

# Thessaloniki Biennale

## A collective experience

'Praxis: Art in Times of Uncertainty,' which opened this week, brings together over 150 artists in the hope of realigning theory with practice

BY ALEXANDRA KDROXENIDIS

The ongoing global economic instability is an opportunity for reappraisals and new beginnings. In the midst of a dizzying proliferation of major art events throughout the world – with all the theorizing that goes with it – and in the aftermath of a booming art market that often led to inordinately priced works, rethinking the role and effect of art in contemporary reality and thought acquires new pertinence. Can contemporary art be a more energetic part of everyday life? Can it make the public relate to it in a more immediate way? Can it inspire productive thought on social and political issues?

These are the kinds of questions put forward by "Praxis: Art in Times of Uncertainty," the second Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art that recently opened at many of the city's venues, organized by the Thessaloniki State Museum of Contemporary Art (SMCA) – it is one of the few biennales organized by a museum. It is a large yet visitor-friendly event that showcases the works of more than 150 artists – most of them commissioned for the event – from 22 countries.

Inspired by Terry Eagleton's "After Theory," a book that reassesses the role of cultural theory, the biennale has developed from the idea that the art market, the ineffectiveness

of cultural theory and the over-theorization of culture have dissociated art from life. It asserts that art should go "back to life and praxis," realigning theory with practice.

Practically speaking, this translates into a kind of art that is more accessible, invites participation and interaction and often results from collective work. The mere fact that the biennial is the outcome of collaborative work between three curators – Syrago Tsiara, director of Thessaloniki's Center of Contemporary Art, Bisi Silva, director of the Center for Contemporary Art in Lagos, Nigeria, and the Argentinean independent curator Gabriela Salgado – indicates the emphasis on collective work.

Accessibility is conceived in two ways: by giving artists from distant countries access to a European public but also by making art accessible to the public by designing an exhibition that spreads across the city and highlights its architecture and history.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of the event is the itinerary that it offers the viewer throughout the city and its monuments – a total of 28 venues are involved. There are also works that are directly related to the city. One example is the project of Marios Spiliopoulos, which, consisting of video installations showing interviews with residents of Thessaloniki, constitutes re-

search into the multicultural history of the city.

Most works have strong political and social content. "The Listening Array," an engaging video by American artists Megan and Murray McMillan for example, is a work that alludes to the Russian Revolution and threatened bourgeoisie power. The Russian artistic team "Chto delat? / What is to be done?" has created a video in which a chorus modeled on the equivalent in ancient drama reflects on the impacts of Perestroika.

Political content is also evident in the Tenerife edition of "Or d'Afrique" by Moroccan artist Hassan Darsi. The video documents the making of an installation in which the artist applies golden adhesives to large rocks on the coast of Tenerife. The exploitation of Africa's resources by the West is a likely reference. Images of violence and the power of the media in shaping our vision of the world is one of the issues in the work of Greek artist Despina Meimaroglou.

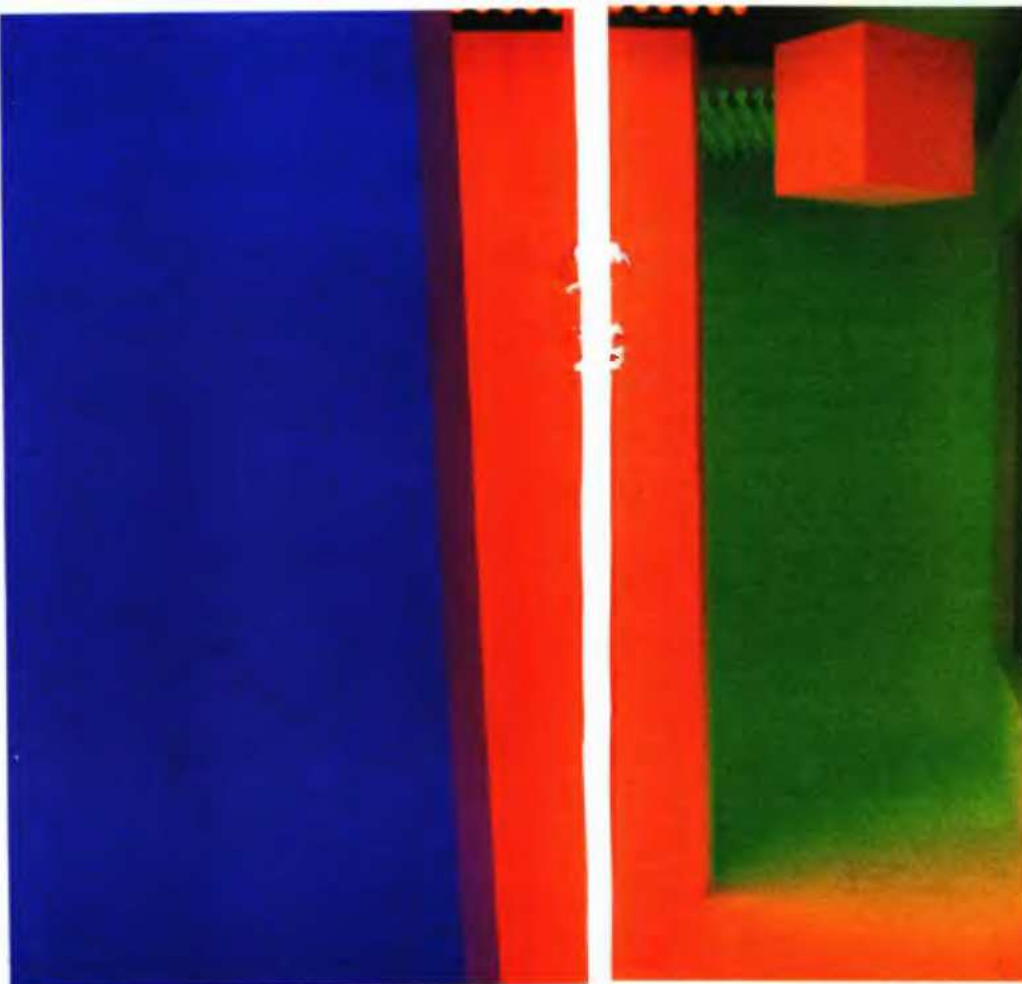
An interesting example of art with a direct social objective is the project of Cuban artist Rene Francisco in which he designed and built the drainage system for a poor home in Cuba. The work – which is presented at Bey Hamam (Paradeisos Baths), an old Turkish bath and one of the biennial's most inspiring venues – is a documentation



**The principles**  
Interaction, participation and collective work are at the core of the biennale's curatorial thesis



A view of the sculpture installation by Cesar Martinez-Silva.



'Chromosaturation' (1965-2009), an installation by Carlos Cruz-Uribe.

**OUTSIDE THE MAIN PROGRAM**

A parallel program of exhibitions and events supplements the main program of the Thessaloniki Biennale. Among the most innovative and experimental is e-Mobil Art, which is held in the port complex.

The exhibition includes collaborative projects that combine technology, art and science. At the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, "Paint-id - Contemporary Painting in Greece" explores manifestations of contemporary painting in Greek art. It is curated by Sotiris Bahtsetzis.

At the same museum, the monographic exhibition on the work of Evgenia Apostolou presents abstract paintings in red, white and black. At the French Institute, "Face to Face" features video art.

An interesting review of contemporary Serbian art is presented at the Museum of Byzantine Culture. The exhibition is organized by the Cultural Center of Belgrade and is curated by Aleksandra Estela Bjelica Mladenovic.

A weeklong festival, which ends Saturday, May 30, has been featuring performance art in various locations of the city.

of the project. Presented at the same venue is Mary Zygou's installation which is modeled on the battery cages used at pig farms. Also reminiscent of parliament chamber, the work explores types of architecture; design that are linked to power mechanisms of control. It is a gripping work of which the conceptual character, however, not be fully appreciated until the viewer has first read about its meaning and objective. Of course, is also true of much contemporary art. The detailed descriptions of the works in the biennial's accompanying Greek/English catalog are helpful.

Given this intricate, complex character of contemporary art, how can an event like the

at the Thessaloniki Biennale succeed in involving a large public? The directness of the word "Praxis" in this year's event and the well-designed displays across the city will most likely help draw a broader audience.

Standout pieces may not abound, but the consistent fine quality of the works should be noted. Some works will make a more immediate impact, while others may sink in more gradually. But in the end, viewing and appreciating art is a slow and, to a large extent, intellectual process. The Thessaloniki Biennale helps introduce the viewer to this process, while also making the statement that art should be a harmonious connection between theory and practice.

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'Woman Waiting,' a photograph by Emeka Okereke.

## International platform



**Establishing a biennale** with an international profile is one of the objectives of the State Museum of Contemporary Art. From its very beginning, the SMCA had actually made a successful attempt to create a platform for art from the Balkan region and Southeast Europe. The biennial is in many ways an extension of this initial strategy.

"Already at the previous biennale, we had placed emphasis on Central and Eastern Asia and not just Europe. This time, I think that both the cultural and geographical expansion are clearer. It is our strategy to give exposure to artists who have difficulty gaining access to the Western artistic centers.

"This is also important for our own knowledge of art and for learning to view art beyond stereotypes. Art from South America, for example, was to a large extent an unknown area for us in Greece and I think for Europe as well,"

Syrigo Tsiara, director of the SMCA's Center of Contemporary Art, told Athens Plus. "We wanted to differentiate ourselves from the Western-centered narrative of the biennials. To a large extent, biennials reproduce certain stereotypes in terms of the history of art, of what is avant-garde and of modernism. It would not make sense for a new biennale not to try to find a new direction, but to simply repeat what is happening at other events. I feel very lucky because in this eight-month-long collaboration, I learned a lot about the practices of artists from very different regions, such as those from Africa and Latin America but also from Asia, Iran or India," Tsiara said.

Asked about the notion of "praxis" (act in Greek) Tsiara spoke about the active involvement of artists in

public affairs. "More than at any other time, we really need the voice of intellectuals. Not, however, just their theories but their involvement in things that matter," Tsiara said. The curator is also interested in the notion of "praxis" as it first emerged in ancient Greek philosophy (in Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics") and as it developed in modern

times, as, for example, in Marxist theory. (Her essay in the biennale catalog provides a probing analysis of this development).

Bisi Silva, the founder of the Center for Contemporary Art in Lagos, Nigeria, also believes in art's active role. "Art can be an incentive for thought. Art gets you asking if something is real or not. Because it is

open-ended, it also gives you the opportunity to come to a conclusion yourself," she said. She also believes that the context of the particular biennial gives it a radical character.

"It seems to me that in Thessaloniki, the biennial is radical because, from what I can feel here, the contemporary art scene is quite small. Just the fact that the state is interested in promoting art and accepting the controversy that sometimes goes with such an event, is in itself radical."

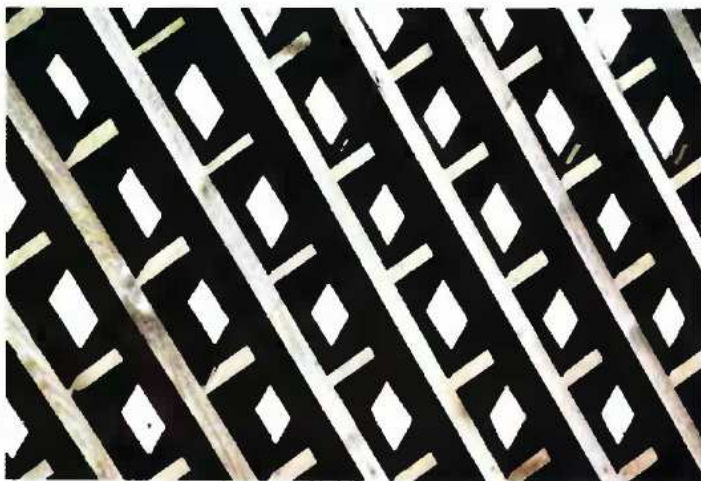
Gabriela Salgado, who visited Greece several times in preparation for her curatorial work for the Thessaloniki Biennale, was fascinated by the history and culture of the city, which she studied for the event. In her essay, included in the catalog, she makes connections between history and art and presents radical examples in the history of South American modern and contemporary art.

### Making a difference

**'We wanted to differentiate ourselves from the Western-centered narrative of the biennales'**



**'Spring is Here,'** 2008, oil on canvas, by Alla Georgieva.



**'Public Constructivism,'** 2008, from a series of images by Azat Sargsyan.

The Thessaloniki Biennale will be held at 28 venues in the city, among them the SMCA (at the port complex), the Archaeological Museum, the Museum of Byzantine Culture, the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, the Teloglion Foundation of Art and the Mount Athos Center. The event runs to September 27. For details, call 2310.589.140 or log on to [www.thessalonikibiennale.gr](http://www.thessalonikibiennale.gr) or [www.greekstatemuseum.com](http://www.greekstatemuseum.com).



**Megan & Murray McMillan's 'The Listening Array,'** 2008, video.



**A painting** by Vassilis Salpistis. From the 'Paint-id' exhibition.