A House is not a Home

In an age of great geopolitical stress, heightened nationalist sentiments and ethnic strife, and forced migrations, Christos Paridis visits the 6th Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art and returns with thoughts about the search for a new home.

Critique / Christos Paridis January 4, 2018

Thessaloniki in Greece's north is the country's second largest city, with a population of million-plus and a major port. It has a long history of more than 2,500 years. Founded by Kassandros, the spouse of Alexander the Great's sister, Thessaloniki, and named after her, it has been, since antiquity, a crossroads of commerce and population movements and settlement, as well as a strategic place of great significance. Its location at the intersection of major roads connecting East to West, the Black Sea to the Adriatic, and North to South, the Aegean Sea (and the Mediterranean) to Central Europe, underscores that importance. One would be right to think that in an age of great geopolitical stress, heightened nationalist sentiments and ethnic strife, and forced migrations from the Middle East and Africa, "crossroads-Thessaloniki" might be the ideal place to host a Biennale, the main theme and title of which is "Imagined Homes". And it is.

Since its launch ten years ago, in 2007, the Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art, organized by the State Museum of Contemporary Art, has worked to foster interactions between the local community and new trends in the international art scene. Importantly, it has made available a platform where Greek artists can gain international exposure and be exposed themselves to the global art scene. This year, participating artists have been asked and commissioned to reconsider (or redefine) the notion of "Home" under the new terms and conditions that our times dictate.

5. REYSI KAMHI.jpg

[1]Reysi Kamhi, Home and Away, 2016
Courtesy of the artist

4. NORAYR KASPER.jpg **[2]**

[3]Norayr Kasper, Steel Life #41, 2015
© Norayr Kasper

The Biennale's thematic core imagines fundamental constructs, such as "hestia" (hearth) and "home", as referring to notions beyond that of "residence," and including ideas of community and homeland. At the base is the idea of home (variously defined) as a protected place where one feels safe and accepted, where one has set down roots, and has developed a network of social and family relationships. We are experiencing a period when none of these notions can be taken for granted, and, moreover, they might only exist on the planes of the imaginary and the desired. It is exactly those who are forced to migrate – the rising waves of immigrants that are crashing upon Europe's shores, often first arriving and settling in Greece – that are in the minds of artists conceiving projects for the Biennale.

What did the curatorial team of the Biennale ask for? The answer is simple and clear. Beyond new identities, a sense of familiarity, processes of assimilation or acceptance, the desire for co-existence and mutual understanding regardless of cultural, religious, gender, and community differences, and in spite of displacement and homelessness, what would one consider "home" to be? Could "home" be a lost-forever house back in the homeland, a cast of memories, the utopian desire for a safe future, or the psychological and sentimental yearnings for a home? A new home might not only be a place of residence (a piece of architecture) but also an environment of a certain kind, or a community – wherever one feels safe and rooted.

The search for home has always been key, but it's especially pertinent now, given that in recent

years nobody has been certain about anything. Society is often collectively imagined and conceived by people, the process animated by their doubts and worries about "the system," which is patently dysfunctional. Such imaginings challenge the established order and practices, and envision the emergence of new ones. The rising political imaginary scenarios and initiatives provide context for artists to tell their own big or small stories. Their work enlightens the various possible interpretations of the theme: some would imagine new ways of organized residence; some suggest different modes of social interaction, others, still, define activism and acts of solidarity. All together, this mosaic of creative works reveals the paradox that every form of "home" and the makings of it, could, simultaneously, produce the conditions for the rejection and marginalization of some community members.

This was the general philosophy suggested by the Biennale's head curator Syrago Tsiara and her group to participating artists. The four major venues that house the event are interesting, in some cases impressive, and effective in communicating that contemporary art mirrors the political challenges of today's world.

13. HALIL ALTINDERE.jpg **[4]**

[5]Halil Altindere, Wonderland, 2013
Courtesy of the Artist and PİLOT Gallery, Istanbul

My first stop was at the Center of Contemporary Art, located at the city's port. Twenty-five young(er) artists from a number of countries, including Greece, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Russia, and Israel, present a range of works with political content that includes video, photography, installations, 3D digital constructions, and traditional painting. Exemplary of the Biennale theme is Halil Altindere's two videos, which explore political, social, and cultural codes. He spotlights depictions of marginalization and resistance against oppressive systems by focusing on incidents that involve

subcultures, gender, and odd situations of everyday life. In his 2016 work titled *Homeland*, he blends documentary and artistic fiction. The video, which was shot in Germany, deals with the themes of forced migration, violence in the lives and upon the bodies of migrants, and their relationship to state oppression. Syrian rapper Mohammad Abu Hajar accompanies the viewer along the underground tracks that link Istanbul to Berlin's Tempelhof complex, a former airport turned into a refugee camp.

Marina Naprushkina who has founded the political platform "The Office for Anti-Propaganda" in 2007, exhibits her collage titled *Home Aerobic*. It juxtaposes photos of women doing aerobic exercises with images of women taken during the summer of 2011 "silent protests" in Belarus. At the time, militia arrested 2,000 people, including many members of the opposition, and randomly assaulted many more, among the local population, who were just on their way home.

3. MARINA NAPRUSKINA.2.JPG **[6]**

[7]Marina Naprushkina, Home Aerobic, 2012, Installation view
Courtesy of the artist

With the support of IFA
The work was produced in the context of the Residency Program of the 6th Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art with the kind support of Goethe Institut Thessaloniki

The architectural elements and geometrical forms dominate Dionisis Christofilogiannis [8] work. His commentary on contemporary social, economic, and political disorder takes the form of a series of photo collages, titled "Feels like home." They combine the signature sites, Athens and Thessaloniki, with apocalyptic images of devastated and desolate urban landscapes in Syria. The work puts the viewer in the awkward position of considering that there are few guarantees that new forms of violence might not be inflicted upon her/him in our irrational era. No one should feel safe.
In his video *Glow in the Dark*, Greek-Iranian Stefanos Tsivopoulos [9] takes a closer look at the life and creative output of 25-year-old African-American drag performer Rakeem. Visually poetic images are intertwined with him talking. Rakeem is presented as a prominent persona eschewing characterization, and is ultimately revealed as an idol of resistance.

11. Dionisis Christofilogiannis Feels-like-home.jpg **[10]**

[11]Dionisis Christofilogiannis, Feels like home, 2017
Photograph, collage

Courtesy of the artist

11. Dionisis ChristofilogiannisFeels-like-home 2.jpg **[12]**

[13]Dionisis Christofilogiannis, Feels like home, 2017
Photograph, collage

Courtesy of the artist

10. Stefanos Tsivopoulous Glow-In-The-Dark.jpg **[14]**

[15]Stefanos Tsivopoulos, Glow in the Dark, 2016
Courtesy of the artist

Written, directed and produced by Stefanos Tsivopoulos
Commissioned by the Onassis Cultural Center NY

A few kilometers away, at the blue-collar district of Stavroupoli, one finds the State Museum of Contemporary Art. Housed in the old Catholic monastery complex of the Lazarist Order (Moni Lazariston), the museum hosts the legendary Costakis collection of early 20th Century Russian avant-garde. The Museum's long-standing commitment to the curating of Russian art has meant that a number of artists unknown to other museums are shown there. All draw on "Home" as a concept and symbol, and tell a story of transformation that has taken place in the last twenty years. I discovered treasures of Russian Art in this exhibition – all about the concept of home. They ranged from depictions of a romantic refuge of family serenity and a poetic depository of childhood memories into a communal residence, a shelter rendered remarkable by its modern and intentionally unfamiliar design, a constructivist skyscraper. Interesting projects include Lyubov Popova's teenage works, along with works by El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevitch, Aleksadr Drevin, Ivan Klioun, Mikhail Larionov, and others. The evolution of the concept of "Home" and "the Familiar" in Russian avant-garde art is showcased through a total of 90 representative works from the Costakis collection.

The State Museum also presents a tribute to the legendary feminist artist Ana Mendieta, who died at the age of 37. In her videos *Moffitt Building Piece* (1973), *Silueta Sangrienta* (1975), *Grass Breathing* (1974), and *Untitled: Silueta Series* (1979) she explored history, memory, the concept of relocating to a new home or country, and personal and collective traumas sustained when one is forced to move to a totally new environment. The work incorporates fragments of her own experiences from when she had to move, at a very young age, from her native Cuba to the US.

Greek artist Dimitris Tataris presents the work titled *Domestic Circus (Who Cares About You?)*: a wooden crate (of the kind that is commonly used for the storage of valuable or fragile items), which portrays a miniature house, and features independent construction elements, designs, and digital images that are assembled into labyrinthine installations. At the same time, the surface of the crate

is decorated with stamps showing satirical portraits of prominent politicians of our times (one can see them with the help of magnifying glasses). Sounds of rain and waves disturb the peace and quiet, and provide a score for images projected onto the crate. Striated perforations resembling barcode lines allow viewers to have a fragmentary look inside the crate. The "circus" is complemented by the screening of a documentary film in which mobile phone users employ their camera to relentlessly search for "home" somewhere in a civilized part of this world.

1. Dimitris Tataris DomesticCircus.jpg **[16]**

[17]Dimitris Tataris, Domestic Circus (Who cares about you?), 2010-2017
Courtesy of Kalfayan Galleries, Athens – Thessaloniki

Video: George Danopoulos [18]
Documentary Courtesy: Vice
The work was produced in the context of the Residency Program of the 6th Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art with the kind support of Goethe-Institut Thessaloniki

England-based, Jerusalem-born Oreet Ashery [19] is an interdisciplinary visual artist working with biopolitical-fiction, gender materiality, and potential communities. In her *Revisiting Genesis* she approaches the Internet as an intangible, new, identity-creating entity where two nurses, both named Jackie, help dying patients to prepare a biographical archive that will become their posthumous digital heritage. The film project explores the philosophical, sociopolitical, and emotional consequences of processes related to loss and death, as well as friendship and memory as identity.

6. OREET ASHERY.jpg **[20]**

[21]Oreet Ashery, Revisiting Genesis, 2016
Courtesy of the artist

Commissioned by the Stanley Picker Gallery and funded by the Welcome Trust, Art Council England, Tyneside Cinema, fig-2 ICA and Goldsmiths College

6. OREET ASHERY2.jpg **[22]**

[23]Oreet Ashery, Revisiting Genesis, 2016
Courtesy of the artist

Commissioned by the Stanley Picker Gallery and funded by the Welcome Trust, Art Council England, Tyneside Cinema, fig-2 ICA and Goldsmiths College

My third visit was to the Macedonian Museum of Modern Art, the oldest museum venue connected with contemporary art in Thessaloniki. Located in the spacious grounds of the International Fair of Thessaloniki, it hosts, by necessity, the larger-scale artworks of the Biennale. One of the first works one witnesses is an impressive installation by Fotini Kariotaki: seven suspended swings, reminiscent of Chinese-style lotus flower pendant lights, are illuminated in different colors. A dream-like atmosphere is created by the colorful fabric constructions.

12. Fotini Kariotaki 1.jpg **[24]**

[25]Fotini Kariotaki, The Swing, 2017, installation view
Courtesy of the artist

With the kind support of Joerg Wotschack

In Orly Maiberg [26]'s extravagant series of paintings, titled "Sea of Galilee", the stage is the referenced Sea, imagined as Israel's symbol of national fragility. The depiction of a popular swimming event is quickly transfigured from peaceful competition into a tableau of defeat, persecution, escape and exile, and last but not least (harboring some hope) into a search of a safe haven. A group of men and women wade into the waters of the Sea, and then start moving as one body in search of land. The direct reference to Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa* is a clear statement that safety can only exist in painting. The paintings offer a powerful visual description of struggle in the modern world.

7. ORLY MAIBERG.jpg **[27]**

[28]Orly Maiberg, Sea of Galilee 3, 2012
Courtesy of the artist and Noga Gallery of Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv

With the support of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Embassy of Israel in Greece

Paolo Incarnato's *Roof* is constructed of Byzantine-style roof tiles, and represents a home in its most timeless form: piled in a circle, it is as if they are untouched by the passage of time. Rafaella Crispino [29]'s work is inspired by the "Toile de Joury," which was originated in Ireland in the mid-19th century and was influenced by the printing techniques of India and the import of cotton fabrics from Asia (extremely popular wares in France, at the time). The patterns usually depicted either exotic images or pastoral and historical themes. The artist chose a typical pastoral scene, which she had altered by coloring the skin of the workers in dark hues, as a direct reference to colonialism.

8. PAOLO INCARNATO.jpg **[30]**

[31]Paolo Incarnato, Roof, 2016
Installation with Byzantine roof tiles

Courtesy of the artist

9. RAFFAELLA CRISPINO.jpg **[32]**

[33]Raffaella Crispino, Untitled (Joury) (detail), 2015
Courtesy of the artist and 1/9 unosunove arte contemporanea, Rome

Photo: Alexandra Bertels
With the kind support of Italian Cultural Institute of Athens

In the same venue, Einat Amir [34] presents her performance *Coming Soon Near You*, a site-specific project where locals are invited to bring their favorite video-movie and watch it on a plasma TV. The living room installation – island-like in the expanse of the exhibition floor – takes the shape of a white cube. Its environment is built of objects and worn-out furniture bought at local thrift stores. The concept behind this familiar installation is to turn the banal into a monument of domestic aesthetics and offer a taste of the past: where memories and the old-fashioned concept of "Home" dwell.

2. EINAT AMIR.jpg **[35]**

[36]Einat Amir, Coming Soon Near you, 2011
Courtesy of the artist and Aspect Ratio Gallery, Chicago

The Canakkale Biennial is a non-profit initiative based in the small southern Turkish city, created by people of different backgrounds who wanted to build a platform for contemporary artists and cultural activity. A year ago, following a time of crisis, the 5th CABININ (its official name) was canceled after the withdrawal of its art director and co-curator, Beral Madra. The Thessaloniki Biennale selected a number of works from the Canakkale Biennial, to incorporate in its own line-up. The CABININ was organized around a similar theme ("Homeland"), which made the inclusion of its works opportune and appreciated.
Biennale events are also held at various other venues of Thessaloniki. They take the form of activities concurrent with the main events, which enrich the city's cultural life and provide its residents and visitors with a rather representative sample of contemporary artists.

The 6th Thessaloniki Biennale [37] is on display through January 14.

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Links
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[2] http://tohumagazine.com/file/4-norayr-kasperjpg
[3] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/4.%20NORAYR%20KASPER.jpg
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