

Locating Belonging, Refiguring Space: Mediterranean crossings and the 4th Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art

Evi Baniotopoulou - Lydia Efthymia Roupakia - Eleni Sideri*

In 2007 the Thessaloniki Biennale became a new addition to the global constellation of perennial art exhibitions. Its fourth edition, *biennale:4 - Everywhere but Now* was held in 2013 and was the second instance of a five-year umbrella theme, *Old Intersections-Make It New* (2011-2015). The focus for this cycle of exhibitions is the Mediterranean as a field of study for social and cultural re-imaginings and revisions. It was within this framework that *biennale:4* was spatialized throughout its host city's urban setting, laying claims on public space, historic buildings and museums, and aiming to transform these via the 'crossings' represented by the curatorial choices. In what follows we will offer a semiotic reading of the importance of 'mapping' for *biennale:4*, namely a concept that was adopted as the exhibition's distinguishing approach and strategy, but also reflected the highly debated repositioning of the city itself in reference to regional politics. This concept occurred along various axes. The *biennale:4* map produced unprecedented spatial linkages that traced literal and metaphorical crossings. The use of historical and cultural sites as hosts for the exhibition refigured established approaches to urban space. Finally, the staging of emotional, as well as spatial, encounters registered by artists and their works performed the non-logical, or provisional affective linkages that connect social members into new configurations of communality when thinking the Mediterranean 'now'.

As an institution, the Thessaloniki Biennale inscribes in the international practice of strategic cultural planning, whereby an exhibition may be used to (re-)define the identity of its host city -a phenomenon greatly intensified with the global proliferation of perennial exhibitions in the last few decades. It is within this tendency that the exhibition appears, among other things, to be deployed for the creation of a cultural framework that will simultaneously enable the local population to 'situate' itself within the city's social, historic and political web, and invite the world-at-large to reconsider Thessaloniki as an important contemporary urban centre.

In *biennale:4* this 'situating' was alluded to not only in spatial, but also in temporal terms. The exhibition's title, *Everywhere but Now* invited the viewer to place emphasis on present time, on the 'now' of the artist and the 'now' of the audience, on the concurrent 'timescapes' that frame the processes through which inherited ideas and emotions are reconfigured and revised. Thus, the 'Mediterranean crossings' (Chambers 2008) intended by the exhibition attempted to chart the political, cultural and historical complexities of a disseminated modernity as experienced in the present moment, a time of intense recontextualization of economic, political and cultural interests and agendas, and as shaped by the Mediterranean sea and its legacies.

The map was one of the two main symbols of *biennale:4*, along with the symbol of the wooden shipping crate. Gianna Stavroulaki (2014, 34-35), who was in charge of the

* Dr Evi Baniotopoulou, Adjunct Faculty International Hellenic University;

* Dr Efthymia Lydia Roupakia, Adjunct Faculty International Hellenic University; English Department Faculty, Anatolia American College of Thessaloniki.

* Dr Eleni Sideri, Adjunct Faculty International Hellenic University, Post-Doctoral Fellow University of Thessaly, Department of History, Archaeology and Social Anthropology.

exhibition signage design, justified the choice of these two symbols by underlining that, ‘the map revealed the intentional spatial relations and conscious interactions of artworks with the respective exhibition environment’, whereas the crate was connected to artistic mobility. The map of *biennale:4* was for its organizers ‘ephemeral and timeless’ (ibid., 36), and in this sense ambiguous in its temporality, stressing the need for spatial redefining. The importance of mapping the exhibition was clear in the statements made in the catalogue: ‘In this sense, the map depicts the obvious spatial correlations, making them explicit, visible and conceivable, while also enabling visitors to produce further spatial, visual, conceptual and memory-related correlations; associations that is (sic) only implicitly alluded to in the map itself.’ (ibid: 34).

Taking a closer look at the published *biennale:4* map¹ one observes that it served to denote what appears to be an emerging cultural quarter of the Thessaloniki city centre. This included two of the city’s most important museums, namely the Archaeological Museum and the Museum of Byzantine Culture and Pavilion 6 of the HELEXPO-Thessaloniki International Fair Area. The Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, while one of the complementary Biennale venues, still is within the HELEXPO area and also appeared within the marked area. The other three distinctly marked (coloured) venues where the main *biennale:4* exhibition was held, were the State Museum of Contemporary Art-Costakis Collections at Moni Lazariston, Alatza Imaret and Yeni Djami. It is interesting to note here that these three venues do not only spread towards the west, north and east, thus creating a virtual geographical web across the cityscape; they also represent different phases of the history of Thessaloniki, as well as different cultural, ethnic and religious groups that have inhabited its space: the Lazarists, the Ottomans and the Donmeh community respectively. Thus, a fairly clear, cultural centre that tallies with its counterparts in other metropolitan centres and is composed of modern-day museums, the exhibits of which stretch from the antiquity to today, and span various cultures was notionally created. By adding to this an intricate web of ‘multicultural’ monument/venues, the Biennale’s structure and strategic planning materialised in line with the exhibition’s intentions, as it ‘encourage(d) comparisons, engender(ed) connotations, while promoting a superior form of tourism: cultural tourism.’ (Koskina 2013, 18).

Hamilakis and Brown (2003, 1) have pointed out that contemporary historians try to uncover the significance of the past as ‘subject to interpretive fashions, and potentially, the political demands of the present’. The reuses of the past, and especially those reminders of a past mostly colonial and imperial, which nation-states tried to forget, hide or even eliminate, form part of what Michael Herzfeld calls ‘institutional globalisation’ (2012, 49). In other words, Herzfeld states that the tendency of many institutions today, such as museums for instance, to shed light to ‘other’ (less dominant or even marginal) histories and voices by taking a reflective or even a critical stance towards the past, has taken global proportions. This tendency is particularly interesting as it often contradicts museums’ mission statements as containers of national homogeneity and continuity.

An element that was emphasized by the curators during *biennale:4* was the use of a variety of city buildings and historical sites as venues of the exhibition. This approach has a

¹ In Stavroulaki 2013, 34.

precedent in other established biennials, as well as in the Thessaloniki Biennale itself.² It is interesting to note, however, that, if one examines the city's recent history, the tendency for re-using historical sites and emotionally invested cultural spaces dates back to Thessaloniki's re-invention as the Cultural Capital of Europe in 1997. As Agelopoulos underlines (2000, 147), the organizing team of 'Thessaloniki Cultural Capital of Europe' in collaboration with the Greek Ministry of Culture tried to combine the Hellenic and the Christian past by focusing on the city's Byzantine history and its imperial and multicultural legacy. However, as he stresses, the ways in which the authorities took on multiculturalism as a form of administrative and politically valid form of membership had nothing to do with the composition of the multilingual and multi-ethnic Byzantine society. As a result, the legacy of the Cultural Capital itself -besides the dark heritage on the city administration's economic management- is not so much the reinvention of the city's past, but Thessaloniki's perception as a multicultural centre. This heritage was connected to the cosmopolitanism of the Mediterranean and started to rise as an innate feature of the city's identity, but also as an emerging brand name since then. The political and economic reformulation of South East Europe during the 1990s contributed to a gradual refiguration of the city's geopolitical status. The city's acclaim as Cultural Capital of Europe repositioned Thessaloniki within the European and global landscape along regional lines (namely, 'South East Europe' or 'the Mediterranean' instead of 'the Balkans'), leaving behind national discourses that had been overloaded with political and historical friction. National discourses echoed with memories of minority oppression and Holocaust trauma; conceptions of the nation were marred by the destructiveness of political parochialism and burdened by new anxieties about the shrinking, or even dissolution, of national sovereignty due to the emergence of the supranational European space. In addition, the influx of several thousands of immigrants from the neighboring Balkan countries and the former Soviet Union during the early 1990s invited heated debates regarding Thessaloniki's multicultural and cosmopolitan history. It is during such times of internal turmoil and soul-searching that many of Thessaloniki's historical buildings, which were later also used as exhibition sites in the Biennale, were first founded or re-discovered, or became visible as important spaces in the city's promotion as the Cultural Capital of Europe.

We find reverberations of this legacy of reusing public and historic buildings as exhibition sites in *biennale:4*, where the reuse of culturally significant locales as meeting places of artists, creative works, audiences and historical memories opened spaces for unexpected encounters and unpredictable affiliations. The chief curator, Adelina von Fürstenberg stated that the central exhibition of the 2013 Thessaloniki Biennale was conceived 'as a space of exchange and confrontation like the Mediterranean itself.' (2014, 42). More than fifty artists from the Mediterranean area, but also from India, Iran, Brazil and Cuba, were enlisted to explore the potential that art carries for superseding cultural boundaries, bridging different systems of thought, and mirroring 'the unifying threads of

² It is nowadays commonplace for biennials internationally to expand beyond the 'institutional' sites of the exhibition into the urban tissue and to use historic and derelict industrial buildings, 'alternative' venues, as well as selected city spots. The Thessaloniki Biennale has used various historic and urban buildings and sites (in addition to art museums and institutions) since its first edition in 2007. Most of the buildings that were used in *biennale:4* had already been used in previous editions, with a few changes only.

spiritual thought and insights that have linked open minds and hearts throughout vast spaces and times' (ibid.). The way the central exhibition was staged and the network of contrapuntal dialogues and complementary negotiations effectuated by the works aimed to challenge each viewer to respond in his/her unique way to the question of belonging.

It is then interesting to see what the particulars of use of different buildings around the city were in the 2013 edition of the Thessaloniki Biennale, and why this matters in relation to the figurative re-mapping of the city. As noted above, the Biennale curators' choices over the years have invariably included modern and contemporary art museums and spaces, ottoman monuments, foreign cultural institutes, private project spaces, neoclassical villas previously owned by members of the Jewish community, and derelict industrial buildings. Both the rich past and multicultural character of the city have been thus obliquely underlined. Therefore, the use of different buildings in *biennale:4* was not a novelty for the city. A major change in this particular edition of the Biennale that is worth observing is that the curator Adelina von Fürstenberg for the first time ever used the Thessaloniki International Fair-HELEXPO Pavilion 6. It is important to note how this choice may have functioned on a symbolic level for the city and for the exhibition. The Pavilion 6 of the HELEXPO area is one of the International Fair's most 'city-friendly' Pavilion, with an entrance situated on the corner of two of the city's main and busy streets, right next to the Vellidis Congress Centre, a popular venue well-known to the public.

Pavilion 6 hosted, for the first time in the Thessaloniki Biennale, the biggest part of the main programme of the exhibition, which is the reason why we will examine its deployment in greater detail. The choice of a HELEXPO pavilion by the curator was a deliberate one, as the Helexpo area is 'related to the city's century-old tradition as a trading centre in the Balkans'. Von Fürstenberg linked this venue with the ottoman monuments and with the museums of the city, which she called 'landmarks' of the city in her statement. The use of the Pavilion seems to have a lot of symbolic –aside from purely practical – ramifications. The Thessaloniki International Fair held in the grounds of HELEXPO is an institution that has been inextricably linked with the city of Thessaloniki and its international image for almost eighty years. Using one of the Pavilions of HELEXPO for cultural purposes acknowledges the power that the allure of an international fair that focuses on industry and technology can lend to culture, and vice versa. It brings to mind the important art displays that took place in historic international exhibitions, such as the Great Exhibition, London (1851) or the Exposition Internationale, Paris (1937). Moreover, the use of a 'pavilion', even if only from a linguistic point of view, refers back to the 'padiglioni' of the Venice Biennale. It thus creates a subtle, but firm link with the oldest Biennial institution in the world, and the potent, historically, city of Venice - a mercantile centre *par excellence* -, and alludes to a similar status for the city of Thessaloniki.

Pavilion 6 conveniently served some of the exhibition's symbolisms too. The axonometric drawing of Pavilion 6 is interesting in that it is a visual representation of an initially linear narration that is being ruptured, discontinued and redefined. It can thus be seen as a symbol of what the Biennale is trying to achieve overall - that is, to highlight the multiple (view)points of the city of Thessaloniki, and to create new literal and symbolic routes. An element that adds to the richness and timeliness of this approach is that the architect of the exhibition, Uliva Velo, explains how her inspiration for this restructuring of the pavilion came from her seeing Ivan Kudrashiev's *Drawing for the First Soviet Theatre in Orenburg* (1920),

at the State Museum of Contemporary Art – Costakis Collection. (Velo 2013, 49). Uliva Velo thus created a notional link between Pavilion 6 and Thessaloniki's State Museum of Modern and Contemporary art (SMCA), which houses the world-renowned collection.³ Although participating as a venue for *biennale:4*, the museum is located in one of the run-down western suburbs of the city, relatively far from the historic centre and the areas of Biennale activities, and is supposed to be a beacon for the regeneration of that area. The Costakis Collection, on the other hand, is frequently used to highlight the cosmopolitan character of Thessaloniki. This is because, despite the fact that it is a Russian Avant-Garde collection, it has been embraced by the city due to its Moscow-born selector's Greek descent, George Costakis. The collection has, over the years, become an emblem of the city's cultural cosmopolitanism, as it attracts great international interest. Sections of it frequently travel to exhibitions abroad. The fact that the main Biennale pavilion was inspired by this collection, which has only recently become a symbol of the city of Thessaloniki, is in itself a telling sign of the unexpected crossings that *biennale:4* was able to both create and sustain.

Michael Herzfeld has argued that 'to think affect is to think the social, and nothing is more important right now' (2012, 25). *Everywhere but Now* aimed at a political and poetic articulation of a shifting Mediterranean 'reality' shaped by dislocation, disjuncture and drift. Marcello Maloberti's installation *Circus Venezia* (2004)⁴ comprised 300 hand mirrors hanging by threads at different heights reflected the surrounding space and fragmented the observer's reflections in a nomadic and precarious way. If encounter, reflection, refraction and reinterpretation in Maloberti's work acquired a dreamlike, festive tone, Maria Papadimitriou's installation *Anti-Apparatus* (2011)⁵ sought to represent the twisted, asymmetrical human economy that defines modern encounters in the Mediterranean area. As Jenny Burman has observed, '[p]eople come into intimate relation on the basis of a shared understanding of displacement and/or emplacement or a shared affective investment in the future of a common dwelling place' (2007, 287). *Everywhere but Now* captured the continuum of emotions from individual and bodily to collective and social. Papadimitriou's work explored the theme of undocumented travelers, illegal immigrants and refugees, the liminal zones they occupy, and the anonymity they are condemned to by virtue of their status of 'statelessness.' The discarded narratives of dispersed and diffused lives acknowledged by the contemporary works of art exhibited in *Everywhere but Now* interrogated national concepts of belonging and upset the neat enclosures of law, land and lineage. Most importantly, they invited affective responses to outlawed conditions of the 'human.'

If, as Davidson and Milligan note, 'emotions [...] might be seen as a form of connective tissue that links experiential geographies of the human psyche and physique with(in) broader social geographies of place' (2004, 524), then *Everywhere but Now* claimed art as a medium flexible enough to host the complex emotional terrain that provisionally connects embodied subjectivities across home, community, nation, and the transnational world. Philip Rantzer's installation *Europe* (2006-2013)⁶ consisted of a stage with a sculpture

³ Illustrations in Velo 2013, 49-51.

⁴ Illustration in Koskina 2013 (vol.1), 140.

⁵ Illustration in Koskina 2013 (vol.1), 147.

⁶ Illustration in Koskina 2013 (vol.1), 154-55.

of a laying black-bearded man dressed in a t-shirt and sport shoes on it. The audience was invited to participate, comment and register their responses by stepping up to the stage and writing their personal reactions to the artwork on the floor surrounding the sculpture. During the exhibition, the platform was covered with answers of different sorts replying directly or indirectly to the questions posed by the artist. Visitors had used words, schemas or drawings to express their emotions and their personal reflections regarding the idea of Europe, the Greek crisis and social or personal problems. Rebecca Solnit argues that '[t]o write is to carve a new path through the terrain of the imagination' (2001, 72). In this sense, this participatory work of art implicated its audience through physical and sensory experience in the recreation and elaboration of meaning. The experience of walking through the maze of responses to the idea of Europe turned the wooden platform to a space of emotional, as well as cognitive re-mapping. Rantzer's art thus became a vehicle for intimate, affective and communal connections across difference.

Everywhere but Now drew attention to the role of uncomfortable emotions in redirecting reason, as well as to the role of art in mobilizing an 'affective remapping' of the Mediterranean. Of course, the transformation of the political envisioned in local, national, regional or transnational terms entails active personal involvement and collective mobilization at different levels. Nevertheless, *Everywhere but Now* decidedly reused and re-imagined old spaces in order to generate new emotions and moods. Whether the latter will develop into constituent elements of the experience of 'belonging' for the city's inhabitants remains to be seen.

Bibliography

- Agelopoulos, Georgios: "Political Practices and Multiculturalism : The case of Salonica". Στο: Jane Cowan (Επιμ.), *Macedonia. The Politics of Identity and Difference*. London and NY: Pluto Press. 2000: 140-156.
- Burman, Jenny: "Absence, 'Removal,' and Everyday Life in the Diasporic City". *Space and Culture* 2007, 9 (3).
- Chambers, Iain: *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2008.
- Davidson, Joyce, and Milligan, Christine : "Editorial: Embodying Emotion Sensing Space: Introducing Emotional Geographies." *Social and Cultural Geographies* 2004, 5 (4).
- Hamilakis, Yiannis and Brown, Keith: "'The cupboard of the Yesterdays? Critical perspectives on the Usable past". Στο: Yiannis Hamilakis and Keith Brown (Επιμ.), *The Usable Past: Greek Metahistories*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003: 1-23.
- Herzfeld, Michael: "Whose Right to Which Past? Archaeologists, Anthropologists and the Ethics of Heritage in the Global Hierarchy of Value". Στο: David Shakland (Επιμ.), *Archaeology and Anthropology. Past, Present and Future*. ASA Monographs 48. London: Berg, 2012: 41-65.
- _____: *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Fürstenberg, Adelina von: "Everywhere but Now/Παντού αλλά Τώρα". Στο: Κατερίνα Κοσκινά (Επιμ.), *Old Intersections/Make it New./Παλιές Διασταυρώσεις/ Make it New* 2. Thessaloniki Biennále: 4 of Contemporary Art. Μπιενάλε Σύγχρονης Τέχνης Θεσσαλονίκης, τόμ. 1. Αθήνα: LTH Advertising. 2014: 36-43.

- Κοσκινά, Κατερίνα (Επιμ.), *Old Intersections/Make it New./Παλιές Διασταυρώσεις/ Make it New 2*. Thessaloniki Biennale: 4 of Contemporary Art. Μπιενάλε Σύγχρονης Τέχνης Θεσσαλονίκης, τόμ. 1 & 2. Αθήνα: LTH Advertising 2014
- Massumi, Brian: “Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.” Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1987, xvi – xi.
- Solnit, Rebecca: *Wanderlust. A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin Books 2001.
- Stavroulaki, Gianna: "The Biennale's Dynamic Space. Ο δυναμικός χώρος της Μπιενάλε. Ανάμεσα στο Δίκτυο και στο Χάρτη. Between the Network and the Map". Στο: Κατερίνα Κοσκινά (Επιμ.), *Old Intersections/Make it New 2/Παλιές Διασταυρώσεις /Make it New 2*. Thessaloniki Biennale:4 of Contemporary Art. Μπιενάλε Σύγχρονης Τέχνης Θεσσαλονίκης, τόμ. 2. Αθήνα: LTH Advertising. 2014: 28-39.
- Velo, Uliva: “Alignments and oblique planes for Everywhere but Now. Ευθυγραμμίσεις και κυρτές επιφάνειες στην έκθεση Παντού αλλά Τώρα”. Στο: Κατερίνα Κοσκινά (Επιμ.), *Old Intersections/Make it New 2/Παλιές Διασταυρώσεις /Make it New 2*. Thessaloniki Biennale:4 of Contemporary Art. Μπιενάλε Σύγχρονης Τέχνης Θεσσαλονίκης, τόμ. 2. Αθήνα: LTH Advertising. 2014: 48-53.