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Between national(ist) desires, digital glamour, and everyday destruction: Eleusis as a European Capital of Culture (2023)

Stathis Katopodis¹ and Alexandra Halkias²

Abstract

Eleusis, a seaside town in Greece, sports both ancient heritage and the ruins of heavy industrialization. Appointed European Capital of Culture 2023, its residents found themselves participants in a spectacle where they, cultural heritage, and the landscape were integral to a new Eleusinian transformation. Here, we argue, ecological catastrophe and capitalist development meet EU-subsidized art, leveraged into nationalist investments. This article describes Eleusis as European Capital of Culture as a counter-site, both reflecting and distorting the social realities of Eleusis itself. Based on dialogue between fieldwork, analysis of digital material and visual constructions, we examine layers of sociality from archeological sites to refineries and the seashore, showcasing how destruction, environmental and human, is (inter)nationally deployed by cultural institutions to promote nationalist interests. Further, we track how human and non-human relationalities synthesize and collide, sometimes in strangely gendered ways, while critical micro-resistances and narratives point towards new ways of co-existence.

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Eleusis is a small seaside town in Greece, located about an hour away from Athens. Elefsina, as it is commonly called, is famous for its archaeological site where rituals, the Eleusinian Mysteries,³ took place millennia ago. More recently, Eleusis has become an interesting yet disturbing mixture; it is also an industrial landscape marked by the heavy factories that settled there from the end of the 19th century onwards, including a petroleum refinery and a state-owned corporation producing military equipment. People flocked there from all over the country and elsewhere, many never considering Eleusis their hometown but a workplace to make ends meet. Today, migrants from other continents also live and work here, while Roma families camp in empty parts of the city.

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³ The Eleusinian Mysteries were held annually in Ancient Greece and were centered around the cult of Demeter and Persephone. The mysteries were divided into three phases: descent, search, and ascent. This narrative has been used to build the artistic vision of Eleusis 2023.

In 2016, in the building of the Greek Ministry of Culture, the President of the Committee of European Experts, Steve Green, declared Eleusis the European Capital of Culture (CC) for 2021.⁴ Due to the pandemic, the opening ceremony eventually took place on February 5, 2023, following changes to the schedule of events, the visual identity, and the content of the program. On that day, we suggest, some Eleusinians realized they were not stepping onto the stage as hosts but as part of a carefully crafted spectacle in which they, cultural heritage, and the landscape were integral to what was being presented as a new Eleusinian era. As early as the summer of 2017, the city's mayor Giorgos Tsoukalas had stated that Eleusis "is steadily and unwaveringly moving"⁵ towards its transition to a European Capital of Culture.

In this new phase of life for Eleusis, we argue, environmental and human destruction is fetishized and meets EU-subsidized art, both being leveraged into nationalist investments.⁶ This is a new chapter for the Eleusinian

Mysteries, where Eleusis is positioned to stand as a small Greek yet European *wonder*. The article shows how this performance rests on layers of severe exploitation of human labor and of aggressive extractivism regarding both the natural resources of the area and its ancient rocks and aura. Further, this article tracks how multiple human and non-human relationalities synthesize and collide at this site, occasionally in strangely gendered articulations, identifying heterogeneities reshaped for nationalist agendas. In addition, we use fieldnotes and images to indicate the existence of critical re-workings of dominant relations of power and of some of the meanings that underpin them, such as human supremacy.

Methods and theory⁷

Our research employed mixed-methods which seek to establish a dialogue between material from analysis of digital sources developed by the CC, seven fieldwork visits between July and December 2023, including

⁴"Η Ελευσίνα Πολιτιστική Πρωτεύουσα της Ευρώπης για το 2021" [Eleusis, European Capital of Culture for 2021], *Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports*, 11 November, 2016, <https://www.culture.gov.gr/el/Information/SitePages/view.aspx?nID=1741>.

⁵"Αισχύλεια 2017: Βαδίζοντας προς την Ελευσίνα του 2021, Πολιτιστική Πρωτεύουσα Ευρώπης [Aeschylea 2017: Moving Toward Eleusis 2021, European Capital of Culture]" *Hellas Journal*, June 7, 2017, <https://hellasjournal.com/2017/06/eschilia-2017-vadizontas-pros-tin-elefsina-tou-2021-politistik-protevousa-evropis/>.

⁶In the sponsorship policy, there is explicit reference to the history of industries, significant for both past and present: "A city of 30,000 inhabitants that produced up to 30% of Greek wealth, yet still bears the imprint of the harsh exploitation of nature and people." "Απόφαση του Διοικητικού Συμβουλίου που αφορά την έγκριση της Χορηγικής Πολιτικής [Decision of the Board of Directors regarding the approval of the Sponsorship Policy]," 4, 2023 *Eleusis*, accessed October 29, 2024, <https://2023eleusis.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ΨΝΧ646M3M3-ΨΟΑ.pdf>.

⁷The visual constructions and images are integral to our analysis. The figures referred to within the article can be accessed at this URI: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1JyiCoobmcHV5MLQgUPP2_5KAWdUt3Yzq. All images are by Stathis Katopodis unless noted otherwise.

⁸We agreed that Stathis focus on what he saw and heard, taking minimal notes in the field. Each evening, Stathis would free-write meticulous accounts of the day's experience moving in (and through) the field. These notes were read and commented on in detail by Alexandra, followed by extensive discussion between the two. Priorities were set for each next visit based on the findings and our use of the related literature. Each subsequent visit further honed our attention, allowing us to fine-tune the focus based on the experience of being in the field. We used long walks as a research methodology, concurring with Snehharshi Dasgupta (2022) that "walking research breaks away from humancentric approach to research and understands the connection between the environment and its effect on humans" in the spirit of "walking [...] in a more-than-human-world" (Springgay and Truman, 2018, 1). The walks took place in 2023, on Saturday, July 8, Monday, August 7, Monday, November 6, Sunday, November 12,

Stathis's five long walks with systematic journaling,⁸ field conversations and two interviews,⁹ authors' photographs from the town, which were processed later, along with images related to the CC from online sources, to form visual constructions.¹⁰ In this article, we examine layers of sociality that extend from archaeological sites to a cement factory, cultural events, and the seashore. We suggest that Eleusis showcases how destruction, both environmental and human, is fetishized and (inter)nationally deployed by cultural institutions for nationalist development. However, even in this late stage of liberalism, when destruction seems to be winning, resistances emerge.

To locate and identify the dominant face of the current Eleusis transformation, as well as possible elements of critique or resistance towards the project, we draw on certain theoretical constructs. Foucault distinguishes types of sites that function as counter-sites—that is, spaces presenting diverse, occasionally conflicting, meanings and functions.¹¹ These

are “real places”¹² outside of, or in opposition to, the dominant social order, which can possess a certain sanctity, even a kind of abaton (inviolable space). They lie outside of (everyday) locations, while “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”¹³ They can work both to render illusory the very social realities in which they are embedded, and/or to compensate for those, with the creation of a more perfect and orderly rendition of them.¹⁴ In this sense, the hegemonic Eleusis as CC, including its digital presence, may be seen as a counter-site. Indeed, the success of the (inter)national cultural endeavor is tied to this functioning, much as a festival or a museum simultaneously constitute both hegemonic spaces and counter-sites.¹⁵ In Eleusis as European CC, the diffuse aura of the transformative Eleusinian Mysteries of antiquity is given content and placed in sharp relief while a rich history of human exploitation as well as the environmental devastation of the area, the

and Sunday, December 17. On November 12, a CC event was held at the X-Bowling Art Center. The three-day closing ceremony, titled *Mystery 1 Closing: Opening, a Ceremony*, concluded on December 17.

⁹ To protect the privacy of participants, all names mentioned in the following interviews have been anonymized.

¹⁰ As a result of these methodological choices, “Informed by the collaborative and participatory underpinnings of go-alongs, researchers inevitably leave the comfort zone afforded by pre-determined and researcher-led research designs” (Duedahl and Stilling Blichfeldt 2020, 439). Our research here suggests that this approach indeed can “generate richer understandings while leveraging qualities such as enhanced embodied understanding” (439).

¹¹ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁴ Paradoxically, “their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every *real* space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as *still more illusory*” (Foucault 1986, 27, our emphasis) as well as “to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.” (27) Regarding the latter, Foucault notes that the Puritan colonies founded by the English in North America in the 17th century may constitute a good example. The digital Eleusis as CC can be seen to concentrate this trait.

¹⁵ In the mapping of heterotopias, Foucault makes a distinction between those involving an accumulation of time, like the museum, and those linked “to time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect, to time in the mode of the festival.” (Foucault 1986, 26) Such, he says, “are the fairgrounds, these marvelous empty sites on the outskirts of cities that teem once or twice a year with stands, displays, heteroclit objects...” (26) In the same paragraph, he identifies an example of the two ‘coming together’ in the case of vacation villages in Polynesia. To our analysis, Eleusis as CC appears as another such case.

¹⁶ “Mystery 7 Free university of Elefsina – in situ 2nd open educational meeting,” 2023 *Eleusis*, accessed October 29, 2024, <https://2023eleusis.eu/en/events/mystery-7-free-university-of-elefsina-in-situ-2nd-open-educational-meeting/>.

ongoing daily air pollution, the contamination of the sea, and possibly of drinking water,¹⁶ are blurred, themselves transformed into exhibits or elements for art. In short, Eleusis is portrayed as a seductive balance between Ancient Greek heritage, the remnants of a heavily industrialized modern period, and a contemporary digitalized art space, primarily aimed at non-Eleusinians and more cosmopolitical audiences.

As Latour¹⁷ notes, humanity stands on ground it believes it dominates, having developed an economy which “has become an argument for forgetting all limits. This has especially been true for coal, oil, and gas, those true ghost acreages [...] that made economists feel they finally had access to infinity.” The quagmire faced today, where the ground considered humanity’s possession has begun to shift significantly – violently impacting living and non-living – further confounds the distinct and discernible lines humanity once assumed existed, between humans and other(s). Our research attention is focused on cracks within the hegemonic functioning of Eleusis CC, and on potential grey zones that elude illusions of a singular truth, whether about the nation, the social, or the (human) self while being conducive to new freedoms and new ways of coexistence, as Halkias suggests.¹⁸ New mixtures of analysis are needed to address today’s urgent situation,

where politics intertwine with science due to the “simultaneous acceleration in the trajectory of the Earth and a sort of paralyzing inertia in how humans react to the reacting Earth.”¹⁹ Or, as Povinelli argues, “the governance of Life and Nonlife [...] is now also a matter of the entire assemblage of Life and Nonlife.”²⁰ Therefore, our exploration also draws from Povinelli’s concept of geontopower, a governance mechanism manifested within late liberalism.²¹ In today’s social landscape of climate change and species extinction, a shift is observed from the governance of humans as living beings to the way governance controls the interplay between Life and Nonlife. For example, in Australia the government exploited a moral panic over Indigenous child welfare to justify land seizures, defunding, and neoliberal policies that undermined Indigenous sovereignty.²² These blurred lines, where Nonlife overlaps with Life, can be enlightening. In this article, we illuminate moments therein that point towards other relationalities of coexistence.²³

With the above theoretical compass, we distinguish three levels of Eleusis CC 2023 and organize the article around them. First, we discuss Eleusis as a location, where tragically sweet moments of heritage, toil, and pride shimmer daily, examples skillfully employed by the CC to demonstrate that Western civilization can exist here. Both tangible

¹⁷ Bruno Latour, “Seven objections against landing on earth,” in *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

¹⁸ Alexandra Halkias, “Tracking love in the wild: from San Diego to Athens, Greece and beyond,” in *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies*, 10(1), 147–180, 2019; Chalkia, Σκύλοι, άνθρωποι, πέτρες: Για μία κριτική σχεσιακότητα [“Dogs, humans, stones: for a critical relationality”], in *Ο Άνθρωπος και τα Άλλα Ζώα*, edited by Anna Lydaki, Avva Λυδάκη, 309–18. Athens: Papazisis press, 2019.

¹⁹ Ibid., 5.

²⁰ Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 36.

²¹ Ibid., 4–5, 176.

²² Ibid., 24.

²³ Halkias, “Human, non-human, and life as war,” 100–109.

²⁴ “1st ecoculture festival,” 2023 Eleusis, accessed October 29, 2024, <https://2023eleusis.eu/en/events/mystirio-50--ecoculture-festival-mia-giorti-gia-to-perivallon/>.

and digital examples, initially seemingly contradictory, artfully combine elements of nationalism, progress, and sustainability.²⁴

The second part addresses the transformation of industrial scars into a vibrant cultural narrative combining avant-garde art, queer-friendly initiatives and romanticized ruins and focuses on the digital visualization of the city as glamorous, edgy, and cool examining online materials developed by the organization (the official website, the Facebook account of Eleusis 2023, and the Instagram account of the volunteer group Culterra). Here, heterogeneous parts transmogrify into idealized narratives of coexistence, enabled by Eleusis's developmental trajectory, part of the current right-wing government's strategy for the city and the nation alike.²⁵ We also examine the institution-driven, implicitly queer group designed to be a beacon of youth and hope for the area, and the artistic, heteronormative vision upon which the cultural program was developed.

In the final part of the article, we turn to the grey zones traversing or interrupting the various layers of Eleusis CC 2023; glimmers of other relationalities unfolding between subjectivities, various living subjects and non-living, including trees and rocks²⁶ (Figure 1).²⁷ Thus, the article also traces temporal inconsistencies in what is otherwise the well-orchestrated project of Eleusis 2023.

First level: A place of destruction, tragically national

On February 5, 2023, the Regional Governor of Attica, George Patoulis, a candidate with the conservative party currently in office (New Democracy), welcomed the audience at the opening ceremony of Eleusis as CC:

To the sacred land of Attica, to the sacred land of Eleusis, to the place where Western civilization was born, which today returns to send its bright rays to all of humanity. In whose soil the mysteries of transition are imprinted, from the past to the present, and from today to tomorrow.

With this stellar version of the narrative constituting the continuity strain of Greek nationalism, the Governor attempts to condense the alleged Ancient Greek heritage into the modern city of Eleusis. Further, in gesturing towards a present return of Ancient Greek glory, and with the prior absence that is therefore signaled, an implicit recognition of both the ongoing desirability and the failure of this narrative is referenced.²⁸ (Figure 2).²⁹

Eleusis CC is inextricably linked with nationalist narratives, surrounded by an ode to European legacies, such as Enlightenment narratives of progress. For example, one of the buildings renovated as part of the CC was the Cine Eleusis, sponsored by Hellenic Petroleum,

²⁵ “Μητσοτάκης από Ελευσίνα: Μείωση ΕΝΦΙΑ, 150 ευρώ για τους νέους και αύξηση επιδόματος παιδιού [Reduction of property tax (ENFIA), 150 euros for young people, and an increase in child benefits,]” *CNN Greece*, May 7, 2023, <https://www.cnn.gr/politiki/story/361668/live-mitsotakis-apo-ta-nafpigeia-tis-elefsinas-ta-metra-gia-neous-kai-idiokrites-akiniton>.

²⁶ Our application of walking as a “go-along” (Duedahl and Stilling Blichfeldt, 2020, 439) research methodology, in which we chose to include non-human Life (animals) and Nonlife (a wall), suggests that its benefits extend further than anticipated.

²⁷ Figure 1: Temporal inconsistencies. A collage of photos by Alexandra along the coast of Eleusis. Two Roma children play at an archaeological site and a group of people swim near merchant ships. The red flags of Eleusis 2023 are waving.

²⁸ For a critical mapping of different strains of Greek nationalism, see Michael Herzfeld, *Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology, and the Making of Modern Greece*, 2020.

²⁹ Figure 2: Snapshot of the opening ceremony on the CC website. A construction in the shape of a whale hangs from a heavy lift crane. Lights and smoke from the town's factories are visible in the background.

which is based in the town. The Minister of Culture, Lina Mendoni, referring to the renovation of the building, stated:

It was December 2019 when, by decision of the Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the Interministerial Committee for the Eleusis European Capital of Culture was established. We started not from scratch, but from below zero. There was nothing. It wasn't a matter of money; it was a matter of planning, a matter of time, to make Eleusis a Capital of Culture that would meet the standards of the European institution.³⁰

The research site was rich with fragments of such stories, always tinged with a sense of loss or destruction. Another legacy, harkening to the modernizing nationalist dream version of Greece as an economically powerful nation, is the TITAN cement factory, presented as part of the city's heritage. Eleusis has a long history of hosting heavy industries. Most have relocated or closed down, but the TITAN and Hellenic Petroleum refineries remain. Together, they extend to the city's coastline. The area also features a port, military facilities, an airforce base, warehouses and the Eleusis Shipyards, all emblems of the modernizing strain of an idealized Greece.

Google Maps indicates that the center of the city is about 150 meters from its

archaeological site,³¹ which is between the TITAN factory and a walkway of strong tourist aesthetic. Souvenir shops and taverns face the ancient marbles, which two women we spoke with during the visit on November 12 described with pride. Scattered here and there are nontraditional shops, like fast foods and creperies. This walkway leads to the sea, with cafés and restaurants nearby. It is clean, and cars patiently stop to let visitors pass. The cleanliness of the walls is occasionally interrupted by graffiti and posters: anti-capitalist, anarchist, against the CC, and in support of some football teams. One reads, "Shit on the Capital of Culture." (Figure 3).³²

TITAN is referred to as "historic"³³ on the CC's website and a special place for residents of Eleusis.³⁴ It is next to the city's central archaeological site. The factory sprawls around the city center, with one example of this expansion seen during a walk along the ship cemetery, where the only escape route was blocked by TITAN.³⁵ Part of the factory is adjacent to the sea. Here, Eleusinians swim and fish despite the nearby factories and the large commercial ships crossing the sea close to the coast. During one of the walks, Stathis spontaneously asked a fisherman, "How is fishing here?" He replied, "It's the sea, so we fish." Meanwhile, TITAN mainly operates at night. This is so that the residents of Eleusis "don't see that foreigners

³⁰ "Η Ελληνικά Πετρέλαια προσφέρει στην Ελευσίνα τον 1ο σύγχρονο κλειστό πολυχώρο πολιτισμού [Greek Petroleum offers Eleusis the 1st modern closed cultural multipurpose space]," 2023 *Eleusis*, December 20, 2023, <https://2023eleusis.eu/i-ellinika-petrelaia-prosferei-stin-eleysina-ton-1o-sygchrono-kleisto-polychoro-politismoy/>.

³¹ The center of Eleusis as shown on Google Maps: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/5zPEf4xn3HVZ1io29>.

³² Figure 3: A collage of photos shot on November 12, 2023, displaying the slogans: "Borders are scars on the body of the planet," "Elefsina, a city of migrant workers," "Cops, what a turn on when you are down," "Good night white pride," "Shit on the Capital of Culture."

³³ "ELEVSIS innovation lab by 2023 ELEUSIS," 2023 *Eleusis*, accessed October 29, 2024, <https://2023eleusis.eu/politistikoi-xoroi/elevsis-innovation-lab-by-2023-eleusis/>.

³⁴ The Hellenic Petroleum refineries are the main sponsor of the CC, yet they do not have strong ties to heritage. References focus on their contribution to the city's development path.

³⁵ The recommended Google Maps route on foot from the end of the ship cemetery to the center of the city was blocked, <https://maps.app.goo.gl/nXzcyB4rw5bEpmHF7>.

are working there,” according to one of the local women Stathis talked with at a CC event on November 12, where she was volunteering. Certainly, the thick pillars of smoke spewed from the factories are less visible than too. The TITAN facilities were chosen by CC organizers to develop the ELEVSIS Innovation Lab (Lab), as another tangible “legacy,”³⁶ meant to be a multifunctional, innovative hub where materials and special constructions for cultural events in the CC program are created.

A sign for the Lab stood prominently in the city center. The area close by was filled with abandoned and newly renovated buildings. Signs aided navigation. Outside the TITAN, other signs indicated surveillance and warnings not to trespass. Despite these, Stathis entered the factory grounds during the field visit on August 7. He found the Lab closed. Near the entrance, there was another interesting discovery. Various announcements were posted, printed on paper and taped to the glass-wall. One was signed by the TITAN Labor Union. The title read “IT’S TIME TO END THIS!” The announcement reported grueling working conditions and the recent death of a worker, on July 7, here in the heart of the Governor’s birthplace of civilization, well into Eleusis’s tenure as CC 2023 (Figure 4).³⁷

Open Eleusis, a digital project of the CC, notes that, especially during the 19th and 20th centuries, work accidents were

commonplace.³⁸ One of the art projects presented on the CC website is called *Mystery 111 Eleusis Terracotta Army*.³⁹ It consists of many protective workers helmets, all made of clay. It is presented as “a tribute to workers”⁴⁰ in broader West Attica. Further, the website states that these clay helmets are to be given to Eleusis residents as gifts, at the end of this action, to become parts of a “monument in the community.”⁴¹ This gift-giving, of protective helmets *made of clay*, presented as souvenir objects of art to residents, is stunning, given the dangerous work lives of Eleusinian workers. It constitutes another telling fragment, revealing the intersection of a fetishizing romanticization of hard manual labor and a silent acknowledgement of the inadequate protection of workers, with a hybrid narrative of Greece today as at once modernly artistically innovative, traditionally “generous” and, of course, via the clay objects’ reference to shards, of noble ancient lineage.⁴²

During our research, Stathis interviewed two artists who participated in the CC. Stathis and the two women had collaborated on a project a few months prior. When the research of the CC began, the artists agreed to participate in (semi-structured) interviews. When the conversation turned to their feelings about Eleusis, Anastasia commented,

³⁶ “Legacy έργα [Legacy projects],” *Eleusis 2023*, accessed January 12, 2025, <https://2023eleusis.eu/legacy-projects/>.

³⁷ Figure 4: *IT’S TIME TO END THIS!* A collage of photos shot on August 7, 2023. The Innovation Lab sign is visible along with signs warning of surveillance. The collage includes various announcements close to the Lab, including one titled “It’s time to end this.”

³⁸ “Βιομηχανία και σώμα: υγεία και ατυχήματα [Industry and body: health and accidents],” *Open Eleusis*, accessed October 29, 2024, <https://openeleusis.eu/node/29>.

³⁹ “Μυστήριο 111 ο πηλινός στρατός της Ελευσίνας [Mystery 111 the terracotta army of Elefsina],” *2023 Eleusis*, accessed October 29, 2024, <https://2023eleusis.eu/en/events/mystirio-111-o-pilinos-stratos-tis-eleysinas-2023-12-17/>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² The CC website notes of this artwork, “This handmade object made of clay creates a reference, beyond the industrial design, to the everyday and ritual objects *from Antiquity* that were excavated in the cemetery of Elefsina. In this way, it links the industrial present and past of the city with its ancient history.” (our emphasis) <https://2023eleusis.eu/en/flagship-events/mystirio-111-lt-br-gt-o-pilinos-stratos-tis-eleysinas/>.

it also relates to how many people have died due to the industry, especially heavy industry, and the diseases caused by it. There were asbestos factories in the area, there's no material more carcinogenic than asbestos. I believe there are still asbestos-containing waste materials that haven't been removed. I once went to an exhibition that paid tribute to the workers who had lost their lives in these factories... it featured a large installation displaying the shoes of those who had died on the job...

The website presents the *Mystery 111 Eleusis Terracotta Army* as “a huge collective portrait representing the individuals who have forged the current image of the place with their physical toil, and lives.”⁴³ However, as Nick, a young man born and raised in Eleusis, shared during a (semi-structured) interview with Stathis, another version of labor experience appears. He states: “Generally, they [TITAN and Hellenic Petroleum] only care about the money. That's it. They try to balance the destruction they cause to the environment and to people, with donations and other initiatives.” This Eleusinian destruction seems to be inspiring, judging from the theme of many of the art projects and several of the cultural events in the program. “The Eleusinians must have seen their place being destroyed,” said Maria, the other artist we interviewed. For her, this is not entirely tragic. Throughout our conversation, destruction seems to accommodate, literally and figuratively, artistic explorations. Eleusis appears as a repository of sorts, for various

subcultures, in her words, subjectivities to us. As for the nation in all this, Anastasia comments, “This city seems like a miniature of all that makes up Greece. Visiting Eleusis is equivalent to multiple visits to various places in the country, and I don't know if there is another city in Greece that has such a strong industrial character.”

Second level: Eleusis as cosmopolitan and alluring hybrid place (of art)

How can the ruins of a catastrophic period, a queer volunteer group whose formation was designed as part of the CC program, and toxic entities such as the Hellenic Petroleum refineries, along with pervasive nationalist symbols of Greek identity, all coexist? For Anastasia, this is possible because Eleusis is “a carcass” capable of containing “everything.” In her words: “...now it's a carcass, which, okay, all industrial buildings have tremendous interest. So now, it's used for exhibitions, installations, performances...” This all-encompassing property is also reproduced by the digital material of the CC.

Through the website and graphic visuals, including the bold red hues resembling cracks and the mix of serif and non-serif typographies, Eleusis is crafted as decaying yet artistically vibrant and even avant-garde (Figure 5).⁴⁴

The city emerges as a site of conservation of various ruins, gloriously ancient yet modernly industrial, and a hub for sophisticated, edgy-seeming art projects, many of them digitally inscribed. The sea, murky, with cargo ships, physically running along the one side of the

⁴³ “Μυστήριο 111 ο πλήλιος στρατός της Ελευσίνας [Mystery 111 The terracotta army of Elefsina].”

⁴⁴ Figure 5: A collage of screenshots, including a snapshot from the video of the closing ceremony uploaded on the Facebook page of Eleusis 2023. The three snapshots that follow are from the homepage of CC's website and show a heavy lift crane, the town's bay in fog, with a merchant ship and part of a structure displaying the town's name and closed factory chimneys with birds flying around them.

⁴⁵ Figure 6: A snapshot from the CC website showing the archaeological site of Eleusis and the bay with merchant ships.

city, stars in much of the website visuals (Figure 6).⁴⁵

In 2019, as part of the evaluation of the project's progress by independent experts on behalf of the European Commission, concerns were raised about achieving objectives on multiple fronts, including staffing, infrastructure, the CC program, and dissemination. Among these concerns was the "approach and engagement of the community [...] to ensure the full commitment and ownership of the project by the city."⁴⁶ The next available periodic update document dated July 13, 2021,⁴⁷ reveals significant changes to the CC team, including the appointment of a new artistic director. Michail Marmarinos (Figure 7)⁴⁸, a well-known non-Eleusinian theatre director, who introduced the city's new tagline, *Mysteries of Transition*, with reference to the previous tagline, described this as "close to the original 'Transition to Euphoria'."⁴⁹ However, an examination of the bid book shows a shift in aesthetics. The new focus emphasizes mysticism and vibrant red hues, in contrast with the previous theme, which featured earthy orange and brown, elements of what might be seen as a Greek blue, and imagery of traditional youth.⁵⁰

In this update, the European Commission expressed numerous concerns, including citizen engagement. In their response, the CC organizing team framed the city itself as theatrical, "The assurance that the city itself is a theater is important, as this is a way to involve and engage the citizens of Eleusis."⁵¹ The CC website also states that Michalis Marmarinos's work "is guided by two assumptions: a) Theater is the art based on the history of humanity and b) there is no moment in everyday life that isn't theatre, once *the right gaze* is present" (our emphasis).⁵² (Figure 8).⁵³ When he walked by Stathis during the rehearsal for the closing ceremony, he wore a long black coat, earrings, and had dyed blonde highlighted hair. He carried his alternative appearance authoritatively; a toned-down version of hegemonic masculinity, exhibiting a (grand)faterly concern for the history of humanity.

The process of digital crafting extends to all digital constructs beyond the website and its content, reproducing this alluring and grand-theatrical reality. Echoing the theme of "humanity," implicitly linking it in some special way to Eleusis, in a recap video on the Facebook page of the CC,⁵⁴ a female voice

⁴⁶ "Επιστολή της επιτροπής ανεξάρτητων εμπειρογνομόνων ΠΠΕ σε συνέχεια επιτόπιας επίσκεψης μελών της επιτροπής [Letter from the committee of independent experts of the CC following an on-site visit by committee members]," 2023 *Eleusis*, accessed October 29, 2024, <https://2023eleusis.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Letter-FINAL-November-2019-1-GR.docx>.

⁴⁷ "New second monitoring meeting report by the ECOC expert panel," 2023 *Eleusis*, accessed October 29, 2024, https://2023eleusis.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ecoc2023-elefsina-new-second-monitoring-report_.pdf.

⁴⁸ Figure 7. Michalis Marmarinos at the Eleusis ship graveyard.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁰ "Τελικός φάκελος υποψηφιότητας: Eleusis 21 [Final candidacy folder: Eleusis 21]," 67–69, 2023 *Eleusis*, accessed October 29, 2024, https://2023eleusis.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ELEUSIS21_BID_BOOK_2016_GR_outline-1.pdf.

⁵¹ "New second monitoring meeting report by the ECOC expert panel," 11.

⁵² "Μιχαήλ Μαρμαρινός [Michail Marmarinos]," 2023 *Eleusis*, accessed January 12, 2025, <https://2023eleusis.eu/member/michail-marmarinos/>.

⁵³ Figure 8. A collage of photos from the night of the closing ceremony. On the left: a mirror is hanging from a heavy lift crane, part of the event of the closing ceremony. On a ledge a couple is kissing. A photo accompanying the artistic vision on the CC's website is to the right.

⁵⁴ "The story of 2023Eleusis | 2017–2021," December 30, 2023, *Video*, <https://www.facebook.com/2023eleusis.eu/videos/760216959256326>.

says, while the scene shifts to a black-and-white photo of a woman,

Art unites, art connects people's minds, art prevents inequalities, all people can be part of art. Just like in the Eleusinian Mysteries, slaves and women could participate, the only sacred ritual where this was possible. I think art is the same, and I hope that in the end, the CC will leave the mark it aims to.

Next to the photo, a title appears – “Hello, Despina! This is for you”⁵⁵ – followed by quick shots of various CC activities. The President of the CC organization, Despina Geroulanou, passed away on April 18, 2023.⁵⁶ Explicit references to the need for Eleusis to enter *a new era* by utilizing its damaging past while accepting the destructive but somewhat romantic present, were also made by less powerful participants in the organization, such as members of the Cultterra group.

Under the scope of the artistic vision,⁵⁷ a youth group was created in October 2018, following a formal open call by the “Director

of Audience Development and Participation”⁵⁸ of the CC, with the stated purpose to empower Eleusinian youth. In a podcast episode of Lifo x 2023 ELEVSIS series, titled *The youth of Eleusis now have a voice*, three members of the group narrate the story of this volunteer team.⁵⁹ The groups' name initially was Youth Labs. Following the revamp of the artistic vision initiated in 2019 with the appointment of the new Board and CC staff,⁶⁰ it was renamed Cultterra, representing those who want to change their place (terra) through art (cult),⁶¹ the film genre that flourished alongside various movements, members explain. Conversations with participants⁶² of Cultterra, as well as its online presence,⁶³ reveal that Cultterra is infused with some queerness (Figure 9).⁶⁴ It is also the same team that organized the first Pride event in town.

In the podcast, Eleusis is seductively described as “a mystery city, which is why we call the actions Mysteries. It draws you in, both positively and negatively.”⁶⁵ Eleusis is presented as combining the best of a city and a not-so-regular village. “Every day, something happens here,”⁶⁶ one member says. However,

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ “We bid farewell to Despina Geroulanou, our President,” 2023 *Eleusis*, April 18, 2023, <https://2023eleusis.eu/en/it-is-with-indescribable-pain-that-we-say-goodbye-to-despina-geroulanou/>.

⁵⁷ “Artistic vision,” 2023 *Eleusis*, accessed October 29, 2024, <https://2023eleusis.eu/en/kallitechniko-orama/>.

⁵⁸ Γιάννης Κουκμάς [Yannis Koukmas], “2023 *Eleusis*,” accessed January 12, 2025, <https://2023eleusis.eu/member/giannis-koykmas/>.

⁵⁹ Some members of the group possibly were employed for CC events. The podcast was funded by the Greece 2.0 Recovery and Resilience Fund of the European Union and produced by Lifo, a popular, right-to-liberal, free press. “Cultterra: Οι νέοι της Ελευσίνας έχουν πλέον φωνή [Cultterra: the youth of Elefsina now have a voice],” *Lifo*, 20 November, 2023, <https://www.lifo.gr/podcasts/lifo-2023-eleusis/cultterra-oi-neoi-tis-eleysinas-ehoy-n-pleon-foni>.

⁶⁰ “New second Monitoring Meeting Report by the ECOC Expert Panel”.

⁶¹ “Cultterra: Οι νέοι της Ελευσίνας μας συστήνονται [Cultterra: the youth of Elefsina introduce themselves],” 2023 *Eleusis*, April 14, 2022, <https://2023eleusis.eu/cultterra-oi-neoi-tis-eleysinas-mas-systinontai/>.

⁶² Stathis had the opportunity to speak briefly with two members of the organizational team of the volunteer group during a visit on November 12, 2023. Additionally, an online interview with a volunteer member was conducted on December 4, 2023, and a short discussion with a member of a queer organization based in Athens, who participated in Cultterra's event titled *Elefsina No Longer Keeps Secrets* on December 22, 2023.

⁶³ Actions were identified by searching the term “cultterra” on the CC website, <https://2023eleusis.eu/en/?s=cultterra>.

⁶⁴ Figure 9: (Queer) actions from the Cultterra team displayed on CC's website and Cultterra's Instagram account.

⁶⁵ “Cultterra: Οι νέοι της Ελευσίνας έχουν πλέον φωνή [Cultterra: the youth of Elefsina now have a voice].”

⁶⁶ Ibid.

they note that many young locals leave for Athens, as opportunities in Eleusis are limited. This youthful hybrid team, blending heritage, culture and queerness is “here to keep people in town. We have a dream to create a community center [...] Eleusis is very beautiful despite the pollution...”⁶⁷

The group sees the CC as helping to keep certain (marginalized) people here. Nick, who is involved in Cultterra’s activities and with whom the team introduced us, is concerned about that, too. When we asked how queer individuals live here, he said they experience their queerness outside the city, with Athens serving as a space for “decompression” and free expression. Nick believes that aside from the formation of Cultterra, nothing substantial resulted for the queer community, “just 2–3 social media posts by the CC,” “essentially nothing” and purely for marketing purposes.⁶⁸

The CC 2023 project presents Eleusis as attractively “wild,” with references to environmental pollution and unemployment intertwined with desires to create a sense of (queer-friendly) community “warmth,” evoking something of the universal belonging Despoina Geroulanou described when referring to the Eleusinian Mysteries. Coupled with Cultterra’s scattered references to queer subjects and the theatrical gaze of the artistic direction, a cultural foundation is laid for yet another transition of Eleusis, from an abandoned heavily polluted site of economic and other forms of violence, to an inclusive, romantic and modern space, a seemingly cool habitat for alternative, predominantly young people.

Third level: Destabilizing relationalities

During the fieldwork visits, relationalities between living, human and non-human animals, and non-living seemed to function as a prelude to resistances or even as fleeting moments of clarity amidst the city’s pervasive anthropocentrism. Within this layer reside peculiar social practices, narratives possibly, in a “parallel universe” where the heavy industrial element seems to dissolve for some subjects. Swimming in the sea and fishing are two vivid examples. We discerned others as well.

Men-with-pigeon

In an alley, there is an old-fashioned café/bar with dark colors and a 90s aesthetic. Outside, three men sit in a row, each at a separate table, drinking coffee alone. The age range seems to be 50 to 60. Behind them, a pigeon is dragging itself along the ground. One man asks, “What are we going to do with it?” Another, along with others, replies: “Let it die... a cat will find it.” “It’s a newborn, it has no legs.” Yet another manages to grab it and tries to assess what is wrong. He places the pigeon on a ledge and tries to give it water. He speaks to it gently or maybe like a child: “Do you want water, buddy?” He holds the bird again, trying to figure out what is wrong. He sits next to the bird, for a few minutes, silently. The others remain indifferent. Outside the café’s entrance, there is a bowl filled with water. A pigeon is drinking from it. Across the street, on a balcony, a bare-chested old man tends to his birds in cages (Figure 10).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Apostolidou (2016) examines a “historical erasure” (68) wherein, at least up to recently, “the idea of homosexuality has been expelled from local dominant narrations about the Modern Greek nation.” (68) The analysis shows, however, that “selected individuals and cultural locales serve as terrains of negotiating the present-day Greek state’s façade as cosmopolitan, Western and post-modern.” (68).



Figure 10. A man and his birds. A photo shot on August 7, 2023. At the bottom of the photo, posters from the CC's events are visible.

Contact zones in uninviting places

One of Stathis's longest walks took him through the Greek shipyards and refineries. The area is empty, with a few cars here and there. There is no other human presence but a cyclist. Outside Hellenic Petroleum, there are cameras and signs informing of surveillance. The cyclist calls out, "What time is it...?" Stathis replies, "around half past nine." The cyclist nods.

Half an hour later, a detour leads to the so-called cemetery of ships. Here, abandoned ships are grounded on the land, and half-sunken vessels are in the sea. A black dog with a red collar appears at Stathis's side and follows him. Upon reaching the entrance of a private shipyard, the dog pauses. The shipyard seems to be the dog's home, it appears more at ease. Stathis continues walking. The dog watches him from a distance (Figure 11 and 12).⁶⁹ According to Google, this road leads to the city center. It turns out to be a dead end, leading instead to the entrance of the TITAN. On the way back, the black dog is once again there, lying down, across from the Savvas Shipyard. The dog quickly gets up and escorts Stathis for a while.



Figure 12. I am watching you. A photo shot on November 6, 2023.

Dogs and roots

It is morning. A handful of men are fishing, commercial ships cross the Eleusinian Bay in front of them. The sidewalk Stathis walks on,

⁶⁹ Figure 11. *Welcome to my playground*. A collage of photos from the ship graveyard, shot on November 6, 2023. Ships on land are visible, along with a black dog walking.

is “swollen”. Tree roots push parts of it up into little hills. Some tiles have even cracked from the unruly roots (Figure 13).⁷⁰ A couple steps further is the old oil mill, now used for cultural events. The shiny program of the CC is hanging on thick paper outside the building. As if looking at the program, a stray dog stands among the trees at the entrance (Figure 14).⁷¹ Then the dog runs with another, joining a group of dogs in front of TITAN. One barks. A man’s voice tells him to stop and “not to worry.” The dog that accompanied Stathis on the desolate path might have kin here.

The leopard lady

In this CC event, items inspired by the heritage of cultural associations in the city were created.⁷² Most people attending are not locals. The production of the items is handled by Eleusinian volunteers, members of these associations. They seem pleased with the interest in their heritage. An older woman in a leopard-print dress walks past Stathis and introduces herself, a retired French teacher. “I’m waiting for my friends, a director and someone from the municipality, to come,” she says.

What follows became an object of lively research dialogue for us. She asks Stathis if he knows what is happening here. He explains the event. The two organizers are rushing around. Stathis thinks he is probably the most suitable choice for her, since he is also an observer. Alexandra saw Stathis’s commanding posture as indicating knowledgeable. Also, perhaps, something in his appearance suggested a kindred outsider. The leopard dress seemed key and Alexandra asked Stathis what he wore

that day. It was similarly impressive, including a small red neckband and white shoes with blue laces. A couple of minutes later, the woman asks Stathis if she can have something to eat from the table. She also likes the tote bag that the volunteers made for him. Hesitantly, she goes and asks the volunteers if they can sew one for her. They responded that there are not enough for everyone, and suggested she ask the coordinators. Someone also said that they “cannot take responsibility” (Figure 15). They seemed annoyed by her presence. She approached Stathis again and said with some complaint, but sweetly, “I did not get an item, my director friend did not come, and neither did the mayor,” showing, with this, possibly, how an intangible alliance of others enabled a restitution of personhood.



Figure 15. I cannot take responsibility. A photo shot on November 12, 2023.

Making connections

During this research, it became clear that Eleusis as CC was also a place of experiments, artistic, social and national. The city is a space where new beginnings and disparate

⁷⁰ Figure 13. *A morning like any other*. A collage of photos shot on November 12, 2023. Two men are fishing while merchant ships pass by. An installation of the CC, along with a poster of an action, is visible. The roots of trees cracking the tiles of the sidewalk.

⁷¹ Figure 14. A collage of photos from November 12, 2023. A dog stands between two trees. Another is standing at the entrance of the TITAN factory, barking.

⁷² Eleusis has more than 10 cultural associations representing groups such as those from Asia Minor and the Pontic Greeks to preserve their traditions and provide a space for communication.

pasts, sustainable development and horrific environmental and human collapse, can walk hand-in-hand. This is a critical mirror of society, at once revealing and obscuring social realities, a counter-site. Eleusinians themselves are not merely spectators in this space but integral parts of what emerges as a museum of spectacles flaunted on the CC website. Throughout the program, the newly developed areas, along with the digital presence of Eleusis 2023, constituted a glamorously modern mixture of historical and mythological elements, alongside the tragically lived experiences of locals, which acquire a masterful artistic aura.

Tsing identifies a global condition of precarity wherein human and non-human lives are commodified and yet, even within damaged environments, regeneration may persist.⁷³ In related work, Halkias sheds light on forms of coexistence where humans and the non-human relate as equals, wherein the inclusion of subjects deemed non-human or less-than may be socially transformative.⁷⁴ The tiny moments identified within routine life in Eleusis are fleeting *glimpses* where critical relationalities surface. These glimpses of subjects and interactions which quietly resist the changes, sometimes violent, swirling around them, and wander outside of Eleusis as CC, can hold significant power. This is a condition where various Life forms and the very distinction from Nonlife fall into the cracks, as if to spread there, escaping from dominant regulation, even briefly. Fishermen, and a few women, cast their lines into a sea seemingly devoid of fish. Tree roots claim their place in the soil cracking human construction into pieces. The lady-in-leopard-dress, treated as less-than, forms an alliance that creates room for dignity, another take on “humanity.” A dog accompanies the strange visitor through

its playground at the shipyards. An otherwise hegemonically masculine man, cares for an injured pigeon, talking to it like a child. These tiny moments can (must) be transformative.

We argue that Eleusis today, indeed serves as a repository, but for relationalities, dominant and potentially oppositional, and national(ist) desires. Contradictory versions of Greece itself may be part of what intrigued the organizing team. This city was made to stand as a grand theater, offering a romantically destructive portrayal of “the best” aspects of Greece’s ancient and modern pasts, against the backdrop of a harsh neoliberal context. The experiences of present-day Eleusinians are encapsulated within a formalistic institution, accentuated through cosmopolitan artistic techniques and a digital crafting, concerted, if somewhat rough, of a new Eleusinian identity; a place that is cool and a little queer, where massive environmental destruction and the intolerable can become more bearable. Yet, violent aspects of Eleusis, even in the form of the reborn city in light of the CC, take on more hopeful articulations in marginal relationalities, unfolding to the side or *in the cracks* of Eleusis as the European Capital of Culture 2023 (Figure 16).

⁷³ Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: on the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*, 5–6.

⁷⁴ Halkias, “Tracking love in the wild,” 160; Chalkia, “Dogs, humans, stones,” 312.

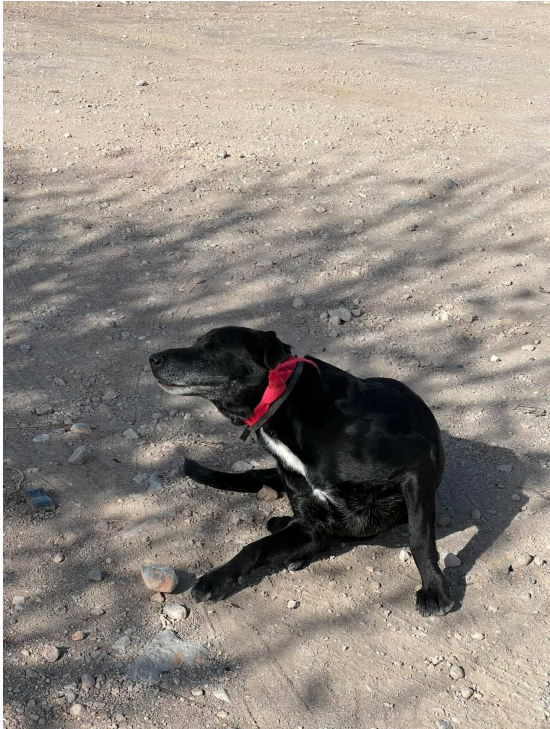


Figure 16. Joy. A photo shot on November 6, 2023.

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