

## NEWS



National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens. Photo: Dimitris Bloukas.  
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## CULTURAL FIGURES DECRY GREEK MINISTRY'S HANDLING OF MUSEUM DIRECTOR SEARCH

Greek arts professionals have condemned the Ministry of Culture and Sports' pronouncement that a public competition failed to come up with a suitable director for the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST) in Athens.

A petition launched last week by artists Angelo Plessas and Georgia Sagri, along with anonymous initiators who call themselves the “committee of invisible international Greek cultural practitioners,” contests the prohibitive conditions of the application process and protests the lack of state institutional support for Greek art production in general. “The current situation proves how the state is still alienated from the flourishing contemporary Greek cultural landscape,” Plessas told Cathryn Drake, reporting for *Artforum*. “There is no more time to waste, so we had to speak up.”

Initiated in early November, the thirty-day open call for applications—published only in Greek on a government website as well as in a limited number of national newspapers—was an attempt by the newly appointed culture minister Myrsini Zorba to replace the practice of political appointment with a more transparent process. According to a statement issued by the ministry, “It is the first time that a call for applications has been

used for the position of director of a cultural organization, which is a step toward our country becoming more up to date.”

In mid-February it was announced that “none of the proposed candidates fulfilled the selection criteria” because they either lacked proper documentation of required credentials or failed to submit the application by the deadline. The petition, which had nearly five hundred signatures as of Monday, March 11, questions the qualifications of selection committee members, points out the absence of women on the panel, and objects to the implication that no Greek candidate is qualified for the position, including former EMST directors Anna Kafetsi and Katerina Koskina.

“We welcomed the ministry’s decision to finally put forward a public competition for director of EMST twenty years after its initiation, but the way it was handled and the results were announced was quite discouraging for Greek art professionals, especially coming from a progressive government,” said curator Marina Fokidis, who had applied for the post. “I was eliminated due to the lack of a high school certificate fulfilling the requirement of a second foreign language on top of English and Greek, although I am fluent in French.”

The troubled EMST has sat mostly empty since the completion of renovations to the modernist Fix Brewery building in late 2013 and has never officially opened, partly due to funding issues. Since serving as a venue for Documenta 14, under former director Koskina, it has operated in a limited capacity, only using the lower floors for temporary exhibitions. Koskina was appointed director in 2014 by then culture minister Kostas Tasoulas, a member of the center-right New Democracy Party, after founding director Kafetsi was fired over a conflict with the board just a year before her contract was up, causing an uproar in the Greek art world.

Shortly after prime minister Alexis Tsipras appointed Zorba in a cabinet reshuffle last autumn, she terminated Koskina’s mandate during a review of the leadership of cultural institutions in order to pave “the way for people who will create surprises in culture.” The minister blamed the former director for not fulfilling the objective of fully opening the museum to the public during her tenure. “I feel proud of the work I have done at EMST,”

Koskina said. “And I know what could have been done if the ministry had given the promised funding in time.”

In an open letter dated December 21, 2018, the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art raised concerns about the lack of transparency in the museum’s governance and accused the ministry of making Koskina a “scapegoat for a difficult situation.” “The recruitment of a director of a contemporary art museum of the scale of EMST should include an international open call and the involvement of international arts professionals as part of the selection process,” the letter read.

The latest outcry was triggered by the March 5 announcement that eighty-five-year-old architect Dimitris Antonakakis would serve as interim director of EMST, which has ceased operations while its permanent collection is being installed. The museum is expected to open to the public in the spring, just before municipal and national elections.

The ministry also promised to hold another international competition at an unspecified future date. Although Zorba expressed surprise at the outcome of the first open call, she stands by the evaluation committee’s determination. “Either we take the institutions seriously or we let them go,” she said. “We have to respect the rules.”

Among the cultural figures who signed the petition, which can be found on change.org, are curator and artistic director of London’s Serpentine Galleries Hans Ulrich Obrist, curator and theorist Paul Preciado, and artist Julieta Aranda.

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