

Elina Kountouri

TERRAPOLIS // NEON

In Conversation with Kostas Prapoglou



[THE SEEN]

One hundred and sixty-nine years since its foundation by King Louis-Philippe I, the French School at Athens is the oldest of the seventeen foreign archaeological institutes in Greece. The institution has explored and studied Hellenism and antiquity through excavations and systematic methodology practices in the analysis of primary evidence—with a wealth of excavation projects in its history, including prominent archaeological sites such as Delos and Delphi, the School plays an active role in the domain of research in Classical studies and epigraphy. Its headquarters, on Didotou Street in the neighborhood of Kolonaki in Athens, have been the center of research for over a century for innumerable scholars. Its gardens have remained a hidden secret to the general public—up until now.

Terrapolis, the most recent exhibition presented by NEON Organization for Culture and Development—presented in collaboration with the Whitechapel Gallery in London—opened an exhibition in the private gardens of the School, for the first time in its lengthy history, to feature the works of thirty-seven artists from eighteen countries. From Lynn Chadwick, Joseph Beuys, Joan Jonas, Yayoi Kusama, and Sarah Lucas, to

Aliki Palaska, Kostas Sahpazis and Dionisis Kavallieratos, the exhibition—spanning the School’s main garden areas as well as the courtyard of its magnificent neoclassical library—encompassed an ingenious dialogue among the works of Greek and non Greek artists.

Surveying the inter-relationship of humans and animals, the show questions notions of coexistence and interrogates societal parameters imbued with elements of Greek mythology and ancient history that counter-react with the contemporary realm. In *Terrapolis*, viewers navigate themselves through the interchangeability of the past and present. The ongoing discourse, between the natural world but also the exhibition site itself, initiates a conscious realization of our own personal mythologies, and challenges more esoteric trajectories to reflecting a synthesis of our surrounding environment. By unlocking this idyllic secret space, NEON renders a type of ephemeral escapism into an arcadian locus—away from the contiguous political and socio-economic turmoil. *Terrapolis* engages in a continuous exchange with an inspirational, even utopic, public habitat.

Elina Kountouri, Director of NEON, oversees the foundation’s activities, projects, and cultural programs. I invited her to discuss the evolvement of the organization with the Greek contemporary art scene, and explain how *Terrapolis* has impacted its audience—a transcription of our conversation is below.

KOSTAS PRAPOGLOU: NEON is a relatively new addition to the Athens contemporary art scene. What led to the decision of founding a cultural organization?

ELINA KOUNTOURI: NEON is a non-profit organization founded and solely funded by art collector Dimitris Daskalopoulos with the aim to bring contemporary art closer to the public, and to introduce the public to contemporary arts and culture. It is based in Greece, and launched its full program of activities in June 2013 amidst a severely shaken financial and social environment. Being the spotlight of the current world economy, international media, and enduring global commentary on a daily basis, the last years have not been easy for Greek citizens. NEON tries to respond to the urgency of the



situation and act in this kind of void. It was our decision to launch our activities within this environment. It is a strategic, institutional decision: we want to make a commitment to contemporary art and culture, to unveil the potential of contemporary art and its ideas as a tool of growth and a catalyst for change. This is the reason why although Daskalopoulos is a collector of international caliber, we moved away from the traditional model of making a space to house the collection. It breaks with the convention that the role of a contemporary art organization, founded by a person who is an art enthusiast and collector, ought to be spatially bound.

School of Athens as the venue to feature *Terrapolis*?

EK: *Terrapolis* is the second exhibition in the three part series of outdoor art projects we are hosting in collaboration with the Whitechapel Gallery (London). This year is at the gardens of the French School of Athens, following the exhibition *A thousand doors* (2014), which took place at the Gennadius Library and gardens. The French School of Athens is situated in an almost hidden, magical, secret garden in the center of the city, on the borders of the aristocratic area Kolonaki and Exarchia neighborhood, and is home to the vibrant and engaging

EK: *Terrapolis* has a specific narrative, which investigates the relation between humans and animals. Echoing the satyrs, sphinxes and centaurs of Greek statuary, contemporary sculptures, installations and films draw on myth, drama and the animal kingdom to suggest a 'bioethics' for the century. Iwona Blazwick, curator of the exhibition, masterfully worked around this theme with works ranging from historical public artworks, such as Lynn Chadwick's, *Dancers* (1967), to new commissions by Greek artists, such as Athanasios Argianas, Eleni Kamma, Kostas Sahpazis, Dionisis Kavallieratos, and Alice Palaska. It was rewarding that both Greek and non-Greek

Cosmopolis was of Greek origin, after all.

Instead, our space is the city. Art happens within the city. We act on a multi-locality of initiatives, spaces, civic, and social contexts. The open, free and yet structured model of activities of NEON proposes a creative partnership of public-private initiatives. Our platform of collaborations is diverse, and spans from our exhibitions to our learning and grants program. We focus on new commissions, giving the opportunity to artists to engage with the public space through our city and community projects, such as opening up closed gardens within the center of Athens to house public art exhibitions and bridge our formidable cultural heritage with contemporary art initiatives.

I am positive that an informed society around contemporary art and culture can release a wealth of human potential and regenerate a cosmopolitan drive. The idea of cosmopolis was of Greek origin, after all.

KP: What were the criteria of choosing the French

left-wing scene in Athens. The dynamism in the location, in relation to the fact that the gardens were only accessible to the French School researchers since 1872, made it the ideal challenge for NEON to start a collaboration with one of the oldest archaeological research schools in Athens. The visionary director of the French School in Athens, Alexandre Farnoux, responded with enthusiasm to my proposal, and so the gardens and its secret pathways became the backdrop to bring together Greek and non-Greek artists into the public realm with works of art that reconnect the human with the animal. Visitors behave differently in a garden; they are more relaxed, less timid. It is an ideal setting to approach the uninitiated public and introduce them to legendary public art works and other works made specifically for this exhibition.

KP: *Terrapolis* embraces the work of a wide range of Greek and non-Greek artists. What do you think is the key component that makes this combination work?

artists responded with enthusiasm to the call—especially since the majority of them were showing their work outdoors for the first time. For William Cobbing and Markus Karstieb, I remember them saying it was the first time they experience their work outside a museum or a gallery space and they were excited to rise to this challenge and explore their work in nature. The key component for me is not making this distinction. All are parts of a global international creative community, which are in dialogue in those gardens in Athens.

KP: How has the Athenian audience responded to this show and to what extent do you think NEON has stimulated and attracted the attention of local art enthusiasts and professionals alike?

EK: The public responded with tremendous enthusiasm, and to some extent gratitude. It was a strange feeling to come across people and families that wholeheartedly thanked you for providing them with free access to the gardens and the exhibition. It acted as a



“sanctuary,” a place where people came to shut down their feelings of anxiety, alienation and anger. It would be hard to forget that the show ran all through the month of July in the middle of a turbulent social referendum, the closing of the banks, and the imposition of capital controls.

KP: How do you see NEON evolving in the years to come, and what contributions to the Greek contemporary art scene do you expect to see?

EK: I would like our projects to have a connecting, educational and transformational value in the long term; a connecting value in which NEON acts as a link between multi-local networks, partners and activities at different locations. That is why we have created a network of trained volunteers whose involvement is of the utmost importance to us, an educational value that will continue to expose contemporary arts and culture to a wider audience. Finally, a sustainable transformational value; activities that will steadily transform the platform of

expression, dialogue, and cultural interaction and put forward Greece’s dynamic voice and intellectual cosmopolitan outlook to demonstrate its creative, liberal, forward thinking and operational capability.



—
Elina Kountouri is the Director of NEON, founded by collector Dimitris Daskalopoulos.

TITLE PAGE:

Yayoi Kusama, *Pumpkin (M)* (2014), courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London; Asta Gröting, *Monkey Dance 6* (2015) *Leather*, courtesy the artist and Carlier | Gebauer. Installation view of *Terrapolis* exhibition at The French School at Athens, 2015, courtesy NEON and Whitechapel Gallery. photo credit: Nikos Markou.

RIGHT:

French School at Athens, “Terrapolis,” Co-curated by Iwona Blazwick with the NEON Organization and Whitechapel Gallery, 2015.

PREVIOUS SPREAD:

Installation view of *Terrapolis* exhibition at The French School at Athens, 2015, courtesy NEON and Whitechapel Gallery. photo credit: Natalia Tsoukala.

LEFT:

Elina Kountouri, Director of NEON

Jessica Stockholder
Door Hinges

Opening Reception Sep 12 | 6 - 9pm
Special Reception Sep 18 | 5 - 8pm
219 North Elizabeth Street
Sep 12 2015 - Jan 16 2016

also featuring
ASSISTED

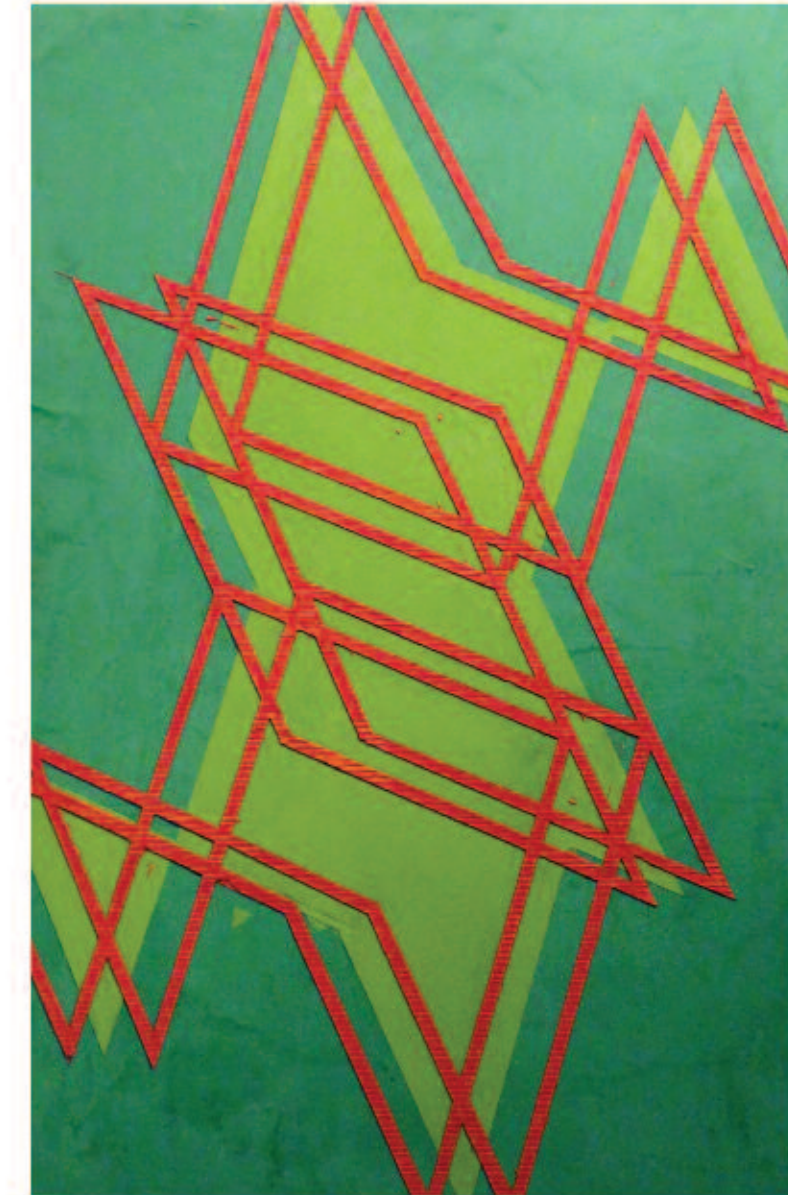
Laylah Ali | Polly Apfelbaum | Anthony Caro
Patrick Chamberlain | Cheryl Donegan
Jessica Jackson Hutchins | Sol LeWitt
Nancy Lupo | Rebecca Morris | Sam Moyer
Jo Nigoghossian | Stephen Prina
Michael Queenland | Kay Rosen
Haim Steinbach | Tony Tasset

curated by Jessica Stockholder

Scott Reeder
Put the Cat on the Phone

Opening Reception Sep 12 | 5 - 8pm
Special Reception Sep 18 | 5 - 8pm
835 West Washington Boulevard
Sep 12 - Oct 24 2015

Kavi Gupta | 835 West Washington Boulevard | 219 North Elizabeth | 312.432.0708 | www.kavigupta.com



PICTURED: 2014 Northern Trust Purchase Prize, “Saree,” Elise Ferguson, Romer Young Gallery, San Francisco

Your passion. Our appreciation.

Northern Trust is proud to be the presenting sponsor of EXPO CHICAGO.

Understanding what our clients care about — then creating an action plan to achieve their goals — is what we do. Similarly, our longstanding culture of caring reflects our commitment to the future of the communities we serve. Because aspirations are the framework for great returns.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT

Mac MacLellan

Executive Vice President — Wealth Management

312-557-5711

northerntrust.com/expo



Northern Trust