**Dimitris Daskalopoulos**

**Speech at Portals – Wednesday 20 October 2021**

**European Conference of Presidents of Parliament of Council of Europe member states**

Since its inception in 2013, NEON has diligently pursued its founding goal: to give the opportunity to the wider public in Greece to interact with the ideas and challenges of contemporary art. 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.

The 2021 iteration of our activities is marked by the birth of an art space, a grand exhibition and a radical public-private partnership.

In a year supremely significant for our country, which celebrates 200 years of independence, the former Public Tobacco Factory, which we have been delighted to renovate, stages the contemporary art exhibition *Portals* for six months.

NEON’s space is the city. While never tying ourselves to a single space, we are excited that in the Tobacco Factory the public has a new place to reconnect with each other through art, after so many months of deprivation from social and cultural contact. It is my feeling that we have now truly traversed the pandemic’s portal, which has now opened opportunities for us to rethink our national self-consciousness. And what better time to do this than against the backdrop of Greece’s 200th anniversary celebrations, which frame the exhibition within the important context of the major developments in our country’s history.

With this in mind, we cooperated on this project with the Hellenic Parliament, the country’s leading democratic institution. We renovated 6,500m2 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.

The influence that you and other policy-makers wield is perhaps more important today than ever. With issues of health, the environment and mental wellbeing being at the forefront of current affairs, the role that we play to ensure access to art and culture is crucial. A basic human need and a democratic prerequisite, we have a responsibility to safeguard art for as broad an audience as possible, ensuring that the versatile and layered role that art plays can continue to inspire and unlock ideas and solutions to the issues we face today.

I am thoroughly convinced that contemporary art enables us to actively coexist with our time and to consciously evolve in a rapidly shifting world. Let us continue to grasp these opportunities that adversity throws at us, and work towards a future where contemporary culture is a driving force for positive change.