



HELLENIC PARLIAMENT

NEON

Athens, 7 June 2021

## PRESS RELEASE

**A collaboration between the Hellenic Parliament and NEON  
Cultural Programme of Contemporary Art 2021  
*Portals*, an exhibition of contemporary art  
Curated by Elina Kountouri, Director, NEON & Madeleine Grynstejn,  
Pritzker Director, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago  
former Public Tobacco Factory – Hellenic Parliament Library and Printing House, Athens  
11 June – 31 December 2021**

On 11 June, the emblematic building of the former Public Tobacco Factory opens its doors for the first time, introducing a new contemporary cultural centre in Athens, open to all. This project is the result of a collaboration between the Hellenic Parliament and NEON to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Greek War of Independence.

The new 6,500m<sup>2</sup> cultural space, renovated with funding from NEON, will be inaugurated by an international group exhibition, *Portals*, featuring 59 artists from 27 countries including 15 new site-specific installations commissioned by NEON. In this auspicious moment, both commemorating the Greek War of Independence and living through the pandemic, the exhibition aspires to give rise to new messages, ideas and reflections regarding contemporary artistic creation, through the prism of a newly-formed reality composed of change and disruption. *Portals* is curated by Elina Kountouri, Director of NEON, and Madeleine Grynstejn, Pritzker Director, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

The **President of the Parliament Mr. Constantine Tasoulas** states: *The historic space of the former Public Tobacco Factory, a site which was renovated with funding from and at the initiative of NEON and its founder Dimitris Daskalopoulos, is the ideal space to host such an interesting exhibition. Both its size and structure, as well as the overall remodelling by NEON, make it the most functional, significant and appropriate environment to showcase a host of cultural events in the best way.*

*Through this remarkable collaboration between the Hellenic Parliament and NEON, two quite significant goals are being achieved. The first goal concerns the upgrade of the emblematic space of the former Public Tobacco Factory, which today houses the printed treasures of the Parliament Library and its Printing House. This space, a classic example of the industrial architecture of the last century, is transformed into a fully functional and hospitable environment, able to host exhibitions of high aesthetics, such as *Portals* – an exhibition of contemporary art – while emphasising the importance of utilising and reusing public spaces for the implementation of high quality programmes. The second important goal achieved is that this exhibition gives to the public the opportunity to acquaint itself with both the interior of the Tobacco Factory – a landmark in its own right, listed as a site of historical preservation by the Ministry of Culture – and with that aspect of Art which recognises that the admiration and enjoyment thereof is not a privilege and that artistic creations should not be displayed behind closed doors. Art, as stipulated in our Constitution, is free, and the State ought to see to its promotion and equal access to it. With *Portals*, therefore, and this collaboration between the public and private sectors, we overcome the impediment that once kept citizens away from the wondrous world of art, and we advocate for access to it as an inalienable right for all.*

**Dimitris Daskalopoulos, Founder of NEON** notes: *Since its foundation, NEON has aspired to bring contemporary art close to citizens, to connect our everyday life with urban public space in a disruptive way. Over the last eight years, we have staged 28 exhibitions in 25 different venues in collaboration with public and private entities in Greece and abroad. In 2021, as we*

*commemorate the 200th anniversary of our struggle for an independent, sovereign Greek state, we cooperated with the Hellenic Parliament, the country's leading democratic institution. We renovated 6,500m<sup>2</sup> of the iconic former Public Tobacco Factory which we proudly deliver to the city and its people as a new cultural hub, gathering, awakening and reflecting.*

*The exhibition's timing is rather unique, as we live in an era of critical reflection on national self-consciousness, and at the same time we unconsciously participate in a universal reflection related to the latest rapid global changes. We chose the former Public Tobacco Factory because it is a building that goes hand in hand with the history of this country – an immense trajectory of development, challenges, controversies, political and social tensions.*

*Through this effort, we seek to highlight the important developmental dimension of art and underscore our contemporary creativity. I am thoroughly convinced that contemporary art enables us to actively coexist with our time and to consciously evolve in a rapidly evolving world.*

According **Elina Kountouri, Director of NEON** and co-curator of the exhibition: *In 2021 at the former Public Tobacco Factory we imagine a non-hierarchical space, a space of togetherness, a space where social and political strategies are rethought and reconstructed. Through its renovation, we keep alive the memories of the building's history and open a new chapter entitled 'modern, accessible cultural centre'*

*The exhibition Portals brings together 59 artists from 27 different countries and diverse cultural backgrounds to build a community of ideas; their works become witnesses to and agents for the laying out of a possible new normal, a story that demands to be heard.*

**Madeleine Grynsztejn, Pritzker Director, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago** and co-curator of the exhibition states that: *The opening of the Tobacco Factory, a new cultural venue for new times, comes at a moment when the most intense scrutiny in our history is being levelled at museums. Voices from both inside and outside museums locally, nationally, and internationally, are calling on these institutions to re-examine their structures (which are of European origin) and the way in which they serve their public. This moment of disruption is the perfect opportunity for a new kind of cultural institution, one that openly recognises that going back to 'normal' is not only impossible, but undesirable, as outlined by Arundhati Roy in her essay which serves as the inspiration for the Tobacco Factory's inaugural exhibition, Portals. To start a cultural institution afresh now offers the chance to be free of outdated formulae that constitute the conventions of many museums.*

### **Portals**

The exhibition takes place in all renovated areas of the building: the atrium, corridors, halls and lofts, bathrooms, the former Customs Office, the surrounding area, on the roof / façade of the building and on Kolonos Hill.

Works by 59 artists from 27 countries, with different origins and backgrounds, including 15 new site-specific works commissioned by NEON, will be featured in the group exhibition. Among them, 18 Greek artists are exhibiting new works or works whose framework of creation and presentation have been renewed to make them site-relevant.

New works have been commissioned from the following artists: Anastasia Douka, Brendan Fernandes, Elif Kamisli, Panos Kokkinias, Chrysanthi Koumianaki, Glenn Ligon, Maria Loizidou, Teresa Margolles, Ad Minoliti, Duro Olowu, Gala Porras-Kim, Michael Rakowitz, Alexandros Tzannis, Adrián Villar Rojas and Danh Võ.

The inspiration for the exhibition originates from an article by author Arundhati Roy<sup>1</sup> which states that "the pandemic is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next." Considering that the rift created by the pandemic on an individual and collective level opens a portal, it is up to us to deal with our transition through it. "We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world."

The exhibition represents a pluralism of ideas and touches upon issues related to collectivity, cultural understanding of history and politics, public space, and our common past, present and future.

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<sup>1</sup> Arundhati Roy: 'The pandemic is a portal', *Financial Times*, 3 April 2020: <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

On the **building's façade**, an artwork by Nikos Navridis welcomes the city and visitors to the exhibition. Outside the building, we find two new commissions; Brendan Fernandes references the human need for communication through performance, while Chrysanthi Koumianaki activates the wider surrounding area and Kolonos Hill.

The **Atrium** is the building's central public space, the exhibition's 'agora'. The public space where communities, social movements and symbolic gestures coexist to form shared memories. We come across works by Steve McQueen, El Anatsui and two new commissions by Maria Loizidou and Glenn Ligon, who through their work reflect on the concept of the collective and the cultural dimension of history and politics. In the third commission at the Atrium, complex histories are documented and aligned in Danh Võ's installation. For Võ, everything from architecture, to plants, to sculptures and relics, comes as already loaded. Within the internal courtyard of the Tobacco Factory, Võ's installation creates an additional public space. The atrium is a tribute to a world in need of healing and unity.

Artworks along the **corridor** use language as an element of identity, negotiation or alienation, creating 'portraits' through sounds, words, maps and newspapers. In the two new commissions here, Michael Rakowitz explores politics and nationalism in a topical geopolitical project, with reference also to the *Charta of Greece, 1797* by Rhigas Velestinlis, while Teresa Margolles focuses on front pages of newspapers as a means of realising the brutality of reality. Furthermore, Shilpa Gupta and Felix Gonzalez-Torres use words as a defining element of memory. On the other hand, through handicrafts, sculptures and textiles, Adriana Varejão, Sonia Gomes and Solange Pessoa – representing three different generations of women in Brazil – become conveyors of the rich history of the region and of colonialism.

**Room 1** is dominated by the concept of equity in relation to labour, social justice and financial resources. Kutluğ Ataman and Adam Pendleton raise issues of social justice and racial equality. The work by Jannis Kounellis echoes the working conditions of the industrial space, while Maria Papadimitriou and Anastasia Douka refer to labour policies and engineering.

On **Room 1 Mezzanine**, female voices from around the globe share the floor with works by Ed Ruscha and Vangelis Gokas. Elif Kamisli's new commission takes a feminine look, in the form of her diary, at the political *status quo* in Turkey. Kamisli honours the multiple lives of powerful women, whose paths express a deep belief in the world around them and demonstrate a perceptive understanding of the human condition. Works by pioneering artists Marisa Merz, Alex Mylona, Erika Verzutti and Dana Schutz are displayed alongside other works made by a younger generation of artists represented by Sidsel Meineche Hansen, Tala Madani, Gala Porras-Kim and Myrto Xanthopoulou.

**Room 2** displays the development of informal networks (a side effect of the pandemic since face-to-face contact was significantly reduced) underlining the power of social connections. Artists have always survived thanks to such networks of solidarity and interdependence of means and ideas. In this hall, works by Louise Lawler, Elias Sime, Jannis Kounellis, Liliane Lijn and Daphne Wright emphasise the variety of relations that we experience and form an 'informal network' made of dynamism, urban stories and personal narratives.

On **Room 2 Mezzanine**, Cornelia Parker pays tribute to the 1215 'Magna Carta', a symbol of rights and freedoms. The 13-meter-long embroidery of the Magna Carta Wikipedia entry (as it appeared on the Magna Carta's 799<sup>th</sup> anniversary on 15 June 2014) was handcrafted by people from all walks of life: inmates, activists, politicians and members of the judiciary.

In **Room 3**, the works explore the issues of trust and intimacy through various representations of identity and home. Do Ho Suh, Robert Gober, Apostolos Georgiou and Christiana Soulou refer to trust, and distrust both home and familial and childhood dreams. The works of Paul Mpagi Sepuya and Francis Picabia refer to ideas of portraiture, eroticism, and the body, whether exposed or hidden. The lives and stories of women as invisible heroines are represented by artists Toyin Ojih Odutola, Billie Zangewa and Joana Choumali, who use painting and embroidery on pictures.

The **Room 3 Mezzanine** narrates the conditions of living in a loft: a strange combination of comfort and discomfort, romance, practicality and memories. The new commission to Alexandros Tzannis relates to the elements of the internal structure of the building, illuminating its edges and corners. Nikos Alexiou, Vlassis Caniaris and Erika Verzutti create memories, fears and uncharted emotions.

In the **bathroom area**, the new commission by Ad Minoliti symbolically disrupts the separation between the two sexes, as a reminder of the existence of other identities, while Dimitrios Antonitsis challenges the idea of desired or accepted uniformity.

In **Room 4**, Adrián Villar Rojas returns to Athens with a new commission visually representing the globe during the pandemic, as recorded by live web cameras around the world.

In **Room 5** works by Kostas Bassanos, Kapwani Kiwanga, Anna Tsouhlarakis, Jeffrey Gibson and Eirene Efstathiou explore the theme of insecurity as a probable, dystopian, unknown end to our common standard of living. The new commission by Panos Kokkinias narrates a story merging many independent images, just as the displaced carry within them many different stories.

The building of the former **Customs Office** is occupied by a new commission by Duro Olowu. His artistic intervention features textural sculptures, painted work, video patterned wallpapers and wall lettering to create an environment that uses different ideas of migration and movement to reveal hidden histories in politics and art. As he puts it, he creates “interventions, conversations and presence in empty rooms”.

In December 2021 the **basement** of the building will be activated with Dimitris Papaioannou’s performance of *Sisyphus/Trans/Form* (2019).

Alongside the physical exhibition, we have also created an online ‘portal’: the free NEON mobile app enables virtual visitors to browse the exhibition, to see and learn about the works and the artists, and to be notified of the exhibition’s parallel events. App users will be able to book their visit to the exhibition in accordance with the latest public health guidelines. The NEON app is available for iOS and Android.

### **Portals**

**former Public Tobacco Factory – Hellenic Parliament Library and Printing House  
218 Lenorman Street, Athens  
Duration: 11 June – 31 December 2021**

Opening Hours:

11 June – 30 September 2021  
Monday & Tuesday: Closed  
Wednesday, Friday, Saturday: 12.00-20.00  
Thursday: 12.00-21.00  
Sunday: 11.00-14.00 & 17.00-21.00

1 October – 31 December 2021  
Monday & Tuesday: Closed  
Wednesday & Saturday: 11.00-19.00  
Thursday & Friday: 12.00-20.00  
Sunday: 11.00-17.00

Free Entry

Please note that in accordance with public health guidelines, entry to the exhibition is only by timed ticket, booked in advance via [neon.artsvp.co](http://neon.artsvp.co)

For more information please visit: [neon.org.gr](http://neon.org.gr)

## **Notes to Editors**

NEON is a non-profit organisation 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 programmes of public and private institutions to enhance increased access and inventive interaction with contemporary art.

### **For additional press enquiries:**

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