

# findings

Issue 65 Autumn 2017

The Magazine of the  
Association for  
Contemporary Jewellery

£5.00  
Free to members



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# Initiation 2017 – Part 1: Lifting the veil

AIR Programme, Athens, 11-18 September 2017

Lieta Marziali

It was only four days before the deadline that I spotted the call for artists advertised by Loukia Richards and Christoph Ziegler of ZLR Betriebsimperium for the Initiation 2017 project, an artist in residence programme culminating in a group show at this year's edition of the SIERAAD Art Jewellery Fair in Amsterdam. It promised accommodation and a week's curated visit to Athens, tailored to both the group project but also to the individual research interests of participants, and a shared stand at the prestigious art jewellery fair, including construction and curation, and all publicity, leaving participants to devote all their energies to the production of a new body of work.

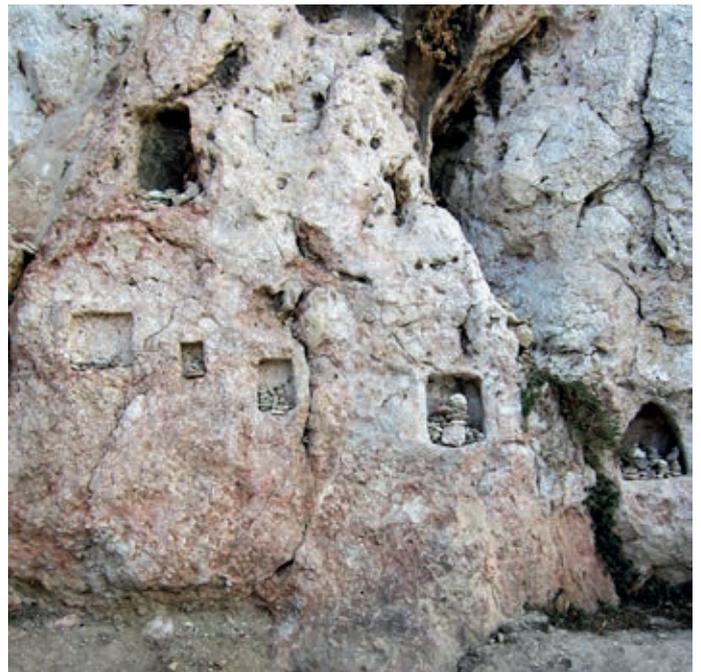
When I approached Loukia with further questions, I was immediately impressed not only with the generosity of information but also the rigorous management of the whole operation and deep understanding of the dynamics and logistics of high-calibre international art fairs. At the risk of blowing my own trumpet, my tendency is always towards extra planning, so it was reassuring to observe meticulous work by an organisation at such early stages of communication.

But what attracted me most to the project was the personal development aspect. As an artist, this is what drives my practice. I constantly ask myself why I should do something: what it is that draws me to a project? Why is it important for me? And in this case it was the recognition that this would not be just a research trip but an educational experience in the more philosophical and experiential sense of the word. And, as I expected, this was no ordinary AIR opportunity.

The project was developed with the purpose of initiating the participants in all aspects of Greek culture. For some of us who had done a certain amount of classical studies, this made us dig in our memory banks for ideas of democracy, philosophical debate and a good dose of Olympian mythology. But how many of us had actually had the chance to examine how all these fitted together in what was a way of thinking and living in the Greek world? Also, what about modern Greek culture? I was the first to be quickly confronted with my knowledge gap between antiquity and contemporary accounts of the ongoing financial crisis.

The Initiation project was conceived exactly as a means to open up Greece and its culture to the eyes of the world. And this means highlighting the continuity from antiquity through to contemporary time of a Greek culture where religion, politics and economics are not isolated elements but part of a wider philosophy of life that governs all aspects of participating in society. It is only by understanding the continued contemporary relevance of the classical elements that one can grasp Greek culture in all its facets and the teachings it can bring to the modern world. The proposition

Cistophorus Caryatid from Eleusis. This Kore (maiden) carries the kiste (chest) decorated with symbols of the Eleusinian cult, and a rather dashing pair of earrings shaped as an initiation rose.



Millennia of devotion: the sanctuary to Aphrodite on the southern and most ancient slope of the Acropolis, still used today by those seeking love and fertility. (credit Loukia Richards)

is that one cannot begin to understand one element of Greek society without taking into account how it fits not only into its wider cultural but also temporal contexts.

As someone whose studio practice is an extension of a wider personal development journey and philosophy of life, this approach makes a lot of sense. It offers a possibility to reflect on how the elements of one's life and studio practice function by confronting one's micro universe with that of a whole society. More importantly for me, it highlights how we must consider our art practices not only in their broader temporal development but, vitally, in the context of the impact they have on the wider society in which they operate. The choice of jewellery as the medium of this project is crucial as it not only joins the maker / wearer / viewer in an intellectual trilogy but has for millennia connected their physical bodies as active participating components in society.

Loukia is a fountain of knowledge, and we spent a very intense week in deep peripatetic discussion, aided by the last-minute arrival at the flat where I was staying of German film-maker Goetz, an accidental and most-welcome AIR companion! The location of the flat is an ideal demonstration of the project's approach, it being perfectly positioned a couple of minutes' walk from both the famous archaeological museum and the most politically charged square in Exarcheia, a contemporary agora in which anarchists, refugees and other disaffected factions come together not only to debate and to make their voice heard but also, again vitally, to look after each other.



Group photo at Eleusis with Evgenia Zoidaki, another Initiation 2017 participant, and Loukia.

The ancient and modern city: the Theatre of Dionysus at the base of the Acropolis is still at the centre of contemporary Athenian culture.



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The square in Exarcheia in daytime. Gatherings don't normally start until later in the evening. (credit Bibi Klekackoska)

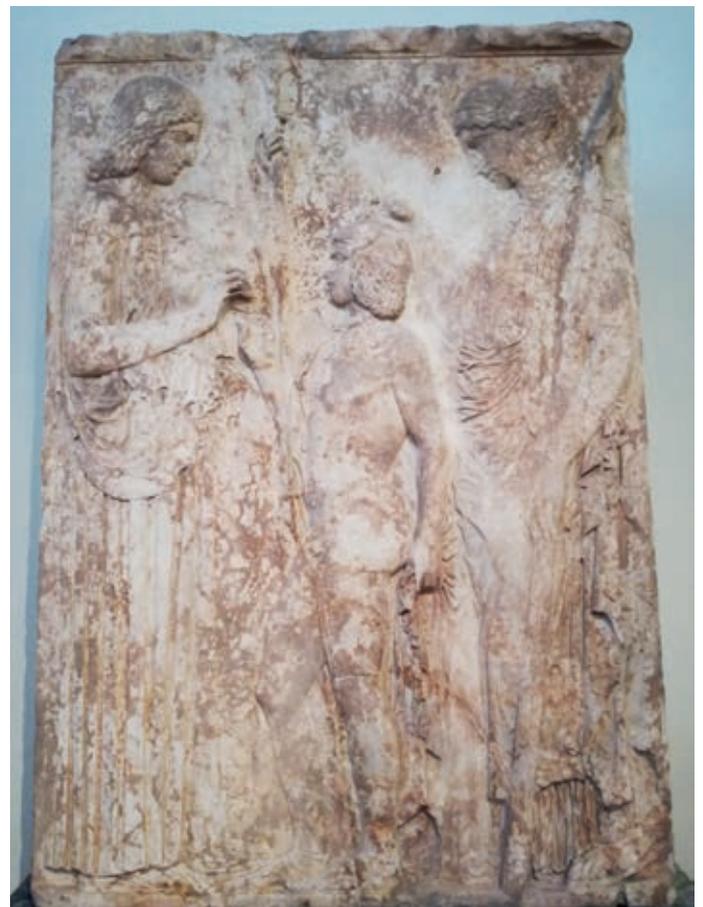


Peripatetic discussions with Goetz and Loukia in the garden of Schliemann's House.

To tailor a programme to individual participants requires great judgement of character on the part of the organisers. In fact, Loukia cites 'character' as the principal criteria with which she and Cristoph choose the participants in their projects. My explorations spanned from the archaeological museum to Syntagma Square, from Byzantine monasteries to a Gestapo prison. As an archaeology nerd, I welcomed a completely different understanding of the Acropolis, not as the dead cleansed Disneyland vision of German romanticism (as Loukia defines it), but as the still beating spiritual and political heart of an Athens and a Greece that are very much alive.

But the initiation, as we were taught at our most important visit to Eleusis, is only the beginning. Each individual participant can be let into the mysteries where the veil of truth is lifted, but it is his or her own responsibility to shape their own participation in them. This is not a challenge but an invitation to take ownership of our varied art practices as a vital element of the society we live in.

Next stop: Amsterdam!



Marble relief of the Eleusinian deities Demeter, Triptolemos and Persephone. Classical Period. Found in Eleusis and now housed in Athen's National Archaeological Museum.