

DIARY

TALKING TURKEY

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Left: Artist Ronan McCrea and curator Vaari Claffey. Right: Curators Beral Madra and T. Melih Görgün. (All photos: Cathryn Drake)

TO A TRAVELER arriving from steaming hot Istanbul on the second weekend in August, the Black Sea seemed like an ideal place for a late-summer getaway. The third Sinop biennial, “Sinopale 3: Hidden Memories, Lost Traces,” is either the ridiculous or sublime extreme in the proliferation of such exhibitions around the world. (With eight curators and thirty artists, it also reflects the worldwide proliferation of curators.) Founded by an Amazon queen, the Sinop seaport is located in the northernmost point of Turkey and was once a thriving crossroads connecting the ancient world. Curator Vaari Claffey and artist Ronan McCrea recounted that when they checked in for their flight from Dublin, the Turkish Airlines attendant exclaimed, “Sinop? We fly to Sinop?” Claffey added: “That should have been our clue.” The laid-back town of around thirty-six thousand now shows little evidence of its impressive historical credentials—not least as birthplace of the ancient philosopher and infamous cynic Diogenes.

Following a swim at the gorgeous volcanic Karakum beach, and a huge plate of manti, the Turkish version of tortellini, I attended curator Beral Madra's slide show–lecture on the state of Istanbul's contemporary art scene at a former madrasa turned crafts bazaar. Her discussion about the conflict in Turkey between traditional male-oriented culture and “the modernist elite” was interrupted abruptly by the call to prayer broadcast loudly from the mosque next door. Madra waited and then, without missing a beat, continued about how difficult it is to find an audience among the local general public and the lack of a healthy art production in Turkey.



Left: Artist Maria Papadimitriou and curator Branko Franceschi. Right: Artist Alpaslan Karaaslan.

Organized by Turkish curator T. Melih Görgün on a shoestring budget, the third Sinopale turned out to be the perfect vehicle for bringing local residents into the art production process. As the artists were expected to produce site-specific installations within a week, they had to depend on serendipity and the kindness of strangers. The exhibition “Temporarily Shelved,” curated by Claffey and Rana Öztürk, seamlessly integrated a series of videos as archival reading stations in the quaint Doctor Rıza Nur Public City Library. Gülsün Karamustafa's contribution, *Bogaziçi 1954*, for example, was a visual diary of a memorable Black Sea ice storm that hit Istanbul. For *The Lost Photographs of Alfred H.*, McCrea collaborated with a local writer who responded in voice-over to a series of anonymous yet personal slide images found at a Berlin market. One unexpected piece of luck was the Sinopean predilection for creative recycling. “Whenever we ask anyone to help us make something, they say, ‘No problem,’ and find new uses for old things.” Claffey explained. “We call it the Sinop solution. There is no trash here.”

Things at the other historic exhibition venue—the notorious Sinop prison, where many of the country’s noted intellectuals and writers were once detained as political prisoners—were not so tranquil. It seemed the intersection between local and global manifested itself in the clash among Sinop’s periodic electricity shutdowns, the nonchalant Mediterranean approach to organization, and the urgency of the impending inauguration. I stopped by on Friday evening to find artist Maria Papadimitriou and her young local assistants waiting for power. “I will be sorry to leave Sinop; I like this place even though it’s humid as hell,” Papadimitriou noted, swatting away mosquitoes.



Left: Artists Georg Klein and Ludwig Kittinger with Austrian consul Christian Brunmayr. Right: Artist Daniele Pezzi and curator Vittorio Urbani.

To kick off the exhibition opening on Saturday, Madra cited sustainability and the activation of traditional local values versus mass consumerism as the most important aspects of the project. The electricity had switched on just two hours before. “It has been very funny,” artist Anne Metzen said. “You just sit all day and don’t know what’s happening, and then suddenly everything is done during the night and you don’t understand how.”

There were raucous Ramadan parties every night, inaugurated by a loud cannon shot at dusk. Young people paraded around in clown costumes banging drums, and live music poured out from clubs. At the nightly gathering place, the beachside Sky Glass Garden Café, everyone expressed surprise at the general openness and lack of conservatism. “It is not at all what I expected; I was a little nervous, actually,” Claffey admitted. As we looked up in search of falling stars, Sinopean artist Alpaslan Karaaslan informed us that there are no traffic lights in town: “When they put one in once there was an accident, so they dismantled it.” Metzen added, “The lack of traffic lights is very symptomatic—they handle it in their own way, a

constant negotiation.” I asked art historian Funda Arkut whether she thought the exhibition was a biennial in terms of the popular conception. “It’s not a biennale, it’s a Sinopale,” she answered. Fair enough. In fact, the concept behind this edition is to counter the homogenizing effects of globalization by having international artists convey a sense of the place and in turn take something of the locale back with them, rather than the other way around—a hopeful antidote to the “biennialization” of art and the same faces in every different place.

— Cathryn Drake



Left: Sinopale's Catriona Maciver. Right: Parades around Sinop.

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