

2nd Thessaloniki Biennale, Praxis

Art in Times of Uncertainty

May-September 2009

By Yulia Tikhonova

With the timely title “Praxis: Art in Times of Uncertainty” the 2nd Thessaloniki Biennale that opened this May, set up hopes for art of conscience, that would not only reflect the anxieties of the current moment, but also point out alternatives.

It was a critical appraisal of reality, resistance to authorities and interrogation of the post-colonial legacies that constituted the practice of the seventy-five emerging artists in the exhibition. Leaving behind their native countries of Africa, the Caribbean and Southern Europe the artists fall under condition of ‘temporary rootedness’ leaving their countries of origins for other homes. Similarly, the Biennale’s curators: Gabriela Salgado, Bisi Silva and Syrago Tsiara worked from such diverse locations as London / Latin America, Nigeria and Greece with a strong cluster of artists who attested to politics and cultural variety.

Thessaloniki inaugurated the buzz of the 2009 summer megashows that followed at Athens, Venice and Istanbul. These Biennales overall revealed a state of skepticism and enervating inertia with majority of dull and self-reflexive works – choices of curators-stars, revealing the needlessly difficult, post-conceptual intellectualization of subjects – a recent market favorite. This Biennale was different in its endeavor not to please, but to challenge by taking politics at stake and by distressing formal (multicultural language). Sincerity and its affect divulged the artists grouped in Thessaloniki from their peers in Venice when they spoke of the frontiers, and demarcation zones of the uncertain world, and hence winning the empathy of the viewer.

The biennale theme “Praxis: Art in Times of Uncertainty” felt timely when political and economic crises was on the back of viewers’ mind. The curators proposed an action, free activity, and an attitude that constitutes praxis- a Greek word that has grounded the event’s theme in a local context. In the arts, praxis includes at once: reciprocity between an artist and his medium, collective action, of the artist-viewer interactions and curatorial collaborations. These basics of praxis were personified in the projects of several artistic duos such as Zoe Walker & Neil Bromwich, collectives What is to be done? (Russia), and Indoors (Greece). A Celestial Odyssey, sound work by Walker and Bromwich searched through the dense and turbulent history of Thessaloniki by mixing together interviews with people and evocative music. The work itself is a radio station that housed on the sailing boat covered by the small mirror tiles. Reflecting sunlight the boat sends signals comparable to the Morse code announcing the presence of the work of art in praxis.

The co-curated exhibition was in itself a form of praxis and challenging decision-making and budget-leveling collaboration. Yet each of the women-curators championed their own field. Syrago Tsiara engaged praxis according to its Marxist reading as a radical transformation of the individual and “as a vehicle for political intervention.” Tsara’ catalog essay radiated with fervor and was instigated by the last year’s protests against corruption and economic fiasco in Greece, which shocked this stereotyped Hellenic country with unexpected force. In the past, a homogeneous society - Greeks have not been prepared to receive hundreds and thousands of immigrants. A growing fear of African and Asian jobseekers who

are not easily integrated into Greek society, (predominantly Christian Orthodox), swelled the racial protests. Along the curatorial premise, the praxis of art is an only alternative way to fight today's predicaments.

The humiliation of emigrants was brought up by Danish artist, Jen Haaning. He drove one hundred Albanian pigeons in his car from Tirana, Albania, and released the birds in the central square of Thessaloniki. The Albanian pigeons looked indistinguishable and assimilated easily with local birds: unlike to people. In the center of this work lies the issue of "Albanity" – an identity crises of the thousands of Albanian immigrants wanting to dissipate in the Greek community. For two decades Haaning creates situations for intervention into the troubled local context. Akin to Joseph Beuys' public projects, Haaning's practice is a catalyst for change through doing-together artistic praxis.

Unfortunately, only a handful of viewers gathered for this performance and learned about the social torments of the city. This is because the local audience did not engage with the stakes of contemporary art. The curators envisaged a series of performances during the Biennale opening to offer an opportunity of participation and active viewing. Lillibeth Cuenca-Rasmussen (Philippine/Denmark) who works with video, presented several re-enactments. One, titled Never Mind Pollock, referenced iconic figures, such as Orlan, Schnemann, Ono, and Mendieta, who used their bodies as expressive and painterly tools. Under a bracing soundtrack, the artist moved holding a brush in between her legs. The artist's references of the roles of women in Western art history is her personal commentary to the repressed position of women emigrants.

While Syrago Tsiara was contextualizing praxis, another curator of the Biennale, Bisi Silva has been spotted among the artists discussing their exhibition needs, and solving the issues of installation. Each of the venues - the converted warehouses of Thessaloniki's port, Cold Storage and Pumping Station Buildings, Ottoman period bathhouses, and market area of the Bazaar Hammam presented own challenges for the installation. The low ceilings and brick walls of the main building curtailed the art, but in the white-wall storages the installation was more successful empowering by the subjects of war, and the 'un-veiling' of ideologies in crises. These concerns largely delineate the predicaments of the "South of the World" linking together the continents of the South: America and Africa, which is going through major restructuring and is aiming to re-organize the Eurocentric geographic hierarchy. The exhibition itself aimed to re-position the centers- periphery division by its focus on the artists from the MENA area.

Jens Haaning
Albanian Pigeons, 2009
Intervention



Following intercontinental connections between Latin America, Africa, and Asia Minor, linked by histories of a colonial past, the exhibition models the principal of curating 'south-to-south' (as practiced by Silva). Silva explained: "We have so much in common: with our colonial past, emerging economies and, the still relatively informal nature of our artistic infrastructure and cultural experiences," when recent political and economic alliances were generated within the "Southern Axis" (between India, Africa, and Brazil), the producers of art reflected by making new thematic connections. Curators staged intercontinental exhibitions and artists turned pan-oceanic distances into creative opportunities and thematic endeavors.

The most captivating and puzzling installation were the culled from across the world, the fourteen feet tall humanoid figures in *Kingdom of the Blind* (2008) by UK-born Hew Locke resembled primitive totems or guardians of a cultural graveyard. *Kingdom of the Blind* built of cultural detritus: masks of Buddhist deities, plastic cell phones that accompany corps of Chinese people, gold-plated weaponry, plastic dolls reptiles, flowers and silver chains. The artist was raised in Guyana, and the cultural fusion of this country, which has descendants of African slaves, immigrants from India, China, Europe, and the indigenous Amerindian people, feeds his fascination with a 'bastardised' culture. Echoing Chris Ofilli's shiny canvases, but three-dimensional and twice as big, Locke sculptures display cultural trash. The installation epitomizes the cultural diversity of this exhibition: Fearful and ironic contest to the old-Europe from the South - an upcoming new center of the world.

From the location recently generated a lot of attention, speaks Iranian artist Jinoos Taghizadeh in her series of collages: *Letters I Never Wrote* (2008). The artist printed limited editions of stamps featuring portraits of dissident intellectuals killed during the Chain murders of Iran - the serial disappearances of the 1990s aimed to shut down democratic reforms in the country. On the reverse side of each stamp Taghizadeh wrote notes about the perpetrators of this inquisition: People involved were high-ranking figures in the government. The artist said: "I document this betrayal, not to forget what has befallen us and me". By using double-sided stamps, the artist references confrontation between authorities and intellectuals, censorship and art. Is art able to affect politicians, and resolve the fights? According to the Biennale premise, art is a catalyser of change and an eye opener.

The political, economic and cultural "experiments" that the region of MENA had undergone in the past 40 years was the

theme of the video, *The Third Vision Around 1:00pm* (2008) by the Egypt-born and Cairo-based multimedia artist Khaled Hafez. The artist entwined historical footage of the social and military histories of Egypt, including the assassination of Sadat with an autobiographical story told through the images of his photo-album. Hafez proves what the history of war and dictatorship wrought on an individual life, making a powerful commentary on the means of historical mediation. Generally opaque, the relationship between history and society, cultural identity and nationhood opened up for artistic investigation with the help of what the artist calls - "visions of a rusty memory". In a subtle play reality and fiction, Hafez agrees with Akram Zatori, who also works with archives that are at stake under the condition of temporary rootedness adopted by the artists.

The 1st Biennale of Thessaloniki previously reflected the shifting geographical identities of the art praxis through its theme of "Heterotopias". Invited prominent curators- Catherine David and Jun-Erik Lundstrom looked to the rich history of contemporary art in Europe, Palestine, and Russia for ideas and contexts. "I see a big potential there for building up an original cultural meeting place; the infinite complex layers of memory and forgetting in a city such as Thessaloniki," said David. Yet, the Biennale's second round took an outward view by focusing on the Southern belt, including Brazil, Mexico, Africa and Balkans. With the proximity of a new rising power in the Middle East, Greece seeks connection for both political sensibility and cultural praxis. (Even the New Acropolis Museum, that opened this June, takes its branding look from the bold concrete-glass museum sensations planned for Abu Dhabi).

The Thessaloniki Biennale communicates an uncertain picture of today's world and it does so with wit and conviction, showing a faith in unseen art coming from off-center regions. The exhibition gave rise to tougher, more trenchant thoughts and ideas than any other among the biennale sprawl. At this moment, when practicality and action are critical, a glimmer of optimism is in the arts and its intrinsic values of resolve, hard work, and community. The curators took the visitor on a circuit that began with discontent but ended with the promise of a solution for society's adversities.

Hew Locke
3617 Sin Eater, 2008
nylon rope, plastic beads, glue
8m high



Jinoos Taghizadeh
Letters I never wrote, 2008-2009
Digital Print on the back of real
stamps 13X13

