

Crisis Center

THESSALONIKI, GREECE 09.26.11



Left: Arsen Kalfayan and Yuli Karatsiki of the Kalfayan Galleries in Athens and Thessaloniki. Right: Thessaloniki Biennial co-curator Marina Fokidis. (All photos: Kaelen Wilson-Goldie)

“YOU GET A STRANGE IMPRESSION of a city when you arrive and everything is closed because it's Sunday,” mused Sueyun Locks, art patron and owner of the Locks Gallery in Philadelphia. A parade of shuttered storefronts on the streets of Thessaloniki passed by the windows of a shuttle bus bringing Locks and a half dozen other people to the opening of the city's third biennale on September 18. “Due to the crisis, everything will be closed on Monday as well. Just so you don't have the wrong impression,” said Margarita Pournara, a tough-nosed critic from an Athens newspaper, an edge of steely humor in her voice.

The weight of the Greek debt crisis looms over this edition of the biennale like a boulder. According to a local paper, Thessaloniki's State Museum of Contemporary Art, which has been organizing the event since it began in 2007, had received less than 2 percent of its one million euro budget as of September 1. On Saturday, after the Greek government passed another round of austerity measures, almost everyone in the city went on strike, “including the police,” said Melina Melikidou, who was hired by the museum as a secretary on a temporary contract but was doing, by my estimation, three higher-level jobs for the biennale at once. On Friday, a small business owner in his fifties, up to his eyeballs in loan payments, doused himself in gasoline and set himself on fire on a sidewalk in front of a Thessaloniki bank. (He survived, as did his debt.) Suicide rates in Greece have doubled since the crisis began.

To stage an ambitious, expansive, over-the-top biennale in such circumstances—twelve venues for the main exhibition, six shows for the parallel program, a performance festival, a symposium, and an international workshop for young and emerging artists—seems incongruous at best. But the curators Paolo Colombo, Mahita El Bacha Urieta, and Marina Fokidis did their best to double back on the crisis, embracing it as a core concern and placing it amid a confluence of current events, including the recent uprisings in the Arab world and Palestine's bid for statehood at the United Nations. “This is a crisis that is affecting the whole world,” said Fokidis. “It may be more extreme in Greece, but it's becoming the new normal everywhere.”



Left: Artist Kasia Korczak of Slavs and Tatars. Right: Artist Angelo Pissas and architect Andreas Angelidakis.

Aptly titled “A Rock and a Hard Place,” the main program of the current biennale lends substance to the idea of being stuck by taking the city itself as a metaphor, and delving into its history, memory, and lived experience. The fact that the biennale is part of a wider initiative exploring Thessaloniki's links to the broader Mediterranean region and Middle East accounts for the heavy participation of artists from (and artworks about) the Arab world.

“Thessaloniki has always been a crossroads, but it's been underestimated how powerful this cultural element can be,” said Yuli Karatsiki, who manages the Athens branch of the Kalfayan Galleries. The brothers Arsen and Roupen Kalfayan opened their first gallery in Thessaloniki in 1997. The space in Athens followed three years later. They are one of the few Greek galleries to work seriously with Arab and Middle Eastern artists, and as Arsen tells it, they've been chipping away at Thessaloniki's culture brokers, urging them to look not only to Europe but also to regions east and south. “As Armenians, our