



## PALIMPOLIS

Demetris Neokleous' upcoming solo exhibition, Palimpolis, also the title of one of his paintings, invites viewers to take a fresh look at how a city against a city might appear. From vomiting and Tarantinoesque videos, to humbling installations of light tents and sleeping bags where stories and histories unfurl, to impressive spurts of colour on canvas, almost in illustration fashion, the city, utopian and not, a sort of urban anti-polis, is imagined here. As with Demetris Neokleous' older work, this work foresees an arbitrariness, which, in a post-neurotic and lethargic Cyprus, can maximize moments of celebrating everydayness. He offers us a kind of utopian landscape free from oppressions and possessions, which we can foster, right now, for our next inhabitants.

Maria Petrides  
Writer

Demetris Neokleous  
Palimpolis  
6-20 May 2011 • Private View Friday 6 May 2011  
Vladimiros Kafkarides Cultural Centre-Underground Space

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### *Passing Sanctuaries in the Life of a Palimpolis*

Demetris Neokleous' work never ceases to surprise its viewer. From the materials he chooses to work with, comics and photographs, the vibrant installations he constructs, to his humourous videos - verging on the grotesque, in a Paul McCarthyist vein of the artist emptying himself of public appeal - like the 2001 scatological study in *Happening "Manure"*, Neokleous makes sure that any intimation of a 'peripheral' art is ebbed away by actively placing it in the forefront. The settings and conditions for his works are important media for mobilization, just as the materials selected are valuable signifiers, pregnant with social-economic and political meanings patiently awaiting activation by participant/citizens.

Light and fun, colourful and rhythmical, supple and shifting, mobile and mobilizing, Neokleous' work, since 2000, has marked a new territory in the art scene of Cyprus. Co-founder of the NGO artist run space, *Stoa Aeschylous*, and co-organizer of the international artists network, *Noise of Coincidence*, Demetris Neokleous belongs to the *zeitgeist* of the mid decade of the 21st century, when artists began to transform the functions and roles of galleries and curators by interfering with existing spaces, while reconstructing new ones intended to generate talk, at times a differing one, and to avoid living on any manipulated margin outside the mainstream art world.

In 2002, the smallest exhibition space in New York, two and a half square feet *Wrong Gallery*, in a posh-looking glass door, greeted its visitors with a brusque sign saying, "Fuck Off We're Closed". Non-commercial and accessible only to window shoppers, *Wrong Gallery*, located itself in the heart of the Chelsea white cubes it mocked. An art-world entertainer turned gallerist/curator, Maurizio Cattelan, and two editors turned curators, Massimiliano Gioni and Ali Subotnick, paved the way for fresh means of critiquing the mainstream from within it, escaping therefore, marginalization.

In an age of a collapsing globalism, *Stoa Aeschylous*, preserves the artist's turned gallerist's vision to host both local and international artists. A former 'shopping arcade', as its given Greek name, *Στοα*, also suggests, it promotes a transforming character of art shows developing in an age of ethical, cultural, intellectual and financial insecurity. Demetris Neokleous' work addresses the issue of what it means to be mobile in an age of economic disaster. How might seeking for alternative refuges release the hostile political environment that surrounds his local, Cyprus? Sharp in his critique towards a social and material complacency, which dictates the daily lives of many people, and consequently, festers apathy, he creates passing

sanctuaries, beginning from the ones we each carry within and without us: our histories, personal and political.

Amusingly, although variable in the media Neokleous chooses to work with, a quality of magic, of the powerful, if you will, appears consistently in altered forms. Dating back to 2003, *Worms*, a series of oil on canvas, energetic in colour and Renaissance in detail, resemble flying magical carpets landing in a still white gallery. The same year, he creates, *Camouflage*, an installation of patchwork fabrics covering what look like tunnel tents from which one can view the outside world. Tents, sleeping bags and jackets in Neokleous' work are like articles of faith one holds firmly to, and being loyal to, must make space for them to be inhabited. This fascinating installation, *Camouflage*, is self-transforming, and a shaper of its environment.

While Faith Ringgold's celebrated 1970s painted story quilts create narratives of oppressed African-Americans in ways which weave forgotten history into the existing dominant one, Tracey Emin's 1990s piece, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept with 1963-1995*, also known as, *The Tent*, rejoiced the history of personal pleasures and tender gestures of cuddling up. Departing from this spirit, Demetris Neokleous' tents, their quirky titles notwithstanding - *Car-tent*, a glossy self-contained *Opportunist's Tent*, a cello case *Passion Tent* - are functional, individual and communal. Yet, some are overly adorned with lace and muslin, indicating the economic strata, which also emerge in 'tent-life'.

Mobile and ephemerally made tents carried on ones shoulders like a backpack, transform into easily transportable sleeping bag shelters, which shift size according to demand. Since 2004, his work has featured sleeping bags, as both a metaphor for creating, wherever we are, new localities and histories, utopian and not, as well as a useful asset to mobilize rather than 'have' in an escalating time of economic emergency. His installation, *The white jacket with red sleeping bag* (2009) hints at a kind of un-human form, like a performer of magic drawing out his hidden white doves from metres of blood red material, an umbilical cord attached to innovative moments of living. Interestingly, locations become signifiers of untainted spaces where the freedom to diverge encourages growth and not conflict.

Adapting to each social context as we might find appropriate, we're invited to 'unload' our shelter home. Each irreplaceable story, which unfolds from any given sleeping bag, bears, without ever possessing, its own history. As with all Demetris Neokleous' work, it foresees an arbitrariness, which, in a post-neurotic and lethargic Cyprus, can maximize moments of celebrating everydayness. Utopian and not, a sort of urban anti-polis imagined, as his latest paintings suggest in *Palimpolis* (2010). These paintings, painstakingly thorough, almost in illustration fashion, spurt exorbitant paint, reflective, in some way, of their own medium and meanings. Wall paintings, but also oil and canvas, tease us with motion, colour, detail, and mixed metaphors. As, for example, one of his *Untitled* paintings, which offers us little human figures suspended, on the one hand, by strings maneuvered by the "invisible" mechanisms of a city's production, while, on the other, holding strings in a spirit of human unity, these beings float euphorically from the heights of the same anti-city.

Most of Demetris Neokleous' work formulated in 2010 hubs around this tension between what it means to share historical events without clinging to harsh and habitual narratives. These light tents and sleeping bags become places where stories

and histories unfurl. A safe haven far removed from a “house” attached to territorial possession, but a shifting one, always a work-in-progress, influenced by other histories, while inspiring next generations. *The family sleeping bag* (2010) anticipates an invention of citizens whose own tales will join past narrative moments, as the bags, themselves, link. Demetris Neokleous, therefore, offers a kind of utopian landscape free from oppressions and possessions, which we can foster, right now, for the following inhabitants. Wherever freedom matters, we live and wherever we live, we are free.

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Writer