



Alexandria: Past Futures

Hrair Sarkissian, *Background*, 2013, see also p. 16
Courtesy of the artist

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It is with genuine joy that we present the exhibition *Alexandria: Past Futures*, a project that was born under the banner of convergence and synergy. First of all, who is this 'we'? A three-voice chorus, insofar as the Domaine et Musée royal de Mariemont (Morlanwelz) initially proposed the concept of this exhibition to Bozar-Centre for Fine Arts (Brussels), which then sought a travelling companion for this adventure and found one with the Museum of Civilisations of Europe and the Mediterranean/Mucem (Marseille). A three-headed production, therefore, for an exhibition that itself benefits from the support of the European Union as part of a project that has been established with the Creative Europe framework. This vast project, which began in 2020 and will end in 2023, is entitled *Alexandria: (Re)activating Common Urban Imaginaries* and proposes a multidisciplinary programme including artists' residencies and workshops in the cities of nine European and Egyptian partners. The Alexandrian constellation brings together the Domaine et Musée royal de Mariemont (Belgium), and Bozar-Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels (Belgium), the Mucem (France), Leiden University (Netherlands), Kunsthall Aarhus (Denmark), Undo Point Centre for Contemporary Art (Cyprus), Onassis Stegi (Greece), Cittadellarte-Fondazione Pistoletto (Italy), CLUSTER (Egypt), the French Institute in Alexandria (Egypt), and Theatrum Mundi (UK). More than just ambitious, we would say: exhilarating!

It should also be noted that 2022 is a decidedly Egyptian year, celebrating both the bicentenary of the deciphering of hieroglyphics by Jean-François Champollion and the centenary of the discovery of the tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamun.

In this context, *Alexandria: Past Futures* seeks to explore the distinctive character of a city that was a major site in antiquity and to identify its spirit, its *genius loci*. This investigation extends from the creation of the city in 331 BC to the destruction of the great Temple of Sarapis that marked the beginning of the Christian era, and it evokes the archaeological research carried out to the east of Alexandria by the Musée royal de Mariemont. But the investigation does not stop there. Because giving voice to a city's past does not prevent it from resonating with the present, quite the contrary. To this end, a selection of roughly 20 contemporary artworks created by artists from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine are placed into dialogue with the exhibition. These artworks – which include installation, painting,

photography, sculpture, text, archival documentation, and video – pursue the exhibition’s questioning and further nourish the reflections on this Mediterranean port city and its heritage within the context of the present moment. The staging of the different sections of this exhibition strives to create critical associations and poetic intersections.

Is it not the dream of an art centre to honour such a megalopolis, a place where cultures, temporalities, networks, knowledge, and plural realities converge upon and radiate from? It was ours, in any case.

We would like to thank the Ministry of the Federation Wallonia-Brussels, the European Union’s Creative Europe programme, the Caisse d’Épargne CEPAC, PwC, and Interxion for their generous support of this exceptional project.

How can we sufficiently thank our eminent curators, who have woven this subtle tale and orchestrated this polyphony of voices, some of which are long departed, some of which are very much alive? As far as the overall concept is concerned, we must applaud the communicative passion of Arnaud Quertinmont, the curator of Egyptian and Near Eastern Antiquities at the Domaine et Musée royal de Mariemont, who was assisted by Nicolas Amoroso, curator of Greek and Roman Antiquities at Mariemont. Thanks also to Sarah Rifky, curatorial advisor, and to Edwin Nasr, independent curator, for developing the concept of the contemporary art section.

Of course, we are grateful to the artists who shared their contemporary vision of Alexandria with us: Haig Aivazian, Aslı Çavuşoğlu, Céline Condorelli, Marianne Fahmy, Ellie Ga, Ahmed Ghoneimy, Malak Helmy, Iman Issa, Mahmoud Khaled, Hassan Khan, Maha Maamoun, Jumana Manna, Mona Marzouk, Jasmina Metwaly, Ahmed Morsi, Hrair Sarkissian, and Wael Shawky.

Without the objects that were loaned to us, this exhibition would hardly have been possible. We therefore express our profound gratitude to the many museums, libraries, galleries, and archaeological services for having agreed to entrust us with their works for the duration of this exhibition.

Of course, we also extend our thanks to our respective teams. In particular, for Bozar, to Maïté Smeyers and Christel Tsilibaris assisted by Marie Claes, as well as Magdalena Liskova, Frédéric Meseeuw and Tomas Van Respaille, Vera Kotaji; and for the Mucem, Laetitia Olivier assisted

by Flavie Jauffret Colleter, as well as Mikaël Mohamed, Agathe Guillou and Emiel Nguyen, Laure Lane, Anne André, and Natacha Cauvin who brilliantly coordinated this exhibition and this book. We would also like to thank the technical teams of our institutions who made this magnificent project a reality, not forgetting our predecessors who initiated it, Paul Dujardin at Bozar, and Marie-Cécile Bruwier and Roland Van der Hoeven at Mariemont. Finally, the members of the scientific committee, the authors, and the co-publishers of this book have our full gratitude for their commitment to the project.

Sophie Lauwers, *in memoriam*
General and Artistic Director of the Centre
for Fine Arts (Bozar), Brussels

Jean-François Chougnet,
President of the Museum of Civilisations
of Europe and the Mediterranean (Mucem), Marseille

Richard Veymiers,
Director of the Domaine
et Musée royal de Mariemont

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