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LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

John Akomfrah *The Airport*

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4/F, Building D7, Yard No.3, Jinhang East Road, Beijing

Artist and filmmaker, John Akomfrah presents his first solo exhibition in China at Lisson Gallery Beijing, with the artist's three-channel film installation, *The Airport* (2016), a three-screen film installation conceived as a meditation on the history of Greece, the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and its aftermath. The exhibition follows the premiere of two major new commissions for Sharjah Biennial in February 2023, and the announcement that Akomfrah will represent Great Britain at the 2024 Venice Biennale – following his participation in the inaugural, critically acclaimed Ghana Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale. Earlier this year, Akomfrah was awarded a knighthood in the King's New Year UK Honours List, after receiving a CBE in 2017.

The Airport (2016) is an elliptical, immersive, 53-minute film installation that follows a spaceman who lands in Southern Greece and adopts an abandoned airfield near Athens as his base. The film is populated by displaced and enigmatic characters, including an elderly man in a tuxedo suit who re-lives moments from his past and his future, a wandering astronaut, a marauding gorilla, and forlorn travelers. Taking its cue from the Greek director Theo Angelopoulos and his long sweeping shots, Akomfrah uses tracking shots of the landscape of Athens and Southern Greece. Through these dreamscapes the film contemplates the significance of empires and the ghosts which linger in our collective consciousness, both physically through architecture and the psychological traces from previous generations.

Accompanied by a mesmerizing soundtrack, the film's narrative weaves together cinematic, literary, philosophical, and artistic traditions, where spaces of human ruin and natural beauty abound. In particular, Akomfrah recalls the work of two filmmaking greats: Stanley Kubrick (1928–1999) and Theo Angelopoulos (1935–2012). The film's elastic sense of time references Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), while Angelopoulos's technique of constant movement between camera, characters, and locations is also employed to a poetic effect.

The Airport followed other hugely influential films by Akomfrah, who came to prominence in the 1980s as a founding member of the Black Audio Film Collective. For the past 40 years, Akomfrah has used film to challenge conventional histories and confront topics from post-colonialism, Black identity and the diasporic experience, to migration and our destruction of the planet. Known for his use of montage and bricolage techniques, Akomfrah's films are characterised by a multi-layered approach that fuses archival film footage, newsreel and still photography with newly shot materials. Blending imagery across time and place, Akomfrah embraces the philosophy of dialectics and constructs complex cinematic experiences that invite us to reflect on historical narratives with a critical lens.

About the artist

John Akomfrah is a hugely respected artist and filmmaker, whose works are characterised by their investigations into memory, post-colonialism, temporality and aesthetics and often explore the experiences of migrant diasporas globally. Akomfrah was a founding member of the influential Black Audio Film Collective, which started in London in 1982 alongside artists David Lawson and Lina Gopaul, who he still collaborates with today. Their first film, *Handsworth Songs* (1986) explored events surrounding the 1985 riots in Birmingham and London through a charged combination of archive footage, still photos, newly shot material and newsreel. The film won several international prizes and established a multi-layered visual style that has become a recognisable motif of Akomfrah's practice. Other works include the three-screen installation *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), a

moving portrait of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall's life and work; *Peripeteia* (2012), an imagined drama visualising the lives of individuals included in two 16th century portraits by Albrecht Dürer and *Mnemosyne* (2010) which exposes experiences of migrants in the UK, questioning the notion of Britain as a promised land by revealing the realities of economic hardship and casual racism.

In 2015, Akomfrah premiered his three-screen film installation *Vertigo Sea* (2015), which explores what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls 'the sublime seas'. Fusing archival material, readings from classical sources and newly shot footage, Akomfrah's piece focuses on the disorder and cruelty of the whaling industry and juxtaposes it with scenes of many generations of migrants making epic crossings of the ocean for a better life. In 2017, Akomfrah presented his largest film installation to date, *Purple* (2017), at the Barbican in London, co-commissioned by Bildmuseet Umeå, Sweden, TBA21—Academy, The Institute of Contemporary Art/ Boston, Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon and Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow. The six-channel video installation addresses climate change, human communities and wilderness. More recently, Akomfrah debuted *Precurity* (2017) at Prospect 4 New Orleans, following the life of forgotten New Orleans jazz trumpeter Charles 'Buddy' Bolden. In 2018, Akomfrah participated in the UK wide World War One arts programme 14-18 Now, with his multiscreen installation *Mimesis: African Soldier* (2018), which commemorated African and colonial participants who fought, served and perished during The Great War. In 2019, on the occasion of his participation at the first Ghana Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, John Akomfrah presented *Four Nocturnes* (2019), a three-channel piece that reflects on the complex intertwined relationship between humanity's destruction of the natural world and our destruction of ourselves.

Akomfrah (born 1957) lives and works in London. His solo exhibitions include Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C., USA (2022); Midlands Art Centre, Birmingham, UK (2022); E-WERK, Freiburg, Germany (2022); Remai Modern, Saskatoon, Canada (2022); Towner Eastbourne, Eastbourne, UK (2021); Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, Spain (2021); Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Sevilla, Spain (2020); Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA, USA (2020); Secession, Vienna, Austria (2020); BALTIC, Gateshead, UK (2019); ICA Boston, MA, USA (2019); Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon, Portugal (2018); New Museum, New York, NY, USA (2018); Bildmuseet, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden (2015, 2018); SFMOMA, San Francisco, CA, USA (2018); Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain (2018); Barbican, London, UK (2017); Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK (2017); Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, São Paulo, Brazil (2017); Perth International Arts Festival, John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University, Perth, Australia (2017); The Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia (2017); Centre of Contemporary Art, Christchurch, New Zealand (2016); Turner Contemporary, Margate, UK (2016); Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen, Denmark (2016); STUK Kunstcentrum, Leuven, Belgium (2016); Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan, USA (2014); Tate Britain, London, UK (2013-14) and a week long series of screenings at MoMA, New York, USA (2011). His participation in international group shows includes: 'Sharjah Biennial 15: Thinking Historically in the Present', Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (2023); 'Global Ghana', The Africa Institute, Sharjah, UAE and Accra, Ghana (2022); 'Fault Lines', North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, USA (2022); 'Posteriority', Museum of Contemporary Art Busan, Busan, South Korea (2021); 'Family – Visions of a shared humanity', Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia (2021); 'Am I Human To You?', Art Museum KUBE, Alesund, Norway (2021); 'Affect Machine: Self-healing in the Post-Capitalist Era', Taipaei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, Taiwan (2021); 'Terminal', City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand (2020); Ghana Pavilion, 58th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2019); 'Strange Days: Memories of the Future', New Museum x The Store, London, UK (2018); 'Histórias Afro-Atlânticas', Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, São Paulo, Brazil (2018); 'From where I stand, my eye will send a light to you in the North', Te Tuhi Museum, Auckland, New Zealand (2018); Prospect 4, New Orleans, LA, USA (2017); 'Restless Earth', La Triennale di Milano, Milan, Italy (2017); 'Unfinished Conversations', Museum of Modern Art, New York City, NY, USA (2017); 'British Art Show 8' (2015-17); 'All the World's Futures', 56th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2015); 'History is Now: 7 Artists Take On Britain', Hayward Gallery, London, UK (2015); 'Africa Now: Political Patterns', SeMA, Seoul, South Korea (2014); Sharjah Biennial 11, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (2013); Liverpool Biennial, UK (2012) and Taipei Biennial, Taiwan (2012). He has also been featured in many international film festivals, including Sundance Film Festival, Utah, USA (2013 and 2011) and Toronto International Film Festival, Canada (2012). He was awarded the Artes Mundi Prize in 2017. He was awarded a Knighthood for services to the Arts in the 2023 New Year Honours.

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across spaces in

London, New York, Los Angeles, Shanghai and Beijing. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estate of Leon Polk Smith. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Van Hanos, Hugh Hayden, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes, Wael Shawky and Cheyney Thompson.

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