

# It's all Greek to me

Maya Jaggi visits Thessaloniki's thriving international book fair and first art biennale

Saturday June 2, 2007

[The Guardian](#)



A worker sweeps the ground around the installation 'Heterotopias' for Thessaloniki's first art biennale. Photograph: Sakis Mitrolidis/AFP

As Athens braced itself to host the Champions League final between Liverpool and AC Milan last month, Greece's second city was staging its own, alternative, cultural encounters. The Thessaloniki international book fair in northern Greece is thriving in its fourth year, while the fledgling Thessaloniki biennale of contemporary art, which followed on its heels and continues until the end of September, is billed as the country's first international biennale. Both events stress the city's pivotal location, as a Balkan capital and an eastern Mediterranean hub linking three continents.

The confluence and accretion of cultures are evident all around the city, from its monuments (starting with the Ottoman white tower on the seafront) to its meatballs - spiced for the palates of Asia Minor. The Rotonda, built as an imperial Roman mausoleum, was furnished with Byzantine mosaics and consecrated as a church, then adapted as a mosque - hence the minaret. The city of Aristotle and Atatürk - whose birthplace, a pink house not far from the

Rotonda, is now closely guarded - has witnessed the mingling of ideas as much as peoples.

Thessaloniki was not incorporated into Greece until 1912, and local history stresses its foundation in 315BC by Cassander, king of Macedonia, who named it after his wife, Alexander the Great's sister. An hour's drive into the mountains is Vergina, the complex of royal Macedonian tombs with their gold treasures. Yet - as witnessed by the few streets that survived the port fire of 1917 and by the architecture of the upper town - from 1430 to 1912, it was a multi-faith Ottoman city, latterly with a Jewish majority. Jews expelled from Ferdinand and Isabella's purist Spain in 1492 found here something of the pluralism purged from Andalus. Unlike Venice, there was no Jewish ghetto until 1942. But, as charted in Mark Mazower's 2004 book *Salonica: City of Ghosts*, the populace was brutally transformed, first by the forcible exchange of populations in 1923, when 30,000 Muslims were ousted and 100,000 Orthodox refugees arrived from Asia Minor and the Black Sea; then, after the Nazi occupation of 1941, by the deportation of almost 50,000 Jews to Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen.

Sephardic Jews set up the first printing presses in 1510, making this a city of books long before the book fair. Yet the dialogue opened with foreign publishers by the National Book Centre of Greece (Ekebi) has undeniably borne fruit. Among the many fine Greek novels made available in English translation since the fair began are Vangelis Hatziyannidis's *Four Walls*, shortlisted for the Independent foreign fiction prize, and *Stolen Time* (both published by Marion Boyars); Alexis Stamatis's *Bar Flaubert* (Arcadia); Petros Markaris's *The Late-Night News* and *Zone Defence* (Harvill Secker); Ioanna Karystiani's *The Jasmine Isle* (Europa); and Pavlos Matesis's *The Daughter* (Arcadia). Out this month is Alki Zei's young-adult novel about drugs, divorce and *gastarbeiter*, *Tina's Web* (Aurora Metro), while unmissable next year is Apostolos Doxiadis's graphic novel about the origin of mathematics, *Logicomix* (Bloomsbury), featuring the author's dog Manga.

While the book fair is smartly housed in Helexpo, the city's cavernous equivalent of London's Olympia, the biennale, with 160 artists from 37 countries, is spreading to the city's monuments, from churches and hamams to disused port warehouses. Maria Tsantsanoglou, director of the Greek State Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, and one of the biennale's main curators, says it has also drawn on the city's status as a crossroads in inviting artists from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the former Soviet Union, "not as exotic, but as people who don't have access, to bring them into creative dialogue with Greek and 'western' artists and curators".

A dozen Greek artists are showing at the Alatzá Imaret, a mosque built in 1484 that was used to dispense alms in the 19th century. Meanwhile, the staid courtyard of the Byzantine museum has been overrun by an army of figurines in dark suits and hats. Part of the plan is to juxtapose installation, video and new art forms with the revered icons and statuary of the Byzantine and Archaeological museums. According to Tsantsanoglou, Greeks have a generally low opinion of contemporary art. "Perhaps it's understandable because there are so many antiquities," she says, "but the biennale is a chance to challenge that, and show art as something active, that has to do with contemporary life."

One remarkable exhibit is a walk-in container parked in the port that displays photographs and videos of a three-year project to rehouse and integrate a community of Greek Pontians repatriated from the Black Sea in 1992 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The ethnic Greeks were invited by the Greek government, says architect and curator Hariklia Hari, but were left for years to live in iron containers in Farkadona, Thessaly, in a guarded camp, because of an official policy regarding the dispersal of refugees. As a result of the project, and with government backing, she says, they have finally moved into housing of their own design.

"In Greece, the phenomenon of migrants is at its very beginning," the Albanian-born writer Gazmend Kapllani said at the book fair. Growing up in a totalitarian state where the borders were closed and books banned made

facility in foreign languages a condition of intellectual survival. After reading forbidden literature in Italian and French, he moved to Greece in 1991, and studied philosophy in Athens while selling goods from a kiosk, becoming adept in "two types of language: philosophy and street". His novel, *The Small Diary of Borders*, is partly about the mass crossings from Albania into Greece of the early 1990s. Though he wrote it in impeccable Greek, it was offered first prize for translation into the Greek language. Boundaries, he says, "are also imposed by how others see us".