



3rd Athens Biennale: Monodrome

various venues 23 October to 11 December

3rd Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art: Old Intersections – Make it New

various venues 18 September to 18 December

If intercity rivalry and stubbornness seem to account for the existence of two biennales in Greece since 2007, only great enthusiasm and tenacity can explain how both the Thessaloniki and Athens Biennales were able to take place in this year of major financial crisis. Funded by the Greek government and the European Union as the first of a biennale trilogy dedicated to the Mediterranean region, this year's Thessaloniki Biennale was apparently conceived and installed in around six months, relying on the goodwill of unpaid staff and contractors until the bulk of the funding was released a few weeks before the opening. The privately funded Athens exhibition, for its part the last instalment in a trilogy started in 2007, offers a lesson in how to put on a biennale on a shoestring: choose very few venues, use found objects and archival documents creatively, do not publish a catalogue, rely almost entirely on volunteers and gifts in kind, and focus on a programme of performances and talks, to be arranged as you go along (I was invited to give a lecture at less than four weeks' notice when the team found out I was going to be visiting the Biennale). Both exhibitions certainly stand as remarkable testimonies to the resilience of art in the face of adversity, while also giving Greeks a chance to counter a largely negative international media coverage by shaping their own national image. With the Biennale's title, 'Monodrome' – a bizarre hellenisation of Walter Benjamin's *One-Way Street* – the Athens team (including guest curator Nicolas Bourriaud) seems to have been referring less to a dead-end than to a general lack of options. In conversation, co-curator Poka-Yio mentioned in particular the chorus – coming from the European Union, the IMF and the Greek government – that there is only one way out. Limited possibilities were also on the minds of the Thessaloniki curators, who titled their main Biennale exhibition 'A Rock and a Hard Place'. It is precisely between a rock and a hard place that the one-way street seems to run in Greece right now, heralding the fate that may yet await other countries.

Beyond the inclusion of the recently deceased Vaslis Caniaris, whose work captures the pathos of modern Greece's history, the two biennales appear to have little in common. The staging of

Caniaris's work in a Byzantine fortress, used from the 1930s to the 70s to hold political prisoners, counts among the successful additions to this year's Thessaloniki Biennale, in which each venue has a different character, though none quite as dramatic as this former jail. In contrast, the Athens Biennale is largely concentrated in one building: a vast, abandoned arts and crafts school in Psyrri, a neighbourhood still considered to be dangerous by many Athenians. The curators kept the building as they found it, including broken walls and boarded windows, graffiti and used blackboards, down to dead pigeons left untouched, under glass bells, on the floor. The school bears the traces of turmoil and desolation as well as invoking the promise of order and education in 20th-century Greece. At times, we visitors are children learning to read Aesop's fables or to look at playful, colourful floor constructions by Rallou Panagiotou; at other times we struggle to make sense of barely legible slogans (by Matias Faldbakken), of a sea of phone numbers that Rena Papaspyrou copied from and added to the wall, or of a room full of defunct desks retrieved from the Greek army by the Under Construction collective, at great bureaucratic expense.

Everywhere we turn ancient history seems inescapable, whether in the display of plans for the first Acropolis museum, the marketing of Greece as a tourist and business destination in 1960s and 70s publicity posters, or the plaster casts used by fine art students. In one room, busts and statues frame footage of victories at the 2004 Olympic games in Athens, in the company of Tracey Moffat's series of photographs of disappointed athletes as they each just realise that they have come fourth in one of the 2000 Olympic competitions in Sydney. On the floor, Andreas Lolis's cardboard box cast in marble lies next to Jimmie Durham's assemblage of a cart, which bears a shoebox to collect money and the head of a classical sculpture about to be clashed by cymbals. As forlorn mannequins limply show off their Pierre Cardin Olympic Airways uniforms in the room nearby, the rise of the national airline appears as precarious as the tightrope-walking Philippe Petit shown elsewhere in the building.

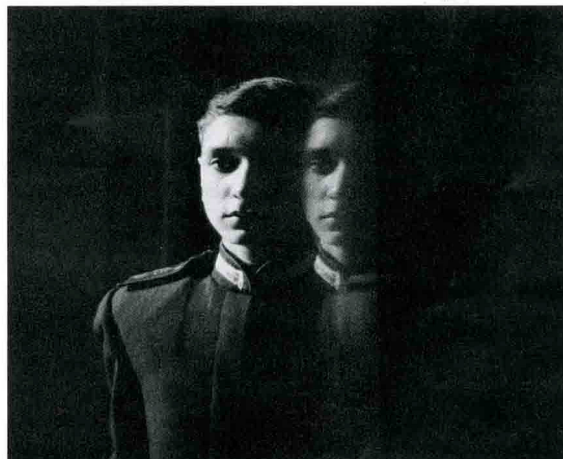
The late 19th-century satirical drawings displayed early in the exhibition remind us, however, that Greece was in debt from the moment of its independence. Only this sense of absurdity can relieve the melancholy of the exhibition, through references to Beckett and Ionesco, the deadpan humour of Josef Dabernig, Julien Prévieux's entertaining 'non-motivation' letters in response to job listings, or Norman Leto's funny decoding of the computer-generated 'life-shapes' of mediocre family members and successful celebrities.

While absurdity is also present in 'A Rock and a Hard Place', no work or object at the Thessaloniki Biennale appears as wistful as in Athens' emotionally charged 'Monodrome'. One of the Thessaloniki curators, Marina Fokidis, explained to me that her team had sought above all to avoid turning the crisis into a marketing brand; resisting the temptation of nostalgia or melancholy was clearly a key part of this strategy. The Biennale's exhibition design certainly frustrates any clichéd tourist experience of the city atmosphere, as unapologetic white-cube structures frame the works in almost every venue. Whereas a Benjaminian celebration of the significant fragment drives the Athens Biennale, 'A Rock and a Hard Place' seems to have been conceived as a kaleidoscope. In Athens, the Acropolis is a constant reminder of a grand and overbearing past; in Thessaloniki, the city's multicultural history still appears forgotten, in need of rediscovery and reassessment. The Casa Bianca offers an elegant salon for cosmopolitan conversations among painters and poets, through surrealist dreamscapes and fanciful illustrations by

artists ranging from Andreas Embirikos to Christina Solou or William Kentridge. Light and spirits are central themes at the intriguing Yeni Jami, originally built as a synagogue but turned into a mosque. Under the dome hangs Nikolaj BS Larsen's *Ode to the Perished*, 2011, concrete canvas bundles left to solidify over a few months in the Aegean Sea in homage to immigrants who died trying to cross its waters. Before entering Mounira Al Solh's wooden hut we are invited to light a candle in order to see the texts and drawings inside, which allude to Guy Debord's insomnia, the use of electricity for torture and of blackouts for sieges. (Apparently Al Solh also asked for the power to be cut once a week in the venue.)

Meanwhile, an exciting dialogue between contemporary artists and the outstanding Costakis collection of Russian Constructivism at the State Museum of Contemporary Art introduces new connections, from science fiction (Steven C Harvey) to Marxism (Alexander Kluge), from para-utopian sculptures (Kostis Velonis) to the hypnotic spectacle of factory labour (Ali Kazma). Visitors longing to relax at the old baths of the Bey Hamam will be bombarded instead with pamphlets, posters, films and television footage, all produced or collected by artists. Photographs from the Arab Image Foundation resonate with those in Turkish artist Tayfun Sertass's collection of the Turkish Studio Osep on display elsewhere in a Biennale that includes artists from Italy to Morocco, from Palestine to Armenia, with the notable presence of Caucasia in the work of Slavs & Tatars and Thomas Dworzak.

The specific political events and facts of the Mediterranean region to which the three curators allude – not only the international economic crisis but also the 'Arab Spring', the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and debates around immigration – may risk being drowned out, however, by the Biennale's cross-cultural, kaleidoscopic cacophony. A good test-case perhaps remains Francis Alÿs's *Green Line*, 2005, which is exhibited at the Contemporary Art Centre along with photographs by Ahlam Shibli, a short video by Christoph Büchel and an article by Rasheed Araeen. In comparison with other works in the Biennale as a whole, Alÿs's work feels at once more politically earnest and more removed from the reality of its subject-matter, as he stands in for white European and US viewers, tentatively and naively trying to understand the changing world around them. After my lecture in Athens, I was asked whether practices such as Alÿs's were still relevant in today's context of emergency. In their very different ways, the two Greek biennales are keeping this burning question alive: what, indeed, is the role of art in a state of crisis? ■



Matias Faldbakken
Untitled (Young is better than old) 2008

Thomas Dworzak
Graduation ceremony in the Novotsherkassk Cossack cadet corps 1997

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Art Monthly

4th Floor
 28 Charing Cross Road
 London WC2H 0DB
 United Kingdom

Telephone

020 7240 0389

Advertising

020 7240 0418

Fax

020 7497 0726

info@artmonthly.co.uk

www.artmonthly.co.uk

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Editor

Patricia Bickers

Associate Editor

David Barrett

Managing Editor

Brendan Fan

Editorial Assistant

Chris McCormack

Listings

Christopher Rawcliffe

listings@artmonthly.co.uk

Advertising

Matt Hale

Christopher Rawcliffe

ads@artmonthly.co.uk

Subscriptions/Distribution

Hannah Sharpe

subs@artmonthly.co.uk

Production

Leah Mooring

Proofreader

Penny Williams

Indexer

Penny Butler

Publisher

Jack Wendler

Design

Beverley Jackson