

# Peripheral Cultural Vitality: Community Engagement Through Art Festivals in Non-Touristic Greek Regions

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## Abstract:

In recent years, Greece's cultural image in the global tourism market has largely been shaped by mass tourism and homogenized portrayals of ancient heritage. This paper explores the counter-narrative offered by two distinctive art festivals in non-metropolitan and non-touristic regions: the Thessalian Poetry Festival and DEO Projects' contemporary art exhibitions in Chios.

The Thessalian Poetry Festival, established in 2013, has fostered a sustained literary community across multiple cities in Thessaly. By combining international participation with strong regional collaboration, it enhances local cultural infrastructure, provides visibility to emerging Greek poets, and democratizes access to poetry in areas with limited cultural offerings.

In Chios, DEO Projects has redefined the island's engagement with contemporary art. By activating public spaces and historical monuments, exhibitions such as *My Dreams Were Dashed Against Your Walls* and *My Past is a Foreign Country* have created platforms for dialogue, healing, and memory, while actively involving residents through oral histories, public workshops, and collaborative events.

Both festivals demonstrate that artistic initiatives outside tourism hotspots can promote sustainable cultural development, strengthen local identities, and foster inclusive participation. These festivals not only counterbalance the centralization of Greek cultural life but also offer replicable models for regional cultural policy.

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**Keywords:** Peripheral cultural development, Community engagement, Art festivals, Contemporary art in Greece, Poetry festivals, Cultural decentralization, Local identity, Non-touristic regions

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## Introduction

Greece has, throughout the years, been associated with warm weather, beautiful beaches and delicious food. This stereotypic depiction of Greece has served as a source for an influx of mass tourism. In this, often chaotic and homogenized image of Greece, culture is also associated to a unified image mainly springing from ancient Greece and the culture once originating from Greece, like ancient Greek theater and the traditional representation of ancient Greece spanning from garments to ancient Greek wines and cuisine.

Thus, the cultural landscape of Greece associated to tourism is increasingly shaped by the forces of mass tourism, which often prioritize economic gain over the preservation of local identities and the engagement of local Greek communities which often find it difficult to access cultural experiences addressed to their own needs and not to those of mass tourism. Even though Greece is not only the Cycladic islands like Santorini or Mykonos or the Peloponnese like Pylos and Kardamyli, tourism remains a significant economic "force" which, often, makes it hard for local identities to emerge and thrive through cultural experiences. The challenge is even greater in small and medium sized cities which do not rely on tourism and are, also, far from the two metropolitan areas of Greece, Athens and Thessaloniki, which present significant opportunities for artistic expression either hosting major festivals and venues, either operating as hubs for artists to create and present their art to vast audiences. In these non-touristic areas, the challenge is of a dual nature which makes the landscape still fairly fragmented. On the one hand, the number of professional artists or of artists aspiring to be professional is relatively small as opportunities for presenting their work to bigger audiences and for funding their future work remain limited. On the other hand, local communities have less opportunities both of being exposed to art and culture as audience, but also as creators. Thus, the number of theatres in Athens grew by 153% during the period 2000 to 2014, while 70% of theatres operating in 2014 were established after the recession set in (2008) (Defner, Lalou, Psatha, 2015), while medium sized cities rely on peripheral municipal theaters (e.g. Theater of Thessaly, Peripheral Theater of Crete, Peripheral Theater of Kavala, Peripheral Theater of Veroia etc.) which host 2 or 3 performances per year funded by a special dedicated public budget. However, this budget is often not adequate to offer permanent employment to local artists which flee in the metropolitan areas of Greece or to offer diverse activities which would engage the local communities and reinforce their sense of shared identity through co creation activities such as diverse artistic workshops for children and adults or art festivals. In the absence or limited presence of such activities funded by public authorities, the creation of such opportunities remains in the "hands" of private initiative which must ensure funding either from local municipalities or by their own private resources.

In this paper, we will mainly focus on art festivals taking place in not traditionally touristic destinations. Firstly, we should note that even though public authorities do not often organize art festivals, the last two decades especially are characterized by the remarkable increase of small- and large-scale urban festivals in cities of all sizes (Konsola, Karachalis, 2009). These festivals, which rely on

diverse sources of funding, are often considered as a mechanism to attract tourists and boost the local economy. Thus, the association of festivals with tourism is especially highlighted as they offer a concentrated and often unique cultural product and, therefore, represent an additional reason for cultural tourists to visit a place (Evans, 2007). Moreover, apart from tourism per se, these festivals serve as a means of portraying a vivid image of the city in which they take place. Major art festivals imply a cosmopolitan atmosphere, a vibrant cultural scene, an open artistic community, a successful night-time economy and signify ‘good taste’ (Freyer, 2000). However, by emphasizing only the economic gain resulting from tourism, the festivals often lack policies which would lead to their long-term sustainability as they fail to engage local communities and meaningfully address their needs. Furthermore, the fact that art festivals contribute to the diversification of the tourism product in Greece is, this way, ignored. By highlighting unique cultural expressions and local narratives, these festivals can attract tourists seeking authentic and immersive experiences. This shift towards cultural tourism helps mitigate the adverse effects of mass tourism, such as environmental degradation and cultural erosion, by promoting sustainable practices and encouraging visitors to engage meaningfully with local communities.

But, most importantly, as already said, by focusing only on “new” tourists, art festivals even in lesser-known Greek cities fail to grasp the opportunity to serve as vital platforms for local communities to assert their cultural narratives, offering an alternative to the commodified experiences prevalent in mainstream tourism. These festivals could be transformed into tools for communities to showcase their traditions, crafts, and performing arts, thereby reinforcing their cultural identity and resisting the homogenizing forces of mass tourism.

Moreover, these festivals play a crucial role in democratizing access to the arts. In peripheral areas where cultural infrastructure may be limited, art festivals provide residents with opportunities to engage in diverse artistic activities that they might otherwise lack access to. Such initiatives not only enrich the cultural fabric of these communities but also empower individuals by providing them with platforms to express themselves and develop their artistic skills.

This paper will focus on two different and unique art festivals taking place in two not traditional tourist destinations. The one is the Thessalian Poetry Festival, taking place in different cities and villages of the region of Thessaly and the artistic exhibitions taking place in Chios each summer, organized by Deo Projects. These festivals have been identified as being organized and developed by engaging local communities and aiming to create a unique and lasting bond with them, profiting both the communities and the festival’s long-term impact and sustainability.

## **Body Text**

### **1. Thessalian Poetry Festival**

The Thessalian Poetry Festival: More than a Decade of Cultural Engagement and Literary Exchange

The Thessalian Poetry Festival was inaugurated in 2013 in the city of Larissa as part of the celebration of World Poetry Day. Over the years, it has evolved into a seven-day cultural event featuring international participation and activities distributed across four cities in the Thessaly region: Larissa, Volos, Trikala, and Karditsa.

Since its inception, the festival has been organized by the cultural organization *Thraka*. It is currently co-organized in collaboration with the Deputy Mayor for Culture and Science of the Municipality of Larissa. The festival also partners with various regional cultural institutions, including the Thessalian Theatre, the Diachronic Museum of Larissa, the Museum of Millos, the Union of Visual Arts “8”, the French Institute in Larissa, and OffArt Dance Theatre, thereby creating interdisciplinary connections between poetry, music, dance, and visual arts.

Each year, the festival confers two awards: the *Makis Lachanas Award*—honoring significant contributions to Greek literature—and the *Thraka Award*, which is granted to the best unpublished poetry manuscript. The latter includes the publication of the awarded work by Thraka, thus supporting emerging literary voices.

The festival’s core mission is to foster the communal dimension of poetry and to position Thessalian cultural production within a broader international context. It aims to bring together emerging and established poets, facilitating intergenerational, cross-cultural dialogue and revitalizing public engagement with poetry and the arts.

Since the festival’s first edition, it has received enthusiastic support from both participating poets and the local community. The city of Larissa, in particular, has played a vital role in sustaining the event’s growth, with audience participation reaching unprecedented levels and serving as a testament to its cultural impact.

The program continues to expand annually, both in scope and diversity, incorporating poetry readings, performances, artistic installations, and socially engaged projects. Additionally, each edition features a tribute to a selected town or region, from which poets are invited to participate. Since 2020, the festival has increasingly emphasized European cultural exchange, spotlighting poets and literary traditions from various countries. Thus, for example, in 2021, the country in focus was Slovenia. In recent years, the Thessalian Poetry Festival has hosted international poets such as, Denis Škofič (Slovenia), Grug Muse (Wales), Tatiana Faia (Portugal), Ana Svetel (Slovenia), Metin Cengiz (Turkey), Marko Pogačar (Croatia), Alicia Stallings (USA).

### **2. DEO Projects**

#### **A Contemporary Art Platform on the Island of Chios**

Established in 2021, DEO Projects is a registered non-profit cultural organization based on the island of Chios, Greece. As the sole

institution dedicated to contemporary art on the island, DEO Projects occupies a unique position within the regional cultural landscape.

The organization offers a multifaceted program that includes solo and group exhibitions, artist residencies, public art commissions, educational initiatives, and interdisciplinary collaborations. These activities are conducted in partnership with a range of public and private entities, including historical monuments, local museums, cultural associations, and non-institutional venues. Through this approach, DEO Projects fosters engagement with both established and alternative spaces, thereby broadening access to contemporary artistic practices.

DEO Projects' overarching vision is to serve as a platform for transnational artistic dialogue while contributing to the development of the island's cultural infrastructure. Its long-term objective is to position Chios as a leading summer destination for contemporary art within the European context.

The thematic and conceptual orientation of DEO's programming draws upon the island's complex historical, maritime, commercial, and sociocultural heritage. This contextual grounding has enabled the organization to attract a diverse audience, including both local residents and international visitors.

All DEO Projects' programs and events are offered free of charge and are open to the public, in alignment with the organization's commitment to accessibility and cultural inclusivity.

Since 2021, they have organized and presented a diverse range of exhibitions, performances and events. Thus, between them are the following:

- In summer 2024 they organized the exhibition *My Dreams Were Dashed Against Your Walls* which is DEO's first public art exhibition and was presented in collaboration with the community of Vessa, a medieval village on the island of Chios. Eight international artists transform the entire settlement into a site-specific, contemporary art experience through large-scale installations and multimedia works.

Set against the backdrop of global uncertainty, the exhibition invites introspection through the village's labyrinthine alleys, ruined walls, and evocative architecture. The works explore themes of loss, memory, love, abandonment, and resilience—mirroring the stillness of Vessa and the emotional landscapes of its visitors.

A newly commissioned video by the Oral History Group of Chios features local testimonies, offering a living archive of the village's social fabric. The exhibition is accompanied by a public program of talks, workshops, walks, and educational activities, fostering dialogue between contemporary art and community heritage.

- In summer 2023 DEO Projects in collaboration with Chios Ephorate of Antiquities presented *My Past is a Foreign Country*, across two historical Ottoman-era monuments within Chios Castle: the Temenos Hamidiye and the Ottoman Baths. Featuring twelve artists from Greece, Turkey, Lebanon, Iran, and Cyprus, the exhibition explored the island's layered histories, borderland cultures, collective traumas, and practices of healing (iasis).

Eight artists were commissioned to create site-specific works inspired by the monuments' past and the shared histories of the Eastern Mediterranean. Through a variety of media—sculpture, painting, textiles, ceramics, installation, and photography—the exhibition fosters cross-cultural dialogue and solidarity, while reflecting on memory, displacement, and resilience.

Referencing both historical and recent seismic events, including the 1881 Chios earthquake and the 2023 earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, the exhibition draws parallels between natural disasters and their human impact. It also acknowledges the monuments' roles as sanctuaries during the Asia Minor refugee crisis, connecting past and present patterns of migration in the region.

Ultimately, *My Past is a Foreign Country* offered a space for reflection on shared histories and the enduring strength of communities across borders.

- In summer 2022 A Public Sculpture–Video Projection on Vigla of Pachi was featured. For the first time, the stone structure of the historic watchtower at Vigla of Pachi was activated as a contemporary artwork. In this site-specific intervention, Serapis Maritime presented a video projection commissioned by DEO Projects, transforming the tower into a sculptural surface for artistic expression.

The video featured slow-motion imagery of fire and smoke, evoking the tower's medieval function as an optical telegraph that used smoke signals to convey messages of warning, urgency, or coordination. These elemental visuals—ephemeral yet charged—carry layered meanings, oscillating between alert and reflection, danger and rescue, destruction and endurance.

Engaging with themes of trauma, entrapment, and survival, the work invites contemplation on the dual nature of fire and smoke as both protective and perilous. Through this gesture, Serapis Maritime the art collective of the project's creators, draws connections between the coastal landscape of Chios and broader maritime narratives, particularly the inherent risks and existential uncertainties associated with the sea.

Among the artists whose works have been featured since 2021 are: Ahmet Doğu Ipek, Andreas Lolis, Francis Offman, Malvina Panagiotidi, Georgia Sagri, Hera Büyüktaşçıyan, Stelios Faitakis, Nikomachi Karakostanoglou, Avish Khebrehzadeh, Maro Michalakakos, Petros Moris.

## Results and Discussion

### Community Engagement and Cultural Impact

The impact of the Thessalian Poetry Festival and DEO Projects on their respective communities reveals several key outcomes aligned with the goals of cultural decentralization, community empowerment, and identity reinforcement.

#### 1. Revitalization of Local Cultural Life:

In Thessaly, the Poetry Festival has significantly contributed to the literary and artistic ecosystem. By rotating its events among Larissa, Volos, Trikala, and Karditsa, it decentralizes access to culture, encourages intercity collaboration, and supports the emergence of new poetic voices. Participation from schools, local artists, and cultural institutions indicates a growing local audience actively engaging with contemporary poetry.

In Chios, DEO Projects has catalyzed cultural activity in a region with limited contemporary art infrastructure. By using historical sites and villages as exhibition venues, it reclaims underutilized spaces and recontextualizes local heritage through artistic practices. Community involvement—through guided tours, workshops, and oral history projects—has been central to building a sense of ownership and long-term cultural engagement.

#### 2. Social Inclusion and Education:

Both festivals have prioritized accessibility. Events are free and intentionally inclusive, offering programs for children, adults, and marginalized groups. In Chios, DEO's exhibitions incorporated testimonies from residents and public education programs, thus fostering intergenerational and intercultural dialogue. In Thessaly, open mic events and school visits strengthen literary literacy and participation across age groups.

#### 3. Cultural Identity and Pride:

By integrating local narratives, both initiatives reinforce a distinct cultural identity and challenge homogenized portrayals of Greece. In doing so, they foster pride in regional culture, activate collective memory, and create a sense of shared cultural ownership beyond the logic of tourism.

## Conclusion

The Thessalian Poetry Festival and DEO Projects exemplify how art initiatives in non-touristic, peripheral regions of Greece can serve as powerful tools for cultural revitalization, community engagement, and social inclusion. Moving beyond the economically driven logic of mass tourism, both festivals foster a model of cultural development rooted in local participation, co-creation, and place-based storytelling.

In Thessaly, the long-standing presence of the Poetry Festival has built a resilient cultural network that brings poetry into everyday life and reaffirms the value of literary expression within smaller urban and rural communities. Its itinerant nature across the region ensures that no single city monopolizes the benefits, promoting regional equity in cultural access.

On the island of Chios, DEO Projects has activated a new cultural identity that aligns contemporary art practices with local histories, oral traditions, and collective memory. By integrating residents into its curatorial and educational programming, DEO has successfully transformed remote villages and historical monuments into vibrant spaces of dialogue and artistic exploration.

Both festivals illustrate that cultural production in Greece can thrive outside metropolitan centers and typical tourist circuits when rooted in community and supported by inclusive programming. They reveal the potential of festivals not only as cultural spectacles but also as sustained, socially engaged processes that empower communities, nurture local talent, and foster cultural democracy.

Future cultural policies in Greece would benefit from recognizing and supporting such grassroots and decentralized models of cultural action, especially in regions where public cultural infrastructure is limited or absent.

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