it become untied?

24. Savvas Christodoulides

b. 1961

Ladders Joined Together, 2012

Wood, aluminium

220 x 280 x 100 cm

Savvas Christodoulides is a master alchemist at assembling found objects. His foraging for objects is confidently oriented towards selecting objects with emotional baggage, usually to do with memory, loss, nostalgia, the passage of time. After the selection, the alchemical talent comes into play with whimsical,

surprising assemblages and juxtapositions of those objects, but with the combination of emotional weight multiplying geometrically. In *Ladders Joined Together*, 2012, the minimalist action of bringing two mere ladders into relational play, evokes volumes of emotional depth: the sculpture is clearly a couple, in fact a couple imbued with the most delicate of tenderness. The tall, sturdy ladder can initially be perceived as the "strong" part of the sculpture, albeit then one notices that it is supported by the smaller ladder in an infinity self-feeding loop of support. Each ladder will collapse without its Other.

25. Asta Gröting

b. 1961

Space between two people having sex, 2008

Silicone

77 x 52 x 106 cm

Asta Gröting's practice revolves around positing volumes and the empty spaces between them whose presence/absence is always emotionally laden. She casts objects and plays with the positive/negative relations that are configured. Her sculptures are time-frozen snapshots whose voids speak of a felt presence in tones of intimacy, memory, loss. In *Space between two people having sex*, 2008, she sculpts not so much a realistic, literal depiction of the momentous event but rather as she states: in *Space between two people having sex*, the visitor faces «the void between two people along with all the unexpressed, inexpressible and hidden issues that relationships involve». It is the primeval moment of being conjoined with a soul mate, but does that always result in the sublime contact that one longingly desires? The ache for such contact sadly does not always lead to nirvana since there are unexpressed obstacles in between - in the void.

26. Kostas Ioannidis

b. 1962

Glimpses, 2007

Audiovisual installation

Dimensions variable

In *Glimpses*, 2007, Kostas Ioannidis is intermeshing two apparently separate monologues within his audiovisual installation: the monologue projected on the screen are the words of a woman who is deciding to terminate her relationship with her male companion. The monologue heard from the speakers is that of a man who encounters a woman for the first time and falls in love with her.

The supposedly disparate monologues are actually not that random at all. In some sort of magically serendipitous connection they follow a trajectory where the words meet and the two people bond one moment, only to sever that relationship in the next stance. The vagaries and difficulties of a

relationship are thrown up in vivid relief by this coming together and subsequent separation. The lyrical monologues almost become a beautiful dialogue, a poetic oscillation, tantalizingly leaving the end outcome open-ended to the viewer's slant of interpretation. It looks as if this is not a Happy End but perhaps hopefully it might be?

27. William Kentridge

b. 1955

Journey to the Moon, 2003

16 mm, 35mm and video film transferred to video

running time 5 minutes 56 seconds

The animation films of William Kentridge are highly evocative, lyrical meditations on images that connect more so in a loose improvisation rather than a narrative. They allow a lot of breathing space for one's unhindered imagination to free-associate. Motifs appear and re-appear as visual cues of memory in a manner more akin to the refrain of an improvisational musical piece rather than obey the strict edicts of narrative structure. Above all, they defy straightforward, equivocal interpretations but instead oblige the viewer to swim freely in associative emotional waters. The end result comprises a beautiful and elegiac meditation of visual poetry. *Journey to the Moon, 2003*, is devoid of any narrative structure apart from the loose theme that the title supplies with its romantic overtones underscored by the musical accompaniment. The atmosphere of romance climaxes towards the end of the film with the clothed artist himself as he interacts with a naked woman in a dance of gestures that are efforts to relate, to touchingly establish psychological contact with a fellow human being. The yearning for connection is palpably felt but so is the sense of loss and sadness at not touching.

28. Maro Michalakakos

b. 1967

In Between, 2007

Wood

110 x 75 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Maro Michalakakos is singularly adept at conjuring the magic of art from found antique furniture (or antique burgundy velvet) objects with just a slight tweak to their appearance and function. The furniture pieces are foraged from antique shops and do still carry on them the patina of age and history. The objects are imbued with the memories and aura of their past lives in the hands of men and women that used them in their daily lives. The artist's reversal of role from functional furniture to non-functional artwork, is accomplished by a subtle, minimalist gesture. In most cases that consists

of shaving the material (usually velvet) and thereby “painting”, the shaving action cloaking the works with a performative history of creation. In her *In Between*, 2007, this has been achieved by the sculptural technique of marquetry, whereby she has subtracted from the furniture’s wood and filled the gap with different wood. This sculpting has led to the outlines of two pairs of arms whose hands are touchingly striving to connect but sadly fail to. It is interesting to note that the loss of contact occurs as a result of the table’s original function, the few centimeters of separation that serve as the space where an extra table plank can be inserted.

ROOM 5

RETURN TO THE ABYSS

29. Alexis Akritihakis

1939-1994

Untitled, 1982

Wood, light bulbs, mirror

73 x 63 x 10 cm

The late Alexis Akritihakis was a legendary figurehead of contemporary Greek art from the sixties to his death in 1994. His practice roamed over various media, but a central part of his work were the *Suitcase* assemblages made mostly out of found wood. They embodied his yearn for escape (the suitcase one packs for a trip) from the conditions of our sordid lives, albeit packed with a strong dosage of optimism too. He was always “ready to go”, prepared to embark on a jaunt that would provide comfort and relief from his complicated life. He took nothing for granted and certainly no prisoners. His *Untitled*, 1982, is an especially evocative suitcase, also doubling as a reference to the Greek tradition of *Anathymata*. This is the old Greek tradition of erecting small sacred structures as a commemoration to the dead of an accident at the site. The light and flower components of the assemblage signify exactly that, a votive offering, a promise to never forget a human life abruptly snuffed out.

30. Jenny Holzer

b. 1950

Laments (No record of joy), 1989

Black granite

209 x 77 x 62 cm

Jenny Holzer came to prominence from the mid-80's onwards through her novel usage of the power of words which she incorporated in various sculptural forms, primarily stone benches and LED signs displayed in public spaces. These sculptures would have written texts on them that disseminated in the public sphere protest messages about power and violence, oppression, politics, sexuality, all articulated from a feminist slant.

Her current work exhibited here is an example from her emblematic series of public benches whose heavy set granite forms inescapably do invoke the shapes of tombs with their tombstones and in fact, are on occasion referred to as sarcophagi. The tomb-like shape of the bench and its heavy granite stone of close to half a ton evoke the weight of death. That ponderous load, however, engages in a lyrical riposte with the engraved text which talks about that elemental opposite of Death: the procreative act of sex, the most potent resistance humans have against their inevitable mortality.

31. Martin Kippenberger

1953-1997

The Raft of Medusa, 1996

Suite of 14 lithographs, various sizes, on various papers; each signed and numbered

Each: 58.4 x 47.6 cm

Edition 10/26

The *Medusa* was a French naval ship that was shipwrecked on a voyage to Senegal carrying around four hundred French soldiers. One hundred and fifty of them managed to survive on a raft made from debris of the ship. After a week, only fifteen of them had managed to survive, the rest having died of hardships, accidents, murder and cannibalism. On the thirteenth day, the ship *Argus* rescued the ten survivors who then remained and returned them to France, where they related their shocking and sordid story. The disaster was a serious blow to French national pride, both for the vulnerability of its military force and the depravity of cannibalism. Both Géricault and Kippenberger have focused on the tantalising moment when the *Argus* appeared to be sailing away from the raft while the survivors (or Kippenberger) are desperately waving to attract its attention: that agonising cusp between death and salvation.

From the inspiration of Géricault, Kippenberger, who knew, or at least sensed, his impending death, proceeded to create this set of lithographs, assuming himself the poses of the shipwrecked survivors. In most of them, his watch is obviously apparent as a device that counts time, time that is running out... In one of them, we see words painted in French: "Je suis Meduse", meaning "I am petrified."

The creative process of preparing these lithographs embarked from a photo session done by Elfie Semotan, Kippenberger's wife, with the artist simulating the Géricault survivors. Here is a description of the photo shoot by Elfie Semotan:

"There was a moment that I will never forget. It was unbelievable. It felt like I was seeing something, another place, in Martin, he was completely in another world, and I saw a drama, a life drama. Martin could play a part very well, but this was different, this was what he wanted to express. He had totally opened up and let everything out, everything that had hurt him in his life, and in the thought that it could all be over. That's what he got to through the *Medusa* project. Everything came out of him - it was everything he was".⁴

32. Ana Mendieta

1948-1985

Untitled (Gunpowder Work #2), 1980

Super-8 colour, silent film transferred to DVD

running time 3 minutes 51 seconds

Edition 2/6

Ana Mendieta's soft but yet jagged gestures elicit a poetry of sorts. With the baggage of her Cuban and Catholic heritage, she integrates indigenous magic and religious ritual into the shamanic role of Earth Goddess she assumes. In this film, she has embraced with her body the Earth and by digging has created a shallow grave of her own outline. She subsequently filled the hole with gunpowder and ignited it. Is this the flash of Death or a body being born anew through flame? If Kazantzakis could have had a dialogue with Mendieta, his answer would be... both!

33. Doris Salcedo

b. 1958

Atrabiliarios, 1995

Mixed media

73 x 174 x 13 cm

Over the years Doris Salcedo has mounted a sustained critique of the political conditions in her native Columbia. However, she does not merely wear the label of a political artist. Drawing on the bloodied history of her country she manages to create works that transcend the political and speak on a much more personal and emotional level about loss, oppression, death. The lyrical sensitivity and delicate handling by which she achieves this, allow her work to become unbridled from her country's circumstances and float freely upon an ecumenical stage. It is a precarious and subtle

⁴ Susanne Kippenberger "Kippenberger, The Artist and His Families", J & L Books, translated by Damion Searls p. 504

balance to achieve: delving into a well of authentic personal experiences lived in one country, but nevertheless attaining relevance for the denizens of the globe. In her series *Atrabiliarios*, 1995, she has entombed shoes of missing persons, victims of the Columbian junta, members of her family being also such “disappeared” victims. With rare artistic deftness, she selects the perfect material, animal skin for both aesthetic and symbolic reasons. Formally she achieves the visual effect of a discernible shoe, but with the translucent animal skin dulling the focus of the object, the luminosity toned down, the abject shoes are fading away into posterity. Symbolically, this animal skin hand-sewn onto a miniature grave box, can the creative act of sewing ever heal the trauma of death of a loved one?

34. Costas Tsoclis

b. 1930

Danger-Risk of Death, 1968

Iron, rubber, light

Dimensions Variable

Costas Tsoclis is a pioneer of Greek Postmodernism, whose groundbreaking work since the sixties was recognized widely and rarely for a Greek artist, abroad. His *œuvre* is characterized by a whimsical inventiveness in the juxtaposition of materials. His *Danger-Risk of Death*, 1968, is a representative work with its full effect of surprise, of upsetting the viewer’s conventional way of perceiving. The normalcy of an outdoors faucet and garden hose is radically subverted by the detail of the hose ending in a light bulb. The contradictory combination of water and electricity is of course... life-threatening.

35. Mark Wallinger

b. 1959

Threshold to the Kingdom, 2000

Projected video installation

335.3 x 50.8 cm

Mark Wallinger’s *Threshold to the Kingdom*, 2000, is a compelling visual metaphor on mortality. The stark sparseness of the opening shot establishes the setting of a beautifully slowed-down motion of “arrivals” which together with the lyricism of the soundtrack and the suggestive title, make one wonder: “could this be arriving at the afterlife?”. In a strange twist of conspiracy theory meets serendipity, the soundtrack is Gregorio Allegri’s (1582-1652) *Miserere*, which for years has been performed in the Sistine Chapel during Holy Week. The same Sistine Chapel where Michaelangelo painted the famous ceiling, a detail of which is on the cover of the edition of *The Saviours of God*, surely all this not a coincidence.

Threshold to the Kingdom, 2000, is an incredible magician's trick, conjuring something out of nothing; the most economical and austere of means, slowed-down motion plus a soundtrack, evoke one of the strongest statements on the frailty of the human condition. Humanity is ever-present here in all its mundane moments: a figure is caught yawning, another running and a group embracing. These moments are somehow miraculously elevated to expressions of beauty and tranquility as the figures "arrive" at mortality, or could it be immortality?



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

NEON, founded by Dimitris Daskalopoulos, breaks with the convention that limits the contemporary art foundation of a collector and enthusiast to a single place. It is a vibrant and engaging interlocutor with civic and cultural stakeholders and the wider public. It acts on a multitude of initiatives, spaces, civic and social contexts. It seeks to expose the ability contemporary art has to stimulate, inspire and affect the individual and society at large.

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The Contemporary Art Centre of Thessaloniki is an independent part of the State Museum of Contemporary Art. Through exhibitions, educational programs for children and adults, and other activities, it supports all forms and kinds of innovative artistic activity, it stays abreast of international trends in contemporary art, it participates in networks exchanging cultural products and experience, it seeks productive collaborations that will serve the shared objective of a multi-faceted support for, and promotion of, the arts. The Contemporary Art Centre of Thessaloniki is oriented mainly towards the relationship of art with politics, gender and the public space, while it participates in the Thessaloniki Biennale for Contemporary Art that is organized by SMCA, with hosting exhibitions in its space or with its own productions.

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