



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of documenta 14 on the occasion of
his visit to the Hellenic Republic
on 8 April 2017
in Athens/Greece**

Workers' rights are being discussed in a former silk factory, Greek film-makers are getting to grips with the complexity of life in a country of crisis, theatres are putting on meditations on human suffering, a sound artist is creating the sound of hunger – the documenta has never been within politicians' comfort zone. This was not the case when the first documenta took place in Kassel in 1955, ten years after the end of the war and actually sought, at long last, to free contemporary art from the shackles of politics. And it will not be the case now in Athens. At any rate, I have considerable doubts as to whether the art world has gathered here to pay homage to politicians. This is not what it is there for either.

"Learning from Athens" – the working title of this documenta – is an excellent, initially perplexing, and, for some, even a provocative tag line. And yet, not so long ago, this appeal would have been considered rather banal than provocative; studying philosophy, poetry or art without a knowledge of ancient Greek was virtually unthinkable at the time. Everyone knew that, of course, we learn from Athens, the cradle of our European culture. However, this documenta focuses on the present, on the political and economic divides between us that – such is my understanding of this message – we must overcome.

Adam Szymczyk, documenta's artistic director, promises us a "significant and exciting learning process" in an exhibition that attempts to comprehend the world around us. This process is significant and exciting because it emerges from a dialogue of perspectives, because we should perceive the world from different angles, should see it both with and through the eyes of the other. I am delighted that we will be commencing this extremely vital dialogue with the opening of documenta 14 in Athens. Allow me to express my gratitude to the makers of this exhibition and to our hosts today.

Seeking to make sense of the world in this way is something that both art and the political realm have in common – when we encounter one another as democrats, that is. Criticism and the ability to handle criticism are also basic preconditions of democracy. The change of perspectives in arguments and counter-arguments is reflected by the – ancient Greek – origin of the word “criticism”, an English translation of which is to “distinguish”. This is, if you will, another legacy of Athens.

Holding an exhibition in two so very different European cities involves adopting the respective other, new perspective, acknowledging the self and the other while at the same time returning to the place where we started this process of learning from each other, of engaging in dialogue and balancing interests as a way of life and form of government. We have, or so it seems to me, already learned a great deal from Athens.

However, the sobering fact of the matter is that we must, time and again, call to mind the lessons we have learned to ensure that they are not forgotten. Democracy is being challenged in many places, including in Europe. It therefore seems to me to be more than appropriate to analyse its current state of health at the place of its birth. In times such as these, we are becoming increasingly aware once again of the fact that, in both art and politics, democracy is not the only model for perceiving and governing the world. Greece has experienced this violent form of seizure and exercise of power in its more recent history. We will be calling to mind the coup of April 1967 in the coming days. It would have been virtually impossible to overcome this phase of isolation were it not for the spirit of resistance displayed by many, especially Greek, artists.

I firmly believe that democracy depends on a perspective which, like that of the owl, documenta’s ubiquitous symbol, encompasses as much as possible and with great depth of focus. Owls can rotate their heads 270 degrees. I do not want to recommend that anyone attempt to try and do just that. However, we can learn, look around us, perceive one another and examine things more closely – this is something that we are quite capable of. And we should indeed do this if we intend to avoid asymmetric, one side relations between our countries.

We should certainly do this more often in Europe. A German attempting to grasp the everyday reality of a Greek person nowadays will appreciate the difficulty of the times that the country is going through. The euro crisis and the economic and social upheavals that have become necessary are a profound watershed in the lives of many Greeks. On top of this, the refugee crisis is making great demands of Greece; the war in Syria, the crises in Turkey and the Middle East – all of this is happening in Greece’s immediate neighbourhood.

A Greek person, on the other hand, seeking to adopt the perspective of his or her neighbours in the European Union knows that the stance adopted by the country's partners is by no means characterised by coldness and hard-heartedness, but that Greece has enjoyed a great deal of solidarity from the community and – I wish to underscore this point – must continue to enjoy this solidarity.

Europe, and this means all of us, must master the art of changing perspectives. A democratic, united Europe must lose sight neither of its individual member states nor of its appreciation of the big picture. We will only be able to learn from each other if our perspective does not constantly seek to confirm our own prejudice, but remains genuine, open and curious.

The conditions for "learning from each other", however, are different in the political domain from those in the art world. Adam Szymczyk has told us that this learning process is not about results – that it is an open-ended process. That essentially goes for democracy as well. However, politicians must keep on reaching decisions in the course of this process. In order to do this, they must fall back on their experiences, or indeed the lessons they have learned. They must sharpen their judgement. While they become wiser when they do this, it does not make them infallible. Even when politicians take decisions to the best of their knowledge and belief, the consequences of their actions are not always clearly foreseeable from the outset.

It would be wonderful if the European Union were able to fly noiselessly and effortlessly along like an owl. But the EU is not a perfectly formed organism. I am still convinced that it is capable of learning, though. To quote this year's Charlemagne Prize Laureate, Timothy Garton Ash: "The European Union is the worst possible Europe, apart from all the other Europes that have been tried from time to time." Reading between the lines of this very British pronouncement, the Europe of the European Union is the best Europe that we have ever had.

We Germans, at any rate, want this Europe. We want it to be a Europe of 27. We want to invest in the future of this Europe. This document challenges our imagination. However, I also wish to say that I cannot nor do I wish to imagine our community without Greece. Our future should and will be a shared one.