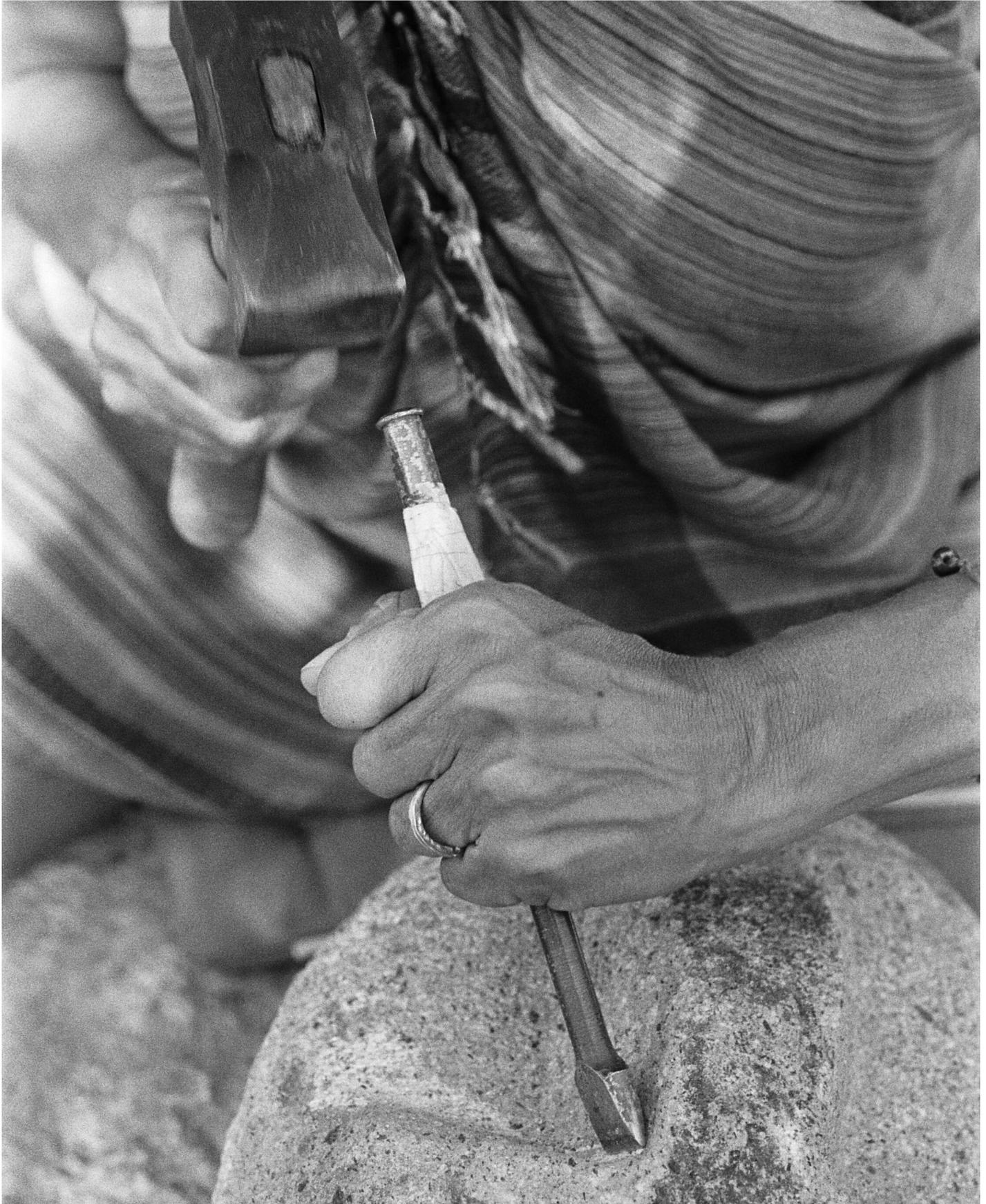


ARTESPRESSIONE

ARTIST INSIGHT



JULY 2021

A CONVERSATION WITH SCULPTOR VENIA DIMITRAKOPOULOU

Considerations and questions by Matteo Pacini

In the 5th issue of Artist Insight, the Greek artist Venia Dimitrakopoulou will talk about herself: about her art, her past, present and future projects.

MP:

Your origins have a significant influence on your work. You feel very connected to Greece and it is here that you have mainly worked as an artist, achieving high levels of quality and a large number of exhibitions. In Italy, after a first presentation in Milan in 2016, a cycle of exhibitions in three important museum venues making you known to the general public has recently ended. So I would turn to those who do not yet know you with an apparently run-of-the-mill question but one that is very useful for those approaching your work for the first time: who is Venia Dimitrakopoulou?

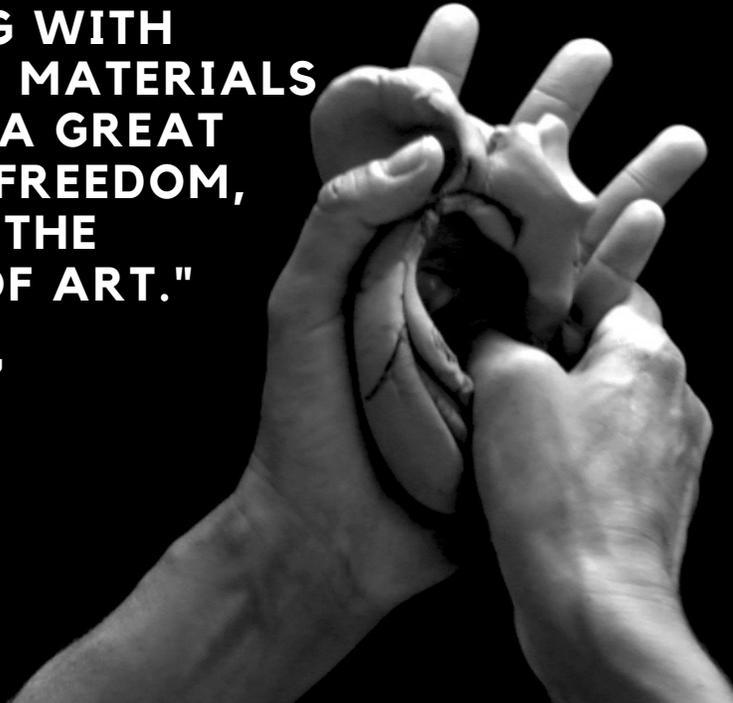
VD:

I am a Greek sculptor. I work with a wide variety of materials and media: stone, marble, metal, paper, digital images and sound. This helps me investigate multiple aspects of artistic creation. Influenced by my theatre and music studies, I try to combine the visual arts with music and prose to bring narrative and conceptual approaches together in a unified “whole” that speaks as much to the emotions as to the intellect. Working with different materials is a great freedom to me, which is the premise of art.



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MP:

Many of your works have obvious references to Hellenic culture: from the small bronze busts to the primordial shapes of the terracotta masks and stone heads that make up a large part of your production. It seems that your intention is to give voice, through their half-open mouths, to ancient memories. What do you think those voices would say today? Do you think contemporary art gives due consideration to the example of the ancients?

VD:

What interests me a lot is the intensity gestated in the moment prior to speech, in every form of expression. It is the moment that gives birth to creation: whether this is logos, words, images or thoughts, it is the moment before a voice speaks. In this sense, these voices are eternal and contemporary as long as they exist. I am interested in finding the thread that connects past to present, human voices to the continuous search and expression of the same existential questions. Voices that yearn to be heard.

MP:

Your preferred form of expression in your exploration of artistic materials and techniques seems to be sculpture. Is this true?

VD:

Images have always been more powerful than reason to me. My way of thinking is with and through images. A bit like in dreams and *rêveries*, which are also part of my work, as a kind of a wellspring of my unconscious side. There is no better challenge for me than to make these images three dimensional, to give them a place in time and space.

MP:

Your inner energy manifested in forms that go beyond your will is best released by handling matter. As if in a state of semi-consciousness and confirming Michelangelo's theories, "by taking away" you release forms that have been imprisoned in stone forever. Is this how you created your heads in volcanic stone and your masks? Is this one of the meanings of your "Life-giving Spring" installation, a video in which your hands work incessantly, repeatedly creating clay shapes in a stream of consciousness?

**VD:**

Carving stone is in some way a little like automatic writing. When I start working I don't think about the final form of the sculpture. I deposit an emotive charge onto the work, which urges me to bring it to the surface. The volcanic stones I use come from the south of the Greek island of Aegina, where I have my studio. This is a landscape that makes you feel that within yourself, in every nook and cranny, there hides a myth, a person, a story that comes from afar; like the sunlight that warms you with its "breath". This is the landscape of Mount Ellanion, with the altar of Zeus on its summit, and of Aeacus, son of Zeus, the mythical king of Aegina and one of the judges of the Underworld, who prayed to his father to bring rain to the island after a three-year drought; around them moves an entire population of warriors, soldiers, heroes, gods and nymphs. In this landscape "immersed in stone" (in the words of our poet George Seferis), stones emerged and acquired form and have all one common characteristic: the mouth. Sometimes half-open, sometimes wide-open, their mouths utter no cries. What I strive to capture is the intensity of the moment, when silence gives birth to sound. Following almost a similar way in the video *Life-giving Spring*, I tried to show this same struggle, this same tension between two entities: my hands, enormous, projected onto the wall, that come together endlessly grappling and battling and, as if driven by a spontaneous automatism, shaping small pieces of clay, similar to shells, but as malleable as words. It is an image of creation, with all its ambiguity, its equivocal nature: fight and truce, union and separation, beginning and end, suffering and redemption. A cellist playing a tango in *tempo rubato* provides the backdrop for this scene.

MP:

Your research touches the very depths of the self. In particular, the personal introspection that emerges from your works on paper, even though linked to other works as part of a “universal cycle”, uses repetition as a “redemptive procedure”. You, yourself, define it as the “creation of structure as to exorcise my obsessions, my unresolved emotional knots, tied between my thoughts...” Do you think you have achieved your aim? Does art have a therapeutic value? Do you think you have reached your goal? Does art have a therapeutic value?

VD:

Not only do I think so, but I do indeed know that art possesses a therapeutic value. In the works presented in the Mapping Oneself exhibition, the gesture becomes soft and introverted, the work alludes to a state of mental imprisonment, it is a mapping of a spiritual cage; an obsessive state that, through the creative process, ends in liberation, redemption and release. To me this is one of the greatest qualities of art: a way of metamorphosing the world.



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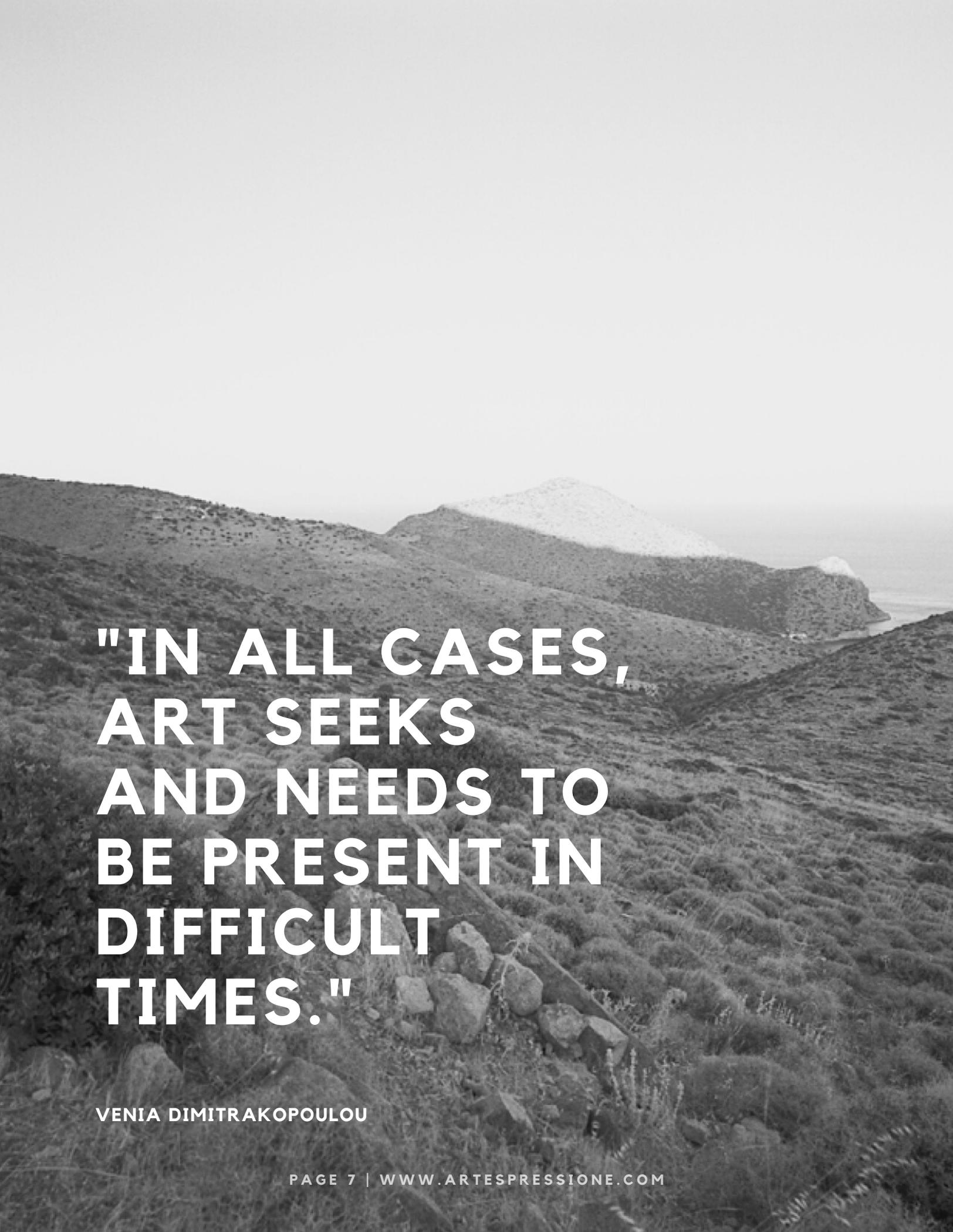


MP:

I propose making a comparison between some of your most famous projects: Promahones, a sculptural installation presented at the Benaki Museum and now placed in the garden in front of the Archaeological Museum in Athens, “Dialogues: polyphonic narrations on a social world in crisis”, it too monumental and intended for a public space in the Greek capital, recently exhibited in a new wall version at the Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Foundation in Turin and, finally, Ellampsis, another new work, also presented on the occasion of your Turin exhibition at the Sandretto Foundation. In all these cases, reference is made to a state of siege and the need to defend oneself from threatening forms of domination. What kind of danger is this?

VD:

“Promahones” is an ancient Greek word with many meanings, even today. Battlements, bastions, vanguards. It is a word that mainly symbolizes resilience and resistance in a period of great pressure and immense tension, all over the world and certainly also in Greece. *Promahones* bend, but do not fall. It is also a work that refers to the power of collective effort. *Dialoghi*, exhibited for the first time last year in Turin, also refers to an image of a society in crisis, to the great pressure felt at a personal and also a collective level. Voices of people that are not heard. Strength and fragility, transience and resistance, structure and chaos emerge through the antithesis of two materials (fine, handmade paper on one side, hard steel on the other), but also through their coexistence and dialogue. Once again, the antitheses are at the core of my research. I always have the feeling that an understanding of the world lies in this interstitial space. Finally, *Ellampsis*, which carries an almost prophetic inscription, refers to the revealing power of art over time, and -more so- in an almost blind society at a time of crisis. It is made up of two parts that were perhaps once joined. Light emerges from their conjunction. It is a work that conveys messages of hope. In all cases, art seeks and needs to be present at difficult times.



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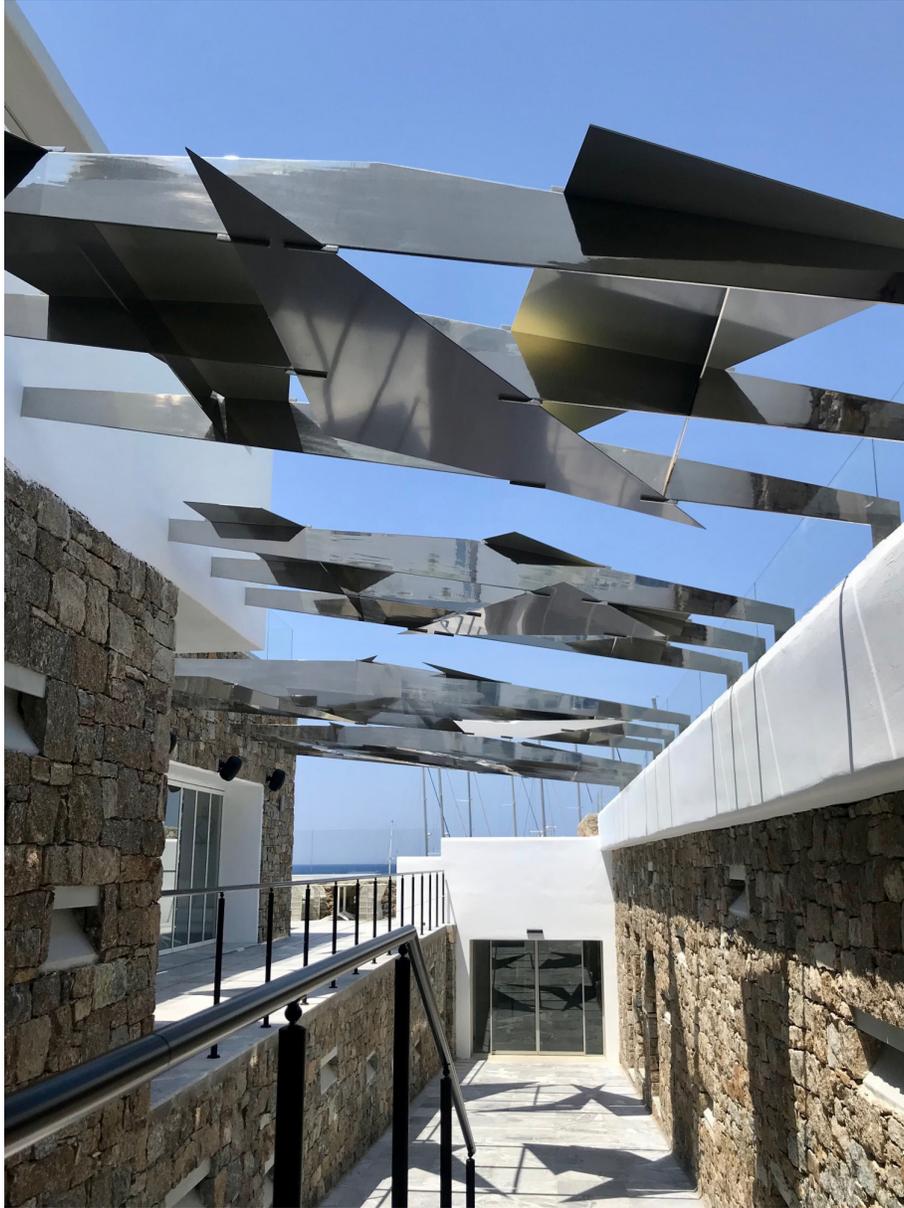
MP:

Let's talk about one of your most recent project, the trilogy of exhibitions that led you to travel in Italy from south to north, organized by the Hellenic Foundation for Culture and Artespressione at three important exhibition venues: the Antonino Salinas Archaeological Museum in Palermo, the Gallery of the Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Foundation in Turin and the Sartorio Museum complex with an installation at the Castle of San Giusto in Trieste, the final city of the journey. What traces has this left in you and what traces do you think you have left in these places?



VD:

This fascinating journey in Italy, entitled “Primordial Future”, began at one end of the country and ended at the other. The opposite poles played a crucial part in the choice of cities, geographical points of great symbolic value. The period in which this journey took place was one of sudden developments and important changes, both in Europe and all over the world. Memory and History are a common thread that comes from the depths of time and I think that by being conscious of the present can lead us to the future, while also making it less uncertain. It is essential to understand what we should leave behind us, what we should keep and where we should invest in order to proceed. Art can be an enlightenment. It can show us the way, help us enter a state of self-reflection, alertness and awakening. In the far south of Italy, in Palermo, I sought a dialogue between the ephemeral and the eternal, the fragile and the resilient, exploring the way archaeology unearths matter and brings it into the present day; hence the subtitle “Matter”. In Turin the central feature was “Logos”, the word. The journey ended in Trieste, a crossroads of civilizations, meeting point of east and west. Here, “Sound” connects to awakening. Sound that arouses memory in an immediate and unexpected way. Both the personal memory, in the duke’s private quarters, and the collective memory in the Castle of San Giusto.



VD:

A synopsis of this trilogy was presented last summer at the Cyclades Art Gallery on the island of Syros. I know it would have been easier to present myself in each city with ready-made works and organize a travelling exhibition in Italy with these, but I chose a more complicated way instead. Each stage of my journey, each time, each place, would suggest what I would have to do. New ideas and new projects were thus born and I found this thrilling. Through this interaction, I managed to feel - wanting to use a Greek word - less “Xenos” (foreign), feeling a “sense of belonging” that, to me, is of vital importance.

MP:

Let's talk, lastly, about this latter period. In 2020 a tragic and unexpected event marked the lives of all of us and highlighted the limits and vulnerability of the human race, which has always considered itself invincible and advanced, forcing us to review many aspects of our daily lives and confront our fears. During the pandemic, one of the weapons in our possession to curb the spread of the infection proved to be physical distancing and isolation, which put at risk the already "complicated relationships" between men and populations. What has this experience taught you; how has it influenced your art and your future projects?

VD:

In a world where everything is changing, in an atmosphere that feels like war, with inconceivable images that however cannot be found in tales or history lessons, in the presence of a constant, invisible threat, everything that makes up and determines our lives has become more evident. Fear, anxiety, absence, desperation, nostalgia, but also faith, expectation, love hope, passion, creation. During 2020, the need to resist the imprisonment of lockdown prompted me to create two new works. The first is entitled "The Free Besieged"[1], a work of considerable size, made with a heavy material, steel, which explores the concept of freedom and its limits. The other work, "Sudden War" is a story invented in the middle of a universal revolution, where the material is sound and logos. I found myself, without wishing to, in this very familiar place, in the midst of pairs of contrasts. This intermediate place, the meeting point of all possibilities, helps me to imagine the multiplicity of the world. We live in an era of transition; the crossing of a threshold. I feel increasingly bombarded and tormented by images of people escaping, carrying on their backs enormous bundles containing everything they could save. What would you take, on this enforced and often violent migration? What would you leave behind? And what materials would you use to build something again from scratch?

[1] Title taken from the poem of the same name by the great Greek poet Dionysios Solomos.



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