

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

THESSALONIKI, GREECE

3rd Thessaloniki Biennale

VARIOUS VENUES

The main program of the Third Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art, which is titled “A Rock and a Hard Place,” focuses on the Mediterranean and on the Arab world in an attempt to designate Thessaloniki as a “cultural crossroads,” in accordance with the development of a new profile for the city by the Hellenic ministry of culture and tourism and local authorities. The biennial has therefore been expanded to cross the city not only in terms of space but also time: The intention of the curators Paolo Colombo, Mahita el Bacha Urieta, and Marina Fokidis is to relate contemporary art to the history of the city by creating a path between contemporary art spaces, local museums, and historical monuments—a narrative interweaving ancient, Byzantine, and Ottoman eras with modernism and contemporary culture. This approach to the past is reflected in the overarching title “Old Intersections—Make it New,” which will also be used for the next two Thessaloniki Biennales.



Nikolaj Larsen, *Ode to the Perished*, 2011.
Concrete Canvas,
dimensions variable.
From the 3rd
Thessaloniki Biennale.

Thus Casa Bianca, an early twentieth-century Italian-Jewish merchant's house, hosts an exhibition that focuses on the relation between literature and art, with an homage to the Italian artist and writer Alberto Savinio and works such as Manfredi Beninati's uncanny installation *Houselife*, 2011, as well as William Kentridge's animated film *Zeno Writing*, 2002. Questions of identity are addressed by works in the Ottoman mosque and hospice Alatza Imaret; the current situation of economic crisis, social unrest, and political change in Arab and Mediterranean countries is addressed in several politically oriented works in other venues. For example, the Yeni Djami mosque contains Nikolaj Larsen's *Ode to the Perished*, 2011, an installation about the tragic journeys of immigrants; the Turkish bathhouse Bey Hamam features a presentation of archives concerning older and recent conflicts and insurrections in the region; and the Contemporary Art Center of Thessaloniki features such works as Rasheed Araeen's proposal for a *Union of Mediterranean Countries*, 2005, and Francis Alÿs's performance in Jerusalem, *The Green Line (Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic)*, 2005. Meanwhile, Olaf Nicolai's music project *Escalier du Chant*, 2011, which includes songs by twelve composers reflecting on contemporary political events, is presented at each Biennale venue, acting as a unifying motif. An exhibition at the Archaeological Museum emphasizes the large Jewish population that once

existed in Thessaloniki, while historical moments of Arab culture are presented in the Museum of Byzantine Culture and the Teloglion Foundation of Art.

The phrase “between a rock and a hard place” sums up the extremely difficult political and economic situation in which Greece finds itself. But the curators claim that the title deliberately leaves out *between* in order to avoid pessimism, and to establish the framework of today's dilemmas without taking sides. This detached perspective is unwittingly revealed at the State Museum of Contemporary Art, where militant works from the museum's Costakis Collection of Russian avant-garde art are shown in parallel with contemporary works. The revelation here is that the earlier artists predominantly aimed to participate in the construction of a new society, while today's merely observe what is happening. Indeed, much of the biennial touches rather superficially on the burning issues in the region, where, for example, a considerable number of people working in the exhibition's organizing institutions are now facing dismissal. The biennial, in fact, tends to ignore local conditions for the sake of addressing prospective tourists and investors from abroad. *While Guy Debord Sleeps*, 2011, by Mounira Al Solh, is a large wooden box containing drawings about the history of electricity use and the recent power cuts in the eastern Mediterranean; the drawings are illuminated only by candlelight. On September 27, the Greek government passed a law that imposes a property tax that will be paid via electricity bills; owners who cannot afford to pay the tax will have their power cut off. Thessaloniki, for all its cultural crossroads, may itself soon be added to Al Solh's list of places without electricity.

—Louisa Avgita