



INTERNATIONAL EDITION

THE ART NEWSPAPER™

Greece

Thessaloniki Biennale is a tonic for a stricken nation

LONIKI. That the third Thessaloniki Biennale should come at a time when Greece's economy was in a state of symbolic resonance with the Hirst sale at Sotheby's on the day Lehman Brothers went bankrupt.

The art world's shaky financial structure, however, cannot shake so many body blows, and the repeated and increasingly suspect mantra that the "real" economy is, the people will turn to art as an alternative investment.

Yet the Thessaloniki Biennale (until 18 December) proves just what such events can do and contribute in such a way that the real aim of any biennial is to demonstrate the richness and diversity of local life while promoting the role of its host city, bringing together curators, critics, artists and connoisseurs to a pitch-perfect melange of Greek

and international artists, established and emerging names, unusual venues, as well as historical and contemporary work. Even the title of the main programme, "A Rock and a Hard Place", perfectly captured the temporal and geographic sense of emergency.

All this credit must go to the trio of curators: Mahita El Bacha Urieta, Marina Fokidis and Paolo Colombo, united under the leadership of Katerina Koskina, who has managed to secure long-term funding for this event to ensure its continued existence.

“The biennale proved just what such events can achieve in times of crisis”

2,500 years,” as the biennial organisers put it, was clear.

Some biennials prefer to align themselves with big names regardless of their own regional scene, longing to be part of the established status quo rather than making their own mark.

By contrast, Thessaloniki got the balance absolutely right with a pitch-perfect melange of Greek

and international artists, established and emerging names, unusual venues, as well as historical and contemporary work. Even the title of the main programme, "A Rock and a Hard Place", perfectly captured the temporal and geographic sense of emergency.

All this credit must go to the trio of curators: Mahita El Bacha Urieta, Marina Fokidis and Paolo Colombo, united under the leadership of Katerina Koskina, who has managed to secure long-term funding for this event to ensure its continued existence.

The famous Costakis Collection of Russian constructivism (which belongs to the State Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki) was smartly complemented by contemporary artists, including Kostis Velonis and British-born Steve Harvey, who now lives in Athens.

Biennial regular Francis Alÿs was installed on the bay with full

Cavafyian poetics, his Israeli theme echoing in this surprisingly Middle Eastern city. A *bellevue* mansion, Villa Bianca, was given over as a "house for reading" to a tight show of such talents as Alberto Savinio, Manfredo Beninati and Greek writer-artists including Nanos Valaoritis, Yiannoulis Halepas and the extraordinary Andreas Embirikos.

One was able to discover not only the city's past, such as the surviving waterfront tower, but also its recent architecture, most notably the Byzantine Museum designed by Kyriakos Krokos, one of the truly great contemporary museum buildings anywhere. Here, the exhibition, "Byzantium and the Arabs", runs until 31 January 2012. The museum is one of five participating in the biennial, including the Archaeological Museum with a revelatory show on the city's fabled Jewish population and

another devoted to "Crossroads of Greek and Arab Culture" (Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, until January 2012).

This sense of the past, of the city and country's vibrant history across a vast stretch of time remained the bedrock on which rested the contemporary programme: whether an evening watching Solon Lekk mesmerising singer-dancers in the 70s, or the use of an abandoned prison, a mosque for converts and the Bey Hamam venues, these all granted resonance.

The ancient trading history of this fabled port, the long history of its booms and busts, its prosperity and populations in the current crisis seem more human, habitual, and our pleasure in the company of art and artists less guilty altogether sustaining. ■

Adrian Dannatt