

THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

Art of the cut or the art of power cuts

By Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

THESSALONIKI, Greece: Nothing determines the rhythms of daily life in Beirut as dependably as the power cut. For three hours every day, the lights go out according to a rolling rationing schedule. Rich or poor, idle or industrious, easygoing or annoyed, you learn to live with, and work around, the cut. In a city of such palpable excess, unconscionable corruption, miserable planning and reckless waste, it may be ridiculous and infuriating to plan your days around power shortages.

Outside Beirut, it's worse. The cut lasts not three hours but 12, which feeds a lucrative grey economy in the supply of illegal electricity, and leads to much prevaricating in front of the fuse box (with only so many amperes from your neighborhood generator, you choose your appliances carefully).

Perhaps it was inevitable that a mischievous and mercurial artist would eventually take up the cut as the substance and metaphor of an artwork. When the curators of the main program of this year's Thessaloniki Biennale asked Mounira al-Solh to create a new work for their exhibition, she decided to share the pain that she and her fellow Beirutis know so well.

Solh's piece, a roughhewn installation entitled "While Guy Debord Sleeps," is essentially a power cut with props. Following the artist's instructions, the electricity flowing into Yeni Djami – an Ottoman-era mosque built in 1902 for a community of converted Jews – is being cut on a set schedule, albeit once a week instead of once a day.

The blackout forces viewers to light candles in order to see her work, a large wooden box kitted out with documents, texts and objects that speak of resource scarcity, political unrest and financial mismanagement in the Mediterranean region.

Scanning the walls of her enclosed room with nothing but a flickering flame, the work makes a number of fanciful, philosophical leaps – from the over-the-top spectacle of biennial events to Guy Debord's reputed insomnia to the fact that, while it would seem to make sense to nap through power cuts, they in fact cause sleepless anxiety.

Power cuts are torture, Solh writes in one of her texts, at which point she launches into considerations of how electricity has been used to extract confessions from political prisoners, to cut off protesting towns and villages over the last six months in Syria, to deprive and demoralize and push people toward despair.

Squeezed between the Balkans and the Aegean, Thessaloniki is a port city and a university town, which is laid out along wide avenues running parallel to the sea, like Alexandria's long lost,

upper Mediterranean twin.

Once home to a multitude of communities – Muslim, Jewish, Greek Orthodox – it was destroyed by fire in 1917 (according to the local lore, a woman frying eggplant in the hills set her kitchen, her house and the city aflame by accident when the oil jumped from the pan). Two years after that, Thessaloniki became the site of brutal “population transfers” between Turkey and Greece.

These days, the city is more monolithically Greek but, thanks to an assortment of municipal, regional and European funds (all pledged well before the Greek debt crisis began), Thessaloniki is now in the midst of a yearlong exploration of its knotted historical roots, and its fragmented relationship to the Middle East.

The current edition of the Thessaloniki Biennale – the third since the event’s founding in 2007 – bears the overarching, grammatically challenged title “Old Intersections – Make It New.”

As part of a wider effort to consider the city’s affinity to the broader Mediterranean region, and in particular the Arab countries to the south and east, the biennale’s main program sets Greece’s current financial calamity in a context that includes the recent uprisings in the Arab world and Palestine’s bid for statehood at the United Nations.

Curated by Paolo Colombo, Mahita el-Bacha Urieta and Marina Fokidis, the main program, aptly titled “A Rock and a Hard Place,” isn’t heavily stacked with new commissions. Solh’s piece is one of only a few. But the exhibition features a number of older works that are effectively mobilized in the present, such as Rasheed Araeen’s “Union of Mediterranean Countries,” Ahlam Shibli’s “Trauma,” and Francis Al?s’ “The Green Line (Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can be poetic),” the playful and probing documentation of a walk along Jerusalem’s green line with a punctured can of green paint.

In the past, dealing with conflicts in the Middle East might have been something of a downer for an exhibition of contemporary art. In the current climate, things have shifted. The aspirations of the Arab Spring offer a way out of crisis and collapse, along with a few lessons in the form of counterrevolutionary struggles and setbacks.

The Thessaloniki Biennale – which slices itself into 12 venues throughout the city, from museums to patrician homes, two former mosques, a hammam and a prison – is not only delving into crisis as a kind of conceptual space, it is also completely shaped by an actual crisis that nearly overwhelms it.

Appointed in February, the curators had only six months to prepare.

As of Sept. 1, Thessaloniki’s State Museum of Contemporary Art, which organizes the biennale, had received less than 2 percent of its allocated 1 million euro budget.

“We were working as the financial crisis was unfolding and affecting most people in Greece,” says Mahita el-Bacha Urieta, a Lebanese curator based in Abu Dhabi, noting that both of her colleagues live at least part of the year in Athens.

“Every time I visited there was a strike, which made the crisis even more real to me as I was experiencing its symptoms whenever I was working on the biennale.”

“At one point, there was a shortage of cash flow,” says Paolo Colombo, an Italian curator and adviser for Istanbul Modern. “The budget of the main program was below half a million euros, all included, therefore we were not expecting to swim in gold. All expenses were weighed and considered. But I hope the rawness comes from our curatorial slant.”

“I think what really benefited us in terms of working in a time and space of crisis was that we really did not have the time and were obliged to use our knowledge and make decisions quickly,” adds Fokidis, an independent curator and critic who was born and raised in Thessaloniki. “This was stressful and tiring but also very productive. We had to live the process must faster than normal, which triggered a passionate energy between us and with the city.”

With that exuberance evident all over the exhibition, the residents of Fokidis’ hometown might find Solh’s power cut almost charming, an intimate disruption that literally sheds light on the process of an artist’s thought.

“A Rock and a Hard Place,” the main program of the 3rd Thessaloniki Biennale, runs through Dec. 18. For more information, please see www.thessalonikibiennale.gr

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