

Portals exhibition opens doors to the future in Athens

The curators have taken Covid and a Greek revolutionary anniversary as opportunities to ask where we go from here



Nikos Navridis's 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better' installed on the former Public Tobacco Factory © George Charisis. Courtesy NEON

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It is not often that the Financial Times inspires art, I would guess, but *Portals*, a new show at the former Public Tobacco Factory in Athens, draws its name and theme from an [FT Weekend piece](#) from April 2020, towards the start of the pandemic. In it, the Indian novelist and commentator Arundhati Roy describes our pandemic present as an opening, marking a threshold, even if it isn't entirely clear where it leads. For her, this rupture with the past “offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality . . . [The pandemic] is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.”

Portals, with 59 artists curated by Neon's director Elina Kountouri and Madeleine Grynsztejn, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, combines this rupture with one from Greece's history: this year the country celebrates the 200th anniversary of the start of its war of independence from the Ottoman empire. While the show's works deal thoughtfully with interconnected histories of independence, nationalism and colonialism, the visitor gets much less about ways forward.

The Public Tobacco Factory in Athens is an industrial landmark whose previous lives include being a military prison, a second world war air-raid shelter, a refugee camp and the Ministry of Finance, before it was handed over to the Greek parliament for use as its library. After a €1.2 million renovation by non-profit arts organisation Neon and its founder, businessman and collector Dimitris Daskalopoulos, its newest life is as a 6,500 sq m art space for the city.



Do Ho Suh's '348 West 22nd St., Apt. A & Corridor, New York, NY 10011' is a life-size recreation of those spaces © Natalia Tsoukala. Courtesy NEON

Fittingly for an exhibition inspired by text, several works deal with the nuances of language. Shilpa Gupta's "Words come from ears" displays a series of scrambled words (AS YOU WLAK THE DSITNACE CHNAGES) on what looks like an old-fashioned airport terminal announcement board. In this context, it seems out of place and out of time, pointing to rhythms that are now distorted or glitched.

Glenn Ligon's "Waiting for the Barbarians" takes pride of place in the building's ample courtyard. Mounted across a towering facade in creamy neon are a question and answer repeated nine times, drawn from the Greek poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" (1904) by Alexandria-born Constantine Cavafy, but each time in a different English translation. A 2007 published version reads, "And now what will become of us without barbarians? Those people were some sort of a solution," while Google Translate offers: "And now what will we be born without barbarians. These people were a solution."

In Cavafy's poem — which has inspired a JM Coetzee novel, a Philip Glass opera and several songs — the barbarians never arrive. His words, which light up as dusk falls, gesture towards the value of calamity in bringing about change.

Another atrium facade is covered with El Anatsui's shimmering "Rising Sea", made of reclaimed bottle tops, facing Maria Loizidou's "A Monumental Lightness", an airy installation of hand-woven thread, both testaments to permeable borders and a spirit of community.

A poignant look at the politics of exclusion is Michael Rakowitz's "Charta Baghdadia", which explores Judeo-Arabic language through the annotated pages of a 1936 *haggadah* (a Hebrew text for the Passover festival) from his Iraqi-Jewish family. The annotations, where Arabic words are transliterated in Hebrew letters, contest Jewish nationalist narratives and the second-class positioning of Arab Jews by both Arab and Jewish communities. The work was conceived in response to the [Charta of Greece](#) (1797), a map tracing the borders of a free Greece created by political thinker and revolutionary Rigas Feraios, who fought against the Ottoman occupation. It is said to have inspired the 1821 revolution that led to independence.

Cornelia Parker expands on ideas of freedom in *Magna Carta (An Embroidery)* (2015). This is a tapestry depicting the Wikipedia page for [Magna Carta](#) (1215), a charter of rights limiting the king's power, and was masterfully stitched together in a 13m-long fabric by 200 prisoners, embroiderers, prominent British figures and others (the word "liberty" is sewn by Edward Snowden and "user's manual" by Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales). There is something powerful about all kinds of people reproducing a document that bears no signs of individual authorship. Cleverly installed, it is laid out on a display case with a mirror, exposing its illegible backside, again pointing to the fragility of language.

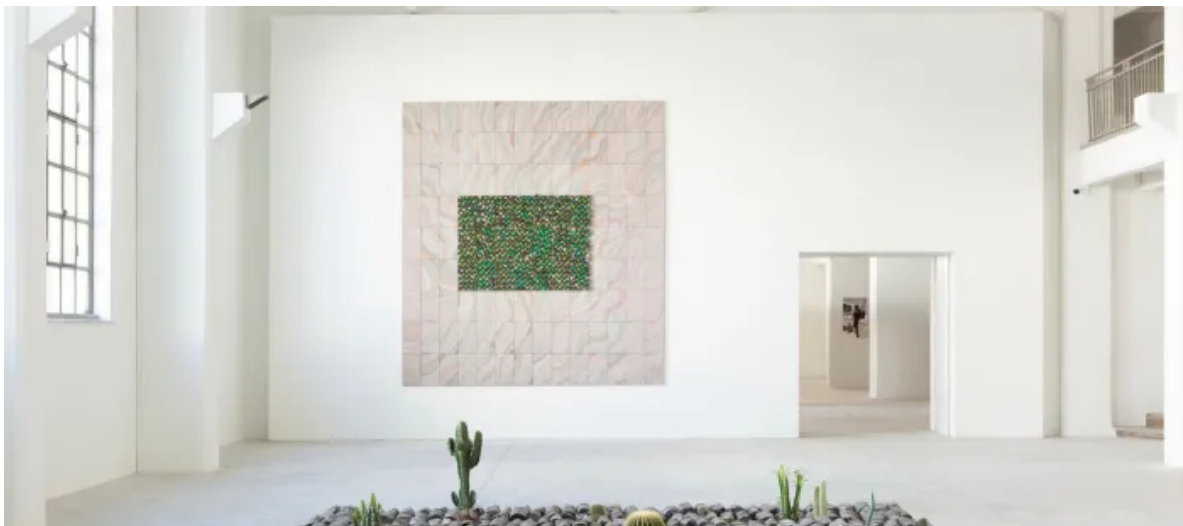


Glenn Ligon's 'Waiting for the Barbarians' draws on different translations of lines from one modern Greek poem © Natalia Tsoukala. Courtesy NEON
Where the exhibition works well is in the way the works converse with the architecture. The light filters through Do Ho Suh's translucent "348 West 22nd St. Apt. A & Corridor, New York NY 10011" (2000-01), a mazelike soft sculpture that reconstructs his NYC home, rendering it almost immaterial. Kutluğ Ataman's installation "Küba" — rows of 40 television sets accompanied by homely armchairs relaying individual Kurdish stories of violence and marginalisation — creates private encounters in a public space.

It's safe to assume the — anticlimactic — room entitled “Ready to Imagine Another World” (also a quote from Roy’s piece) marks the show’s ending. Kostas Bassanos creates a celestial body out of blackened snail shells (“Eclipse”) and Eirene Efstathiou’s vaguely unsettling painting triptych “Choose your Flag” juxtaposes a rioter’s outstretched hand, a disco ball and an image of the Greek flag during the dictatorship. Perhaps Jeffrey Gibson says it best in his graphic “SHE KNOWS OTHER WORLDS”. Framed with abstract beaded patterns, its cross between Native American craft and algorithmic language indicates a balance between the unknown future, indigenous wisdom and technological speed.



In Kutluğ Ataman’s ‘Küba’, Kurdish people tell of the violence they have experienced © Natalia Tsoukala. Courtesy NEON





Jannis Kounellis's untitled work (front) is made from rolled fabric and lead with earth and cacti © Natalia Tsoukala. Courtesy NEON

Although the show's curators talk about home and movement, social justice and informal networks, solidarity and healing, resistance and language, these are largely rhetorical ploys. The show itself does not present real solutions for how the world might be reimagined. As Roy writes, Covid "is the wreckage of a train that has been careening down the track for years". Perhaps it is overly ambitious for both the writer and the curators to call for a restructuring without envisioning what lies on the other side.

One work stays with me: Adrián Villar Rojas's massive video screens showing films drawn from 16,000 hours of real-time footage of publicly accessible webcams. Two scenes include animal life-as-usual at zoos and vacant squares since the start of the pandemic juxtaposed with close-ups of a glistening spiderweb. It's an intricate framing of watching and waiting and a living environment devoid of humans. The work is called *The End of Imagination*.

When I left Athens, *Portals* had been temporarily closed because of the poor air quality from wildfires in north Athens and Evia. I wonder if more could have been said in this show about portals to our environmental future.

To December 31, neon.org.gr