

AGENDA

LEBANON

FILM

‘Citizen Four’

Ashkal Alwan, Jisr al-Wati,
Sept. 10, 7 p.m.
01-423-879

This 2014 documentary presents the encounters of filmmaker Laura Poitras and journalist Glenn Greenwald with Edward Snowden over the course of many visits to Hong Kong, as he hands over classified documents providing evidence of mass indiscriminate and illegal invasions of privacy by the National Security Agency.

AKU Student Film Festival

Al-Kafaat University, Hadath, Ain Saade
Sept. 20-26,
screening times vary
01-879-304

This film event showcases the work of local film school students and recent graduates, and will include workshops and networking events that promote openness and cultural diversity.

MUSIC

The Jigers

Onomatopoeia, Jean Jalkh Street, Ashrafieh
Sept. 10, 8:30 p.m.
01-398-986

Dedicated to spreading Celtic culture through original fusion music, Sam Wehbi, Inger Hannisdal, George Athanas, Charbel Hajj and Kevin Safadi will perform an evening of folk, rock and Celtic tunes.

PHOTOGRAPHY

‘Au Retour’

Institut Francais, Damascus Road, Mathaf
Through Sept. 30
01-420-205

This show presents a series of photographs taken by Clara Abi Nader, who after living abroad since 2011 decided to revisit and document various locations around Lebanon.

‘Raw Talents’

Art Factum Gallery, Rebban Street, Karantina
Through Sept. 14
01-443-263

This show assembles the works of 10 emerging student photographers from NDU.

‘10 ans après’

SV Gallery, Ariss Kanafani Street, Saifi Village
Sept. 10-20
01-975-655

Joy Homsy’s photos capture the Beirut protests of February to April 2005.

‘Assim Vivemos’

Brasil-Lebanon Cultural Center, Trad Building, Mar Mitr Street, Ashrafieh
Sept. 10-14
01-332-905

This exhibition presents the images of Brazilian journalist Lu Braga and photographer Bruno Percut. The opening will be followed by a performance courtesy of the band Samba Brasil.

ART

‘What Happened Here’

Ayyam Gallery, Beirut Tower, Zeitouneh Street
Sept. 10 until Oct. 5
01-374-450/51

Oussama Diab presents his latest paintings, drawings and mixed-media collages juxtaposing domestic scenes and individual portraits.

JUST A THOUGHT

The cure for anything is salt water: Sweat, tears or the sea.

Isak Dinesen (aka Karen Blixen)
(1885-1962)
Danish author

REVIEW

A dialogue of art, space and salt

‘SALTWATER,’ the Istanbul Biennial, launches its ambitious, far-flung program

By Jim Quilty

The Daily Star

ISTANBUL: In a large, high-ceilinged ground-floor room of the Galata Greek Primary School, a group of international media and critics are milling about in Anna Boghiguian’s “The Salt Traders.”

Draped from the ceiling like the sails of an undead man-of-war, three large lengths of not-quite-rotting canvas are variously unfurled. One is adorned with a world map, subdivided by salt-consumption patterns, and a model of salt’s molecular composition.

The sails are tethered to several large chunks of rock salt scattered on the tiles. Complementing these are piles of sea salt, sand and the smashed skeleton of an antique-looking wooden boat, its fragments cast around the room like so much storm-tossed flotsam.

This is strong work, though its meaning defies simple summary.

Further speculation is interrupted by a monophonic chorus of eight male voices rising abruptly from the foyer outside, belting out an Armenian-language chorus.

With a few dozen startled art-consumers surrounding them, and dozens more lingering on the landing above, the singing choir ascends the stairs.

Reluctantly, you leave the air conditioning billowing through “The Salt Traders” and return to the dense humidity guarding the school’s interior, wedging into the scrum of moist bodies following this majestic, indecipherable dirge as it is borne to the fourth floor.

“How sweetly,” the choir sings, “blows the wind of love.”

This new performance of an old tune is the work of Beirut-based artist Haig Aivazian, collaborating with the Beyoglu Holy Trinity Armenian Church Choir.

For innocents accustomed to thinking of Turkey as a Sunni monoculture, hearing an Armenian church ensemble performing secular music in Istanbul is surprising. Composed by an Armenian-Turkish oud master, “Wavy is the Sea of Bolis, Oh Mother” echoes an older cultural hybridity.

The Galata School is hosting one of several group shows in the program of the 14th Istanbul Biennial. Boghiguian and Aivazian’s works were unveiled Wednesday, Sept. 2, alongside new pieces by Michael Rakowitz, Hera Buyuktasciyan, Prabhakar Pachpute, Rupali Patil and Emre Huner.

Like the city hosting it, this biennial is a sprawling affair.

Staged in over 30 venues on both sides of the Bosphorus, from the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara, and several districts around greater Istanbul – Beyoglu, Balat (the old city), Sisli, Kadiköy, Rumelifeneri and Büyükdada – the event is exhibiting over 1,500 artworks, including 50-odd artist commissions.

Entitled “SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms,” the biennial has been “drafted” by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and is organized by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV).

Christov-Bakargiev may be best known for her work as artistic director of dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel’s famed art quinquennial, in 2012. She’s been juggling projects ever since, and in 2016 will assume the role of director of Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporanea.

The “thought forms” of the biennial’s subtitle refer to a series of early 20th-century abstract works of that name created by Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater. Besant’s works are hanging in the biennial’s 55-artist group show at Istanbul Modern, as are contemporary artist Lea Porsager’s series of new interpretations of Besant’s work.

“A number of drawings, paintings, installations, films, objects, books, collaborations and research-based events will be viewable as thought forms,” Christov-Bakargiev has remarked in her biennial notes, “waves or oscillating patterns of repeating and differing lines that structure and enfold all forms of transference of energy – from brain waves to shockwaves after an explosion ... radio waves and light.”

“SALTWATER,” the title, is a conceptual touchstone for Istanbul’s (indeed humanity’s) relationship with salt, water, seawater, etc., and a number of the biennial’s new works – like Boghiguian’s “The Salt Traders” – reflect upon this theme.

Salt is vital to human survival, Christov-Bakargiev notes, but it’s inimical to our digitized civilization.

“If you drop your smart phone in fresh water,” she writes, “you can dry it and it will probably work again. If it falls into salt water, chemical molecular changes in the materials of your phone will break it.”

During the first three days of the biennial – as international media, critics, curators and the like sprinted through as many works as possible – salt water was ubiquitous for other reasons too.

A conspiracy of heat, humidity and the charming old (negligibly ventilated) venues that house many of the works – the Galata Greek Primary School (built between 1885 and 1909) being only one of these – left all hands thoroughly sodden in their own sweat.

At the end of a day of “SALTWATER,” shirts were likely to be imprinted with personalized “thought forms” of dried salt.

The venues are an integral part of SALTWATER. Organizers have been scrupulous about including information about their history – whether a condemned car park or the retooled former warehouse that’s now Istanbul Modern – as well as the works they house.

Some of SALTWATER’s several group shows are staged in conventional white cube-style galleries. Other venues have been selected because they are not neutral spaces, but will somehow dialogue with the work. This is particularly true of the many small converted spaces hosting standalone pieces.

Some locations do lend added value to the work, not least two of the spaces on Beyoglu’s Bank Street.

Housed in the former headquarters of the Ottoman Bank, designed at the end of the 19th century, SALT Galata is hosting Zeyno Pukinli’s “Minima Akademika/Magnus,” 2015, a work that claims to be comprised of “found cheat sheets.”

Enclosed within several glass-topped tables, Pukinli’s work is indeed made up of dozens of tiny pieces of paper, bearing tinier writing in several languages on subjects from



Anna Boghiguian’s “The Salt Traders,” on show at the Galata Greek Primary School.

social science, humanities and science. Some are hand-scrawled, others seem to have been miniaturized and Xeroxed from textbooks – just the sort of thing you might use in an exam, at least before smartphones.

Thanks to its media and location the work has a nostalgic quality. Yet the irony of the cheat sheet transcends both media and location.

“Cheating,” using information we don’t actually possess, requires discretion, which demands the compression of information. Greater compression makes the information less accessible, however, making the cheat reliant on mediating technology – each vitrine is accompanied by a magnifying glass for those wanting to read the content.

Nowadays, “cheating” is mundane reality.

A few doors down from SALT, the Minerva Han building, built in 1913 to house the Bank of Athens, is home to Kasa Galeri, the refitted former bank vault.

Here Walid Raad’s 2015 work “Another Letter to the Reader” is being exhibited. It consists of three discrete installations of wooden shipping crates and cardboard boxes, all laser cut.

The laser cuttings that score each container are of a decorative sort. Biennial press materials suggest the “art objects seem to have escaped, referring to the need for art to be freed from its hoarding in the age of

creative capitalism.” They could just as easily be read as the incisions of a thief who’s removed decoration from each crate the way another might cut canvasses from their frames.

The venues on Büyükdada, too, were chosen to dialogue with the works they house. The largest of the “Princes’ Islands,” clustered just off Istanbul’s Asian shore, Büyükdada is hosting a number of strong and visually striking works.

Rizzo Palace, a gorgeous, now-abandoned, 19th-century clapboard structure, is staging Ed Atkins’ 2015 work “Hissler,” an oddly engaging two-channel CGI-assisted musical-video installation recounting the final half-hour in the life of a man who expired when a sinkhole opened beneath his bed.

Picturesque venues like Rizzo Palace have become collaborating forms with the works they house. No surprise that some visiting Büyükdada felt that these locations complement the work less than needlessly distract from it.

Christov-Bakargiev has sprinkled biennial works about various spaces around the Bosphorus in order to make the event a city-wide affair, rather than something restricted to a few galleries.

The implication that SALTWATER is making contemporary art accessible to people outside the rarified sphere of contemporary art habitués made some snort with

amusement. Much of the work in the exhibition program assumes a common discursive framework between artist and onlooker. Eye-balling such work probably won’t be enough to “get it.”

Given the incompatibility of popular taste and contemporary artistic practice, it seems appropriate that the ruin of Leon Trotsky’s former house sets the stage for perhaps the most accessible – some say “kitsch” – work on Büyükdada.

“The Most Beautiful of All Mothers,” the new work of Adrián Villar Rojas, sets a menagerie of 15-odd life-sized animal statues a few meters offshore, on concrete plinths set in the shallows.

Quite unlike the apocalyptic tableaux of cracked-clay sculptures Villar Rojas devised for the last Documenta (an emaciated woman suckling a piglet, say), the animal pairs on Büyükdada are shiny and white – ideal forms rendered as ersatz classical statuary.

Stacked upon these glistening figures are scruffy, naturally hued secondary elements. The white elephant, with a squirrel and a few birds perched on its shoulder, balances a metal disk on its head. Beehives and clay pots teeter atop a moose carcass, which itself balances upon a white rhino.

The corpse-bearing beasts look like climate change refugees, burdened with a few shards of human culture, awaiting the next ark.

One of the treats of SALTWATER is being hosted in Balat, site of old Constantinople. Here the Küçük Mustafa Pasa Hammam (built in 1477, 24 years after the Ottoman conquest of the city) is staging “The Secrets of Karbala.”

The final film in Wael Shawky’s Cabaret Crusades – a trilogy recounting that conflict from an Arab-Muslim perspective – “Karbala” uses song and glass marionettes to retell the story of the notorious Fourth Crusade, which culminated with the sack of Christian Constantinople.

This spectacle can be appreciated perfectly well in a white cube. Seeing the work within this 15th-century Constantinople bathhouse elevates it to an entirely different level.

“SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms” is up at its various venues through Nov. 1, 2015.



Walid Raad’s “Another Letter to the Reader,” at Kasa Galeri, Beyoglu.



From Adrián Villar Rojas, “The Most Beautiful of All Mothers,” the Trotsky House, Büyükdada.