

past is all over the Middle East," he said. "But the Greeks, too, are all over Egypt, Syria, Lebanon. In terms of mentality, we are not very far. In fact, we are very close."

Assigned to the bus—that irritating accessory of the archetypal press tour—our group had little time to linger on cultural differences. On Sunday afternoon, we hit the exhibitions at Casa Bianca (an elaborate old mansion typical of Thessaloniki's early twentieth-century urban elite), where Colombo had assembled a quiet show of art inspired by literature, and Yeni Djami (an architectural amalgamation of a mosque originally built for converted Jews), where El Bacha Urieta had placed new commissions by Mounira Al Solh, Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen, and Naoko Takahashi alongside older works by Marwan Sahmarani and Moataz Nasr.



Left: Artist Olaf Nicolai. Right: Syrago Tsiara, director of the Contemporary Art Center of Thessaloniki.

Next up was the Eptapyrgio, a chillingly intact Ottoman prison, used as a torture chamber through the 1970s by the Greek military junta. A sculpture by Vlassis Caniaris seemed to keep watch from a high tower as we scampered into a courtyard to hear Olaf Nicolai's mesmerizing *Escalier du Chant*. Adapted for Thessaloniki from an ongoing project at the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich, *Escalier du Chant* is, to date, a collection of fifty songs written by twelve contemporary composers in response to current political events. "Some are abstract," said Nicolai, "some are extremely concrete." A soprano stepped into the prison yard to perform "The Ballad of Bradley Manning," a fitful, scat-like piece by Elliott Sharpe that shuddered through her body like a seizure.

Later that evening, at the State Museum, where the biennale was beautifully woven into George Costakis's extraordinary collection of Russian avant-garde art, three women began looping slow circles around an exhibition gallery, following the movements of listless viewers while singing another piece from *Escalier du Chant*, Mika Vainio's plaintive and mournful "Purex." In a biennale that felt both urgent and enervating, scattershot and shambolic, those three voices, sounding out clear, sorrowful notes according to rhythms that never quite coalesced, cut through the chafe and chatter of the event.

But by then the bus was waiting, and so off we went to another decommissioned mosque, Alatzá Imaret, where I flopped down on a plush couch with a brood of small children to watch Ryan Trecartin's grating video, *I-Be Area*. Trecartin seemed entirely age-appropriate for the audience. Penelope Georgiou's *Petunia*, screening in the room next door, with its grainy black-and-white sequence of a rollicking threesome, rather less. The kids giggled and guffawed and elbowed each other in the ribs until a name-tagged biennale volunteer came in, uttered a few sharp words in Greek, and marched them back to their parents. The night wound down with everyone played out on a carpeted platform by Slavs and Tatars, flipping through the group's reissue of the magazine *Molla Nasreddin*, and fiddling with their HELP THE MILITIA—BEAT YOURSELF UP wristbands.



Left: MACBA curator and Documenta 13 agent Chus Martínez. Right: Alexandra Athanasiadou and Vangelis Ioakimidis of the Museum of Photography Thessaloniki.

On Monday, I ditched the bus to visit the Museum of Photography and the Contemporary Art Center, both located in warehouses on Thessaloniki's port, which is currently enlivened by Angelo Plessas's wi-fi hot spot as public sculpture, *Monument to Internet Hookups*. Catching up with Plessas later, at the Telloglion Foundation of Art, he introduced me to Andreas Angelidakis, who did all of the sensitive architectural incisions into the biennale's historically heavy venues. "He's my boyfriend!" Plessas declared. "We live together in Athens. We met online! That's why I did the piece." Endearing to know there's still love in the ruins of financial collapse.

On that note, we bussed it over to the Archaeological Museum, where Fokidis was introducing the curator Chus Martínez, who in turn, was introducing Documenta 13's ongoing notebook project. Martínez gave a fiercely articulate talk on Borges and the logic of inquiry, enigma, and fulfillment, and then addressed the state of perennial exhibitions in the present. "We are in a totally different situation now. The world is in some kind of revolution. We want a solution and we want to get out. These are not questions anymore. These are fucking problems. We want fulfillment now. We don't want to be in crisis. We don't want to be in collapse." And with that, I left, a song still ringing in my ears.

— Kaelen Wilson-Goldie



Left: Angelo Plessas's *Monument to Internet Hookups*. Right: Singer Elena Krasaki.