

## **Alserkal Advisory harnesses power of cultural districts to address issues of climate crisis**

*New co-commissioning initiative includes participation of four cultural districts across the world, with local artists responding contextually to themes of global concern*

15 October 2022

**Dubai-based Alserkal Advisory has announced 'A Feral Commons', a new, co-commissioning arts project uniting cultural districts from the Global Cultural Districts Network (GCDN) across four continents, each one presenting a public art installation in response to the theme of climate change.**

The first cycle of the co-commission series will present multi-city public art interventions that will be unveiled in Fall 2023, including: **Alserkal Avenue**, (Dubai, United Arab Emirates) a pioneering arts and culture district in the UAE that is home to more than 70 creative businesses, including the region's most renowned contemporary art galleries, design houses, and an arthouse cinema; **Kingston Creative** (Kingston, Jamaica), an arts district and hub for creative entrepreneurs that aims to revitalise Downtown Kingston's cultural identity through multiple monthly programmes and a major mural project; the **Onassis Stegi** (Athens, Greece), a multidisciplinary cultural centre that hosts theatrical and musical productions, film screenings, art and digital shows, and which is part of an ecosystem of enterprises and initiatives that include the Cavafy Archive as well as a robust scholarship programme; and **Victoria Yards** (Johannesburg, South Africa), a uniquely integrated urban complex that has fostered an ecosystem that is as much about community and social development as it is commercial enterprise.

The intent of the co-commission project is to **harness the power of networked cultural districts to respond collectively to urgent global subjects**, and invite participants to renew their current perspectives and learnings. **This first cycle (2022-23) will explore how cultural districts can engage in knowledge-sharing and collective action, an ongoing endeavour for GCDN and its members.** More specifically, *A Feral Commons* will explore how artists in these locations can rise to new challenges and rethink modes of working, create new models of the commons and new ways of living. Each project will stand alone as a site-specific exhibition and will be accompanied by a programme that engages with local communities to further explore the theme and questions. The

inaugural initiative from Alserkal Advisory is developed in collaboration with GCDN, an international membership-based network that fosters cooperation and knowledge-sharing between organisations responsible for a cultural district and clusters at the intersection of creative and cultural activity, urbanism, and community engagement . Supported by UAP, *A Feral Commons* will self-audit the environmental impact of the project, attempting to create the public artworks across all four continents in the most responsible and conscious method possible. Utilising UAP's proprietary tools, specifically Artwork Ingredient List and Public Art 360, these tools will guide the project team on sustainable practices as well as measure the quantitative and qualitative impact on the environment, and the value of public art.

**Vilma Jurkute, Executive Director of Alserkal Initiatives and Alserkal Advisory**, said, "Today, more than ever, we need places for growth, meaning, and community that are inclusive and accessible. The Global Co-commission project by Alserkal Advisory re-localises our efforts for commissioning public art. It acts as an attempt to harmonise and repair our relations with our ecology, as well as recalibrate social and economic dimensions through collective thinking with peer art organisations globally in times of climate change. We hope this will not only lead to more sustainable practices and formulation of whole-thinking structures within the current global art ecosystem, but will also shine a light on the imperative role cultural districts play in their communities globally."

Alserkal Advisory has appointed **Tairone Bastien as curator of the first cycle**. Bastien, who co-curated the first two editions of the Toronto Biennial of Art, developed the theme alongside the participating districts. Under the title *A Feral Commons*, the curatorial theme proposes an alternative vision of the commons, which is usually defined as land or resources shared by all people within a community. Instead, this project invites artists to illuminate human and non-human entanglements and explore a more radical understanding of what the commons could mean in a multi-species world. The theme draws upon visionary American anthropologist Anna Tsing's scholarship and writing on open-ended inter-species gatherings and non-human participants in human projects that are described as feral because they participate independently, resisting human control.

*"For this project, we are inviting each artist to make a work for public space that draws on their individual beliefs, ways of knowing and being, and unique ways of working to explore the non-human relations, indeed worlds, that overlay their own."* **Curator Tairone Bastien explained.** *"I want to dream with others of radical horizontality, a vast common ground shared by humans and their more-than-human kin. And search for non-human protagonists of stories that have yet to be told."*

In the coming months, Bastien will work with the co-commissioners within each cultural district to study, shortlist and finalise artist proposals. The responding public artworks will be specific to each district's context and locality, exploring critical issues related to the curatorial theme within different geographical environments.

The full list of participating artists will be announced in early 2023.

**For more information please contact:**

[add relevant press contact details]

### **Additional Quotes:**

#### **Christos J. Carras, Executive Director, Onassis Stegi**

"Since its launch in 2010, Onassis Stegi has firmly established itself as a landmark venue on the Athens cultural map, with events and initiatives that go beyond artistic limits and geographic borders. Producing challenging contemporary work in public spaces, or unexpected locations in Athens and beyond is our way of stimulating discussions, proposing new ideas and perspectives, and deconstructing stereotypes. It is also a way to valorise those spaces, seen as parts of an urban commons, as essential components of a reflexive and democratic society. *A Feral Commons* is fully inscribed within this fundamental strategy."

#### **Andrea Dempster Chung, Co-founder & Executive Director, Kingston Creative**

"Jamaican culture is truly a global phenomenon and the epicentre of Jamaica's culture can be found on the streets of Kingston. We are very excited to see what emerges from this global conversation between artists and global cultural districts. We believe that *A Feral Commons* is an important opportunity for re-emergence, re-definition and re-connection for cultural spaces and communities."

#### **Brian Green, Founder, Victoria Yards**

"Victoria Yards is proud to be associated with *A Feral Commons* spearheaded by Alserkal Advisory. Very much like Alserkal Avenue, Victoria Yards is a harbour for artists and artisans who have built a foundation here and call Victoria Yards their home. The community at Victoria Yards is a work-in-progress, with everyone being part of a circular economy, arising from the goal of aspiring to our mandate to uplift the inner city of Johannesburg and the surrounding community. Being part of an initiative such as this Global Co-Commission initiative would go a long way in highlighting the positive impact that projects like Victoria Yards and Alserkal Avenue can make."

#### **Adrian Ellis, Chair, Global Cultural Districts Network (GCDN):**

"The Global Cultural Districts Network is pleased to collaborate with Alserkal Advisory on this inaugural Global Co-Commissioning initiative which engages our members in collective thought and action. GCDN aims to strengthen connections between members, to build and share knowledge about the value of cultural districts. We

always look to support our members in new ways and this partnership is an opportunity to explore innovative ways of learning together."

## **Notes to Editors**

### **Alserkal Advisory**

Alserkal Advisory is a multidisciplinary practice comprised of Alserkal's founding team in addition to thinkers, researchers, and specialists in diverse fields from multiple geographies. The advisory practice helps develop cultural production and establish spaces for polyphonic voices. The Advisory challenges conventional business practices, embracing a mindful approach to reimagining cultural destinations and crafting audience-specific public programmes that resonate with our communities, while also assessing our impact on society, the environment, and local economies.

Alserkal Advisory has three principal areas of expertise: cultural production, including audience-specific programming, flagship events, and public art commissioning; developing cultural institutions and destinations, ranging from establishing not-for-profit entities to building sustainable communities; and policy-making for creative industries, including guidance and support on infrastructure and government/economic licensing. Clients include Expo 2020 Dubai, Etihad Museum, ICD Brookfield and Swatch.

Alserkal Advisory is part of Alserkal, a cultural enterprise based in Dubai, that was founded by Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal.

<https://alserkal.online/alserkal-advisory/>

### **Alserkal Avenue**

Alserkal Avenue is a vibrant cultural district in the Al Quoz industrial area of Dubai, and is home to a community of over 70 contemporary art galleries, visual and performing arts organisations, designers, home-grown and entrepreneur-led businesses, and community spaces across 500,000 sqft and 90 warehouses. Alserkal Avenue provides an essential platform for the development of the creative industries in the United Arab Emirates. As one of the region's foremost destinations for contemporary art, and home to Dubai's risk-takers, makers and wide-ranging creative communities, Alserkal Avenue provides cultural experiences for local, regional and international audiences through its extensive year-round programming. Alserkal Avenue is home to Concrete, a multi-disciplinary exhibitions space conceptualised and programmed by Alserkal, as well as the artist residency programme of Alserkal's non-profit, Alserkal Arts Foundation. Alserkal Avenue was established in 2008 by Alserkal Initiatives following the visionary thinking of its founder, Emirati businessman and cultural patron Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal, who

sought to cultivate a vibrant creative community and support cultural production in Dubai.

Alserkal Avenue joined the Global Cultural Districts Network in 2015.

### **Kingston Creative**

Kingston Creative is a nonprofit arts organisation started in 2017 by a team of three co-founders who believe in using Art and Culture to achieve social and economic transformation. They want to see the city of Kingston leverage its creative heritage, its world-class talent and reach its potential to become a Creative City, not just in name or by UNESCO designation, but for this to be a reality for all who live in Kingston. They envision a safe and vibrant Art District in Downtown Kingston, a Creative Hub that develops and trains people and long-term, a healthy creative ecosystem in Jamaica. Kingston Creative joined the Global Cultural Districts Network in 2018.

<https://kingstoncreative.org>

### **Onassis Stegi**

Onassis Stegi is synonymous with art that defies borders, with creative experimentation, and with open dialogue that builds bridges. It provides young Greek artists with the space they need – be it physical or digital – to prove that culture has many more aspects than we've come to expect. In parallel with this, it also invites international artists to present their work, often as world premieres. Music and theatre performances, art installations and exhibitions, talks and lectures – all by leading lights in their respective fields – are programmed and curated in line with the ethos of the Onassis Foundation. Namely: to pose questions, to act as an ongoing stimulus, to offer up new ideas and innovations, and to upend stereotypes. Onassis Stegi has demonstrated its ability to adapt and meet the needs of the times, presenting its "visitors" with digital content via the Onassis Channel on YouTube.

Last, but by no means least, it has shown that to champion freedom of expression and access to culture is to act in ways political. This is where the arts intersect with the sciences and aesthetics to ultimately bring about a new paradigm.

Onassis Stegi joined the Global Cultural Districts Network in 2018.

<https://www.onassis.org>

### **Victoria Yards**

Through building an eco-system where tenants thrive as a community, Victoria Yards presents a uniquely integrated urban complex that is as much about social

development as it is commercial enterprise.

<https://www.victoriayards.co.za>

### **Global Cultural Districts Network**

The Global Cultural Districts Network (GCDN) is an international federation committed to improving the quality of urban life through the contribution of the arts, culture and creative industries. The membership network fosters cooperation and knowledge-sharing among those responsible for creative and cultural districts, and engages leaders in culture and in urban development through convenings, research and collaborations in order to inform global, local and sectoral agendas. GCDN produces events, commissions research, creates original content, and nurtures peer exchanges, thought leadership, and strategic partnerships. The Three Bells, GCDN's podcast, features interviews with cultural, urban and civic leaders working to address the challenges and opportunities facing the arts and cultural sector internationally. GCDN is an initiative of AEA consulting. GCDN members coalesce around a shared common agenda which guides GCDN activities. The global co-commission will contribute to GCDN's evolving understanding the potential for content and programming partnerships across the membership, in particular as it relates to the role of culture in the climate crisis, the economic and social impact of cultural districts on a global scale, and the animation of public spaces.

<https://gcdn.net>

### **Supported By:**

#### **UAP | Urban Art Projects**

Established in 1993 by brothers Matt and Dan Tobin, their modest Brisbane practice has evolved into a global art and design studio and workshop. In August 2019, UAP acquired the 60-year-old foundry, Polich Tallix located in upstate New York, making UAP one of the most significant art foundries in the world. Its network comprises three key studios and facilities in New York, Brisbane, and Shanghai and seven worldwide satellite offices in Sydney, Melbourne, Chengdu, Shenzhen, Singapore, Los Angeles and Riyadh.

From the design studio to the factory floor, UAP works across all aspects of the creative process, from commissioning and curatorial services, concept development, and design assistance to engineering, fabrication, and installation. Its diverse team of creative specialists, strategists, and practitioners share an enduring vision for the future with an ingrained culture of collaboration. By pairing exceptional strategies and manufacturing capabilities with the team's unrivalled dedication to excellence, UAP ensures that our generation creates timeless and relevant artworks, ideas, and places that will inspire and connect people for generations to come. As a company, this is the common ground on which it moves forward.

[www.uapcompany.com](http://www.uapcompany.com)

## **Biographies**

### **Vilma Jurkute**

Vilma Jurkute is the Executive Director of Alserkal Initiatives, overseeing Alserkal Avenue, Alserkal Arts Foundation, and Alserkal Advisory. Her professional and academic experience is centered on placemaking and the development of sustainable, community-centric creative economies with both global and regional impact.

Vilma has been instrumental in the evolution and growth of Alserkal Initiatives. She oversees the three primary areas of activity: cultivating a creative economy in Dubai and building a collaborative network of civic-cultural institutions through its renowned cultural district, Alserkal Avenue; providing advisory services to public and private sector entities through Alserkal Advisory; and supporting public artist commissions, residencies, research grants, and educational programmes through its non-profit, Alserkal Arts Foundation.

Prior to Alserkal, Vilma championed creative economies, destinations, communities, and industries across New York, Chicago, and London, guiding projects that are responsive and context-specific, and designed to create lasting impact. She continues to advocate for homegrown initiatives emerging from Dubai and the region, especially through her role on the advisory board of the Global Cultural Districts Network (GCDN), a position she has held since 2019.

Vilma holds a Bachelor's in International Business from GGSB, France and a Master's of Science in Sustainable Urban Development from the University of Oxford, UK. Her research explores the role of cultural districts and their social, economic, political and environmental impact, connecting the two disciplines of culture and sustainable urban development.

### **Tairone Bastien**

Tairone Bastien is an independent curator based in Toronto and an Assistant Professor in the Criticism and Curatorial Practice program at Ontario College of Art and Design University. Tairone co-curated the inaugural Toronto Biennial of Art in 2019 and is collaborating on the second edition in 2022. From 2011-2016, Tairone established the

arts programme at Alserkal Avenue and Alserkal Residency in Dubai, for artists, curators, and researchers in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. From 2005-2010, he was a curator for Performa in New York City, co-organising the first three editions of the ground-breaking biennial of live performance art. Tairone holds a Master of Art from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, New York; and a Bachelor's Degree in Art History with a Minor in Critical Studies in Sexuality from the University of British Columbia.

### **Afroditi Panagiotakou**

Afroditi Panagiotakou is Director of Culture at the Onassis Foundation. She is responsible for the strategic planning and development of Onassis Culture, and oversees the cultural initiatives and programming of the Foundation, including Onassis Stegi in Athens and the Onassis affiliates in New York and Los Angeles. The Onassis Culture program she has developed incorporates major commissioning and presentation programs of a cross-disciplinary nature, spanning contemporary time-based visual and performing arts, expanded cinema, digital art, new media, and urban development, as well as international and national residencies, fellowships, and hybrid educational programs. This program places an emphasis on contemporary Greek and international artistic expression and process, with commissioned projects that address the city as a site, highlighting current political and social issues, and triggering debate about human rights, democracy, social justice, and the climate crisis.

Afroditi studied Musicology at the University of Athens, and holds two postgraduate degrees – in Aesthetics, and in Cultural Policy and Management – from City, University of London. She has worked cultural institutions in Greece and further afield – the Greek National Opera, the Hellenic Ministry of Culture, the Royal Opera House, and Cheek by Jowl – and sits on various committees concerned with the development of cultural policy in the public and private sectors.

### **Adrian Ellis**

Adrian is the founder of AEA Consulting (1990) and the Global Cultural Districts Network (2013). He has worked in senior management and as a board member in both museums and the performing arts and as a strategy consultant to leading clients in the cultural, public, and business sectors around the world. He is recognised as having contributed to the cultural sector's deeper understanding of a number of areas including the development of successful cultural building projects, capitalisation needs, impact assessment, cultural district planning, the creation of new business models and investment strategies for cultural infrastructure, and strategic responses to long-term societal changes in technology, philanthropy, demographics, and the use of leisure time.