

AGENDA LEBANON

ART

‘Collective Show’
Janine Rubeiz Gallery, General De Gaulle Avenue, Raouche
Oct. 8-31
01-868-290
This exhibition features works from 25 regional artists, showing their awareness and representations of the political issues that are modifying our societies.

‘The Person Within’
Ayyam Gallery, Beirut Tower, Zeitoune Street, Downtown
Until Oct. 15
01-374-450 / 70-535-301
Jordanian artist Asma Fayouni exhibits her collection of expressionist paintings all addressing the theme of motherhood.

‘Toxicity’
Espace Kettaneh-Kunigk, Gefinor Center, Clemenceau
Until Oct. 8
01-738-706
“Toxicity” features photographs and sculptures by Lebanese artist Nancy Debs Hadad.

‘Of Others’
The Venue, Beirut Souks, Downtown
Oct. 7-23
01-390-004
Lebanese artist Katya Traboulsi presents her art show and new book on the importance of the Other. She collaborated with 74 international artistic figures.

‘Avant-Premiere’
Alice Mogabgab Gallery, Ashrafieh Street, Karam Building, Ashrafieh
Until Oct. 21
03-210-424
This show gathers recent acquisitions from Lebanese artists Rima Amyuni, Fadia Haddad and photographer Roger Moukarzel, to name just a few.

FILM

‘The Exterminating Angel’
Metropolis Cinema Sofil, Ashrafieh
Sept. 29, 8 p.m.
01-204-080
The retrospective on Spanish filmmaker Luis Bunuel continues with his 1962 dramatic comedy on guests unable to leave an upper-class dinner party. With French subtitles.

‘Brasil-Liban Movie Nights’
Brasil-Liban Cultural Center, Mar Mitr Street, Ashrafieh
Until Oct. 26
01-322-905
Familiarize with the Brazilian culture every Wednesday with films in Portuguese. Entrance is free. All have English subtitles.

MUSIC

Force
DRM, Souraty Street, Hamra
Sept. 29, 8 p.m.
01-752-202
Lebanese band Force will fill the venue with their jazz and rock fusion.

‘Beirut Jazz Festival’
Beirut Central District
Sept. 30 to Oct. 8
03-616-316 / 01-999-666 for ticketing
Performances by the Rabih Abou Khalil Group, Philippe el-Hage Quintet, Cuban pianist Chucho Valdes and American jazz musician Marcus Miller.

Ycare
Sporting Club, near Al-Manara stadium, Raouche
Oct. 1, 9 p.m.
01-742-481
Franco-Lebanese artist Ycare presents his compositions from his latest album “Black Light.”

JUST A THOUGHT

We believe that electricity exists, because the electric company keeps sending us bills for it, but we cannot figure out how it travels inside wires.

Dave Barry (1947-) American author and columnist

REVIEW

Art of the cut or the art of power cuts

Palestine’s bid for statehood, Arab uprisings, Euro debt crisis, in 3rd Thessaloniki Biennale

By Kaelen Wilson-Goldie
Special to The Daily Star

THESSALONIKI, Greece: Nothing determines the rhythms of daily life in Beirut as dependably as the power cut. For three hours every day, the lights go out according to a rolling rationing schedule. Rich or poor, idle or industrious, easygoing or annoyed, you learn to live with, and work around, the cut.

In a city of such palpable excess, unconscionable corruption, miserable planning and reckless waste, it may be ridiculous and infuriating to plan your days around power shortages. Outside Beirut, it’s worse. The cut lasts not three hours but 12, which feeds a lucrative grey economy in the supply of illegal electricity, and leads to much prevaricating in front of the fuse box (with only so many amperes from your neighborhood generator, you choose your appliances carefully).

Perhaps it was inevitable that a mischievous and mercurial artist would eventually take up the cut as the substance and metaphor of an artwork. When the curators of the main program of this year’s Thessaloniki Biennale asked Mounira al-Solh to create a new work for their exhibition, she decided to share the pain that she and her fellow Beirutis know so well.

Solh’s piece, a roughhewn installation entitled “While Guy Debord Sleeps,” is essentially a power cut with props. Following the artist’s instructions, the electricity flowing into Yeni Djami – an Ottoman-era mosque built in 1902 for a community of converted Jews – is being cut on a set schedule, albeit once a week instead of once a day.

The blackout forces viewers to light candles in order to see her work, a large wooden box kitted out with documents, texts and objects that speak of resource scarcity, political unrest and financial mismanagement in the Mediterranean region.

Scanning the walls of her enclosed room with nothing but a flickering flame, the work makes a number of fanciful, philosophical leaps – from the over-the-top spectacle of biennial events to Guy Debord’s reputed insomnia to the fact that, while it would seem to make sense to nap through power cuts, they in fact cause sleepless anxiety.

Power cuts are torture, Solh writes in one of her texts, at which point she launches into considerations of how electricity has been used to extract confessions from political prisoners, to cut off protesting towns and villages over the last six months in Syria, to deprive and demoralize and push people toward despair.

Squeezed between the Balkans and the Aegean, Thessaloniki is a port city

and a university town, which is laid out along wide avenues running parallel to the sea, like Alexandria’s long lost, upper Mediterranean twin.

Once home to a multitude of communities – Muslim, Jewish, Greek Orthodox – it was destroyed by fire in 1917 (according to the local lore, a woman frying eggplant in the hills set her kitchen, her house and the city aflame by accident when the oil jumped from the pan). Two years after that, Thessaloniki became the site of brutal “population transfers” between Turkey and Greece.

These days, the city is more monolithically Greek but, thanks to an assortment of municipal, regional and European funds (all pledged well before the Greek debt crisis began), Thessaloniki is now in the midst of a yearlong exploration of its knotted historical roots, and its fragmented relationship to the Middle East.

The current edition of the Thessaloniki Biennale – the third since the event’s founding in 2007 – bears the overarching, grammatically challenged title “Old Intersections – Make It New.”

As part of a wider effort to consider the city’s affinity to the broader Mediterranean region, and in particular the Arab countries to the south and east, the biennale’s main program sets Greece’s current financial calamity in a context that includes the recent uprisings in the Arab world and Palestine’s bid for statehood at the United Nations.

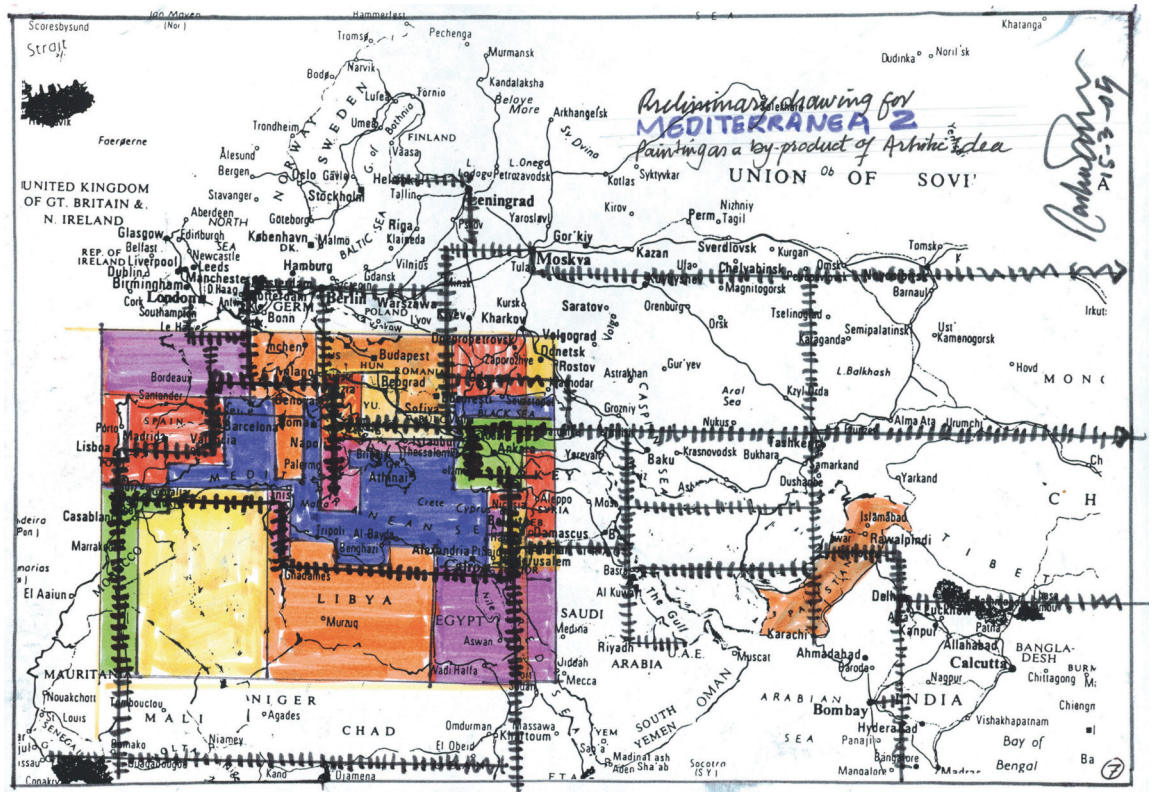
Curated by Paolo Colombo, Mahita el-Bacha Urieta and Marina Fokidis, the main program, aptly titled “A Rock and a Hard Place,” isn’t heavily stacked with new commissions. Solh’s piece is one of only a few. But the exhibition features a number of older works that are effectively mobilized in the present, such as Rasheed Araeen’s “Union of Mediterranean Countries,” Ahlam Shibli’s “Trauma,” and Francis Aliy’s “The Green Line (Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can be poetic),” the playful and probing documentation of a walk along Jerusalem’s green line with a punctured can of green paint.

In the past, dealing with conflicts in the Middle East might have been something of a downer for an exhibition of contemporary art. In the current climate, things have shifted. The aspirations of the Arab Spring offer a way out of crisis and collapse, along with a few lessons in the form of counterrevolutionary struggles and setbacks.

The Thessaloniki Biennale – which slices itself into 12 venues throughout the city, from museums to patrician homes, two former mosques, a hammam and a prison – is not only delving into crisis as a kind of conceptual space, it is also completely shaped by an actual crisis that nearly overwhelms it.

Appointed in February, the curators had only six months to prepare.

As of Sept. 1, Thessaloniki’s State Museum of Contemporary Art, which organizes the biennale, had received less than 2 percent of its allocated 1 million euro budget.



Rasheed Araeen’s “Union of Mediterranean Countries” (2005), highlighting colors on paper, variable dimensions.

“We were working as the financial crisis was unfolding and affecting most people in Greece,” says Mahita el-Bacha Urieta, a Lebanese curator based in Abu Dhabi, noting that both of her colleagues live at least part of the year in Athens.

“Every time I visited there was a strike, which made the crisis even more real to me as I was experiencing its symptoms whenever I was working on the biennale.”

“At one point, there was a shortage of cash flow,” says Paolo Colombo, an Italian curator and adviser for Istanbul Modern. “The budget of the main program was below half a million euros, all included, therefore we were not expecting to swim in gold. All expenses were weighed and considered. But I hope the rawness comes from our curatorial slant.”

“I think what really benefited us in terms of working in a time and space of crisis was that we really did not have the time and were obliged to use our knowledge and make decisions quickly,” adds Fokidis, an independent curator and critic who was born and raised in Thessaloniki. “This was stressful and tiring but also very productive. We had to live the process must faster than normal, which triggered a passionate energy between us and with the city.”

With that exuberance evident all over the exhibition, the residents of Fokidis’ hometown might find Solh’s power cut almost charming, an intimate disruption that literally sheds light on the process of an artist’s thought.

“A Rock and a Hard Place,” the main program of the 3rd Thessaloniki Biennale, runs through Dec. 18. For more information, please see www.thessalonikiennale.gr



From Ahlam Shibli’s “Trauma” series (2008-2009) chromogenic prints, 38cm x 57.7cm.

Art: refuge from toxic assets, and beauty too!

By Chris Vellacott
Reuters

LONDON: At Christie’s auction house in London one evening last July, as art investors bid millions for an 18th-century painting of a horse, the sons and daughters of the capital’s super-rich were going through their paces in a simulated auction.

In an upstairs room in London’s plush St James’s district, around 30 people mostly in their 20s chatted politely in fluent English, their accents Russian, Arabic, South Asian and Chinese. After a three-course dinner of salmon and roast lamb, the program began: A role-play in which teams bid in an imaginary auction for various works of art.

A crew of experts was on hand to advise on the value of the pieces. The bidding gathered pace. Staff took fake phone calls and bid on behalf of “mystery buyers.” A young woman shouted encouragement in Arabic.

One team bid hard, driving prices far higher than the recommended valuations. At the last minute they pulled out, landing rivals with an exorbitant bill. A large plasma screen showed the real-life bidding going on downstairs. George Stubbs’ “Gimcrack on Newmarket Heath” sold for about \$35 million, making it the third most valuable Old Master ever sold at auction.

For the young would-be buyers, the event was one of a series of workshops aimed at grooming them for the responsibilities of inheriting vast wealth. A taster of how to invest in alternatives to stocks and bonds, the session showed how some of their “high net worth” parents are protecting their wealth from the market ructions of the financial crisis.

It went further. It also showed the young investors how they could boost their budgets by offering art in their collections as collateral for loans.

“It’s a way for them to get liquidity out of the art collection to invest back into their business or buy other new business,” said Suzanne Gyorgy, a New York-based art finance manager at Citi’s private banking arm, which organized the event.

Art used to be known as an “investment of passion.” Today for those who can pay, it is a form of haven. Demand for art – along with watches, rare wines, vintage cars, and boats –

expanded in 2010 as the world’s super-rich rebounded from the 2008 financial crisis, according to a report by Capgemini and Merrill Lynch in June.

The Christie’s lesson went beyond using alternative assets to hedge a portfolio. When the players’ budgets ran out, they could borrow against the value of what they already owned.

That’s an increasingly common phenomenon as stock market volatility climbs back toward levels seen after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, financial advisers say. At a time of tight credit for all, more of the world’s wealthy are using such collections to finance property purchases and inject capital into their businesses.

“Typically,” Gyorgy said, “it is a hedge fund manager, private equity manager or entrepreneur who has a private art collection that’s on their wall.”

Interest in setting up such facilities started to spike in summer, in anticipation of market volatility that hit in August, Gyorgy says.

Such deals are limited to the top end of the market, using works valued

above \$1 million. The best terms are offered on Old Masters, pieces by the likes of Thomas Gainsborough or Michaelangelo, as well as impressionists such as Claude Monet.

Another top-end group includes Andy Warhol.

Pierre Valentin, a partner at London-based law firm Withers, specializes in commercial transactions involving art, antiques and design. He says more banks are now looking into offering similar services, mainly to open up relationships with a lucrative client base among the newly rich.

Valentin says he was once involved in a \$100 million loan. “Banks tend to prefer fine art, paintings, rather than the decorative art,” he says, “but I’ve been involved in transactions where furniture may be involved, silver or sculptures, even vintage cars.”

The first half of 2011 saw a record 944 artworks sell for more than \$1 million, according to Artprice, a consultant tracking the international art market. The previous record was 735 lots in the first half of 2008.

Prominent super-rich art buyers include U.S. billionaire and hedge fund manager Steve A. Cohen. The London-based billionaire owner of Chelsea football club Roman Abramovich was widely reported to have snapped up paintings by Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon in New York in 2008 for a combined total of \$120 million.

Ronald Lauder, the cosmetics magnate, paid \$135 million for a portrait by Gustav Klimt in 2006, then the highest known price ever paid for a painting. In 2010, a Picasso sold to an anonymous buyer for a world auction record of \$106.5 million, just shading the \$104.3 million paid for a Giacometti statue earlier the same year.

Jussi Pylkkanen, president of Christie’s Europe, has likened the modern collectors of such works to the Medici, the Italian dynasty of merchant bankers-cum-art patrons. The phrase comes from the idea that the great Italian merchants found the best workmen from around the world and brought them to Florence, Venice or Rome to work as court painters.



Employees pose for photographers with Andy Warhol’s 1963 “Silver Liz” portrait of actress Elizabeth Taylor.

Top Iraqi officials quit Islamic capital project

By Hassan Abdul Zahra
Agence France Presse

NAJAF, Iraq: Several senior figures have pulled out of troubled plans for Iraq’s Shiite shrine city of Najaf to become the Islamic Capital of Culture for the Arab world next year.

The deputy governor of Najaf province, the chief of the provincial council and the bloc loyal to radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which is headquartered in Najaf, have all withdrawn from the project, which sees Najaf take over as Islamic Capital of Culture on Jan. 1.

Earlier this year, officials responsible for implementing the plans admitted time was short, several projects were behind schedule and much of a half-billion-dollar budget had been hastily re-allocated.

“There are a number of problems in the spending rules and measures set by the culture ministry and the central government,” said Najaf Deputy Governor Razzaq Sharif, who had been heading the Najaf 2012 media committee.

Sharif said Baghdad authorities had not effectively delegated spending authority to the province, and added unspecified “factions were creating hurdles for the project” but refused to give details.

The Sadrist bloc, meanwhile, pulled out because committees were “unstable” and spending measures were needlessly complicated, said Jawad al-Karawi, a provincial councilor loyal to the radical movement.

Provincial council chief Faad al-Shammari, of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s State of Law alliance, resigned from his post as one of Najaf 2012’s project directors without explanation.

Two other smaller blocs withdrew from the Najaf 2012 preparations earlier this year.

“Despite the withdrawals, the committees are still working well and have not been affected,” insisted Luay al-Yasiri, the deputy head of the Najaf 2012 security committee and another member of Maliki’s bloc.

The Najaf celebrations are part of efforts by Iraq to put the country back on the cultural map.