

Interviews

Then and Now

Adelina von Fürstenberg in
conversation with
Stephanie Bailey

Independent curator and film producer, Adelina von Fürstenberg, is director and founder of Art for The World, a non-governmental organization founded in 1996 with a view to use art as a social force. This same belief has driven von Fürstenberg's career, which spans decades and first found inspiration in Harald Szeeman's Documenta 5. In this interview, von Fürstenberg discusses the 4th Thessaloniki Biennale, of which she was Chief Curator. For the exhibition, she looked at the Mediterranean Sea as a geographical space layered with histories and relations. Von Fürstenberg then discusses some of the influences behind her curatorial career, while looking back on the origins of Art for the World and the exhibitions it has produced worldwide.



(foreground) Maria Papdimitriou, (background) Marta Dell'Angelo

Stephanie Bailey: I wanted to talk about how the geographical and historical context of Thessaloniki fed into your conceptualization of the 4th Thessaloniki Biennale's central exhibition. You take into account the location of Thessaloniki being on the Mediterranean Sea and on the border with Turkey; essentially between east and west. You also consider the cultural make up and legacy of the city itself, with the long historical presence of Italian, Armenian and Jewish communities here, from as far back as to antiquity.

Adelina von Fürstenberg: I believe that each of us is related to a place, and that our ideas come from our personal biographies. Everything comes from inside yourself. Then of course it becomes universal and then you can engage in dialogue. But first and foremost, when someone asks you where you are from, you answer specifically. I would say I was born in Constantinople or Istanbul. I am Armenian and educated in the first years of my life with this Mediterranean spirit, as was the case with my generation. I was educated on one side with this cosmopolitan spirit of the

Mediterranean, but at the same time I was influenced by the past, its conflicts. There was the population exchange of 1922: it was still very present growing up – everybody at home would speak about it, so even if you were a child you would hear these stories; we grew up around them.

From my perspective, Thessaloniki is a key place because modern Turkey started in Thessaloniki – Ataturk was born here. But since Greece took control of Thessaloniki from the Ottomans, everything that has happened here in the twentieth century has had a strong cultural impact. You have the Balkan wars, World War II and then the Nazi occupation, which affected the huge Jewish community living in Thessaloniki. In all, there is a history here that goes back four thousand years – this is a place where many things have happened. Therefore, it was necessary to focus on this. You cannot do a show here out of the blue. You have to make an exhibition based on the roots of the place. So this was my initial approach. But this was not an intellectual effort at all – it was personal.

SB: The central exhibition you curated does feel personal. And I think it is at its strongest at the Yeni Camii, where you are showing such works as Rosana Palazyan's *A Story I Never Forgot* (2013), which is dedicated not only to the Armenian history of migration, but to all migrants in general. This attests to the legacy of migration that is very much part of the Mediterranean region's history, its heritage, its flow and energy. But this adds a deep-seated pain to the region's legacy, too.

AVF: A lot of pain.

SB: So I am interested in how you dealt with this, in terms of the works you selected but also from your personal position of being Armenian.

AVF: In the Mediterranean, people have experienced a lot and these experiences have not gone unexpressed. It is important to see, through art, these expressions. So, in this show you can see pain, love, solitude, being together, violence. I wanted to do something that brought all of these things together. This work of Zineb Sedira that I included in the exhibition for instance, *The Lovers* (2008), it's amazing: so tender but also so sad. These ships, they are abandoned; broken. In each work included in this exhibition, you have a history, just as we all have our own histories. But saying that, with Palazyan, it was not just because she is Armenian that I chose to work with her, but also because I worked with her in Brazil. She did a lot of work on criminality in Rio and I thought it would be interesting to have someone from Brazil with that spirit in this show. But then, she told me that her grandmother was from Thessaloniki! She produced this work especially for the Biennale because her grandmother taught embroidery – she was brought up in Konye, in Turkey, after the genocide. So this added a really interesting dimension to the exhibition and specifically to the context of Yeni Camii.



Gal Weinstein, *Fire Tire*, 2010-2013. Wax, wool, polyester wool, Styrofoam, graphite.

Courtesy Galleria Riccardo Crespi, Milan, and the artist.

SB: In terms of Yeni Camii, you presented these explosive tyres in the middle of the space by Gal Weinstein, *Fire Tire* (2011). This was a pretty intense addition, given the nature of this space being an old mosque. I wanted to ask you about how you dealt with the curatorial in this specific site.

AVF: I studied this space a lot because I was very impressed by the story of it. It is an old mosque, built by Italian architect Vitaliano Poselli in 1902 for the city's Donmeh community: Jewish converts to Islam who had converted in around the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. This was a small community, very wealthy and dynamic, who moved from Thessaloniki to Istanbul during the population exchange. So Yeni Camii was their official mosque – Yeni Camii literally means 'New Mosque'. This was fascinating to me. If you look inside the building you can see a lot of Stars of David. The space was most interesting to me in terms of how you could bring these two things together – Judaism and Islam, for example – while remaining harmonious within yourself.

Using Yeni Camii was very much about the Ottoman influence in Thessaloniki. I mean, this was one country in the past, a long time before the concept of nations came onto the table. So here, it was also about this idea of how to bring these legacies together – Arab, Armenian, Cypriot, Jew, Persian – this idea of memory, the past, the present: everything is contained in this space. When thinking about this specific place in the context of the 4th Thessaloniki Biennale, the Yeni Camii is really 'everywhere but now', in that sense.

SB: The exhibition attempts at raising all these layers so one can see everything in tandem in some ways. There is this idea also that history is so quickly forgotten and this idea that the world is quickly forgetting its historical legacies as you say – its relationships.

AVF: This is true.

SB: And you talk about this efficacy of art in the exhibition catalogue to revive such relationships. I am thinking here also about the utilization of art, and more specifically biennales, as apparatuses with which to put forward, sometimes even impose, a cartographic agenda....

AVF: Something to take into consideration is that I am from an older generation of curators. I have a complex education and background and belong to that generation of what used to be called the *Kunstmacher* in Germany – those who make, who fabricate, art. Some of them disappeared or became established directors, or so on. Being a female curator was not easy in those days, surrounded by such powerful curators. Nevertheless, thanks to my being a woman, Mediterranean, and even a rebel, I was able to keep my freedom, and able to do projects such as this, in total autonomy.

Some biennales, even if they do strong intellectual research and are deeply involved with the most contemporary of today's art, they are lacking in experience. It is like Walter Benjamin said about the poverty of experience: what is the value of our cultural heritage if we are not supported by the bonds of experience? Let's face it: that poverty is not just about our personal experiences, but also on the experiences of all mankind. At the end of the day, it is poverty of experience that we are facing today.

SB: So this is related to memory...

AVF: You know, at the press conference for the Thessaloniki Biennale, I told people to remember that they are living in a society with freedom of expression. People take this for granted. But, even with this crisis in Greece, for example, despite everything: there is freedom of expression here. Look at what is happening next door in the eastern and southern Mediterranean countries: you can't talk and there are police everywhere! So we have to take this as a value as

much as we have to remember the experiences of the past in order to face the present.

SB: So in thinking about Palazyan's work, the object – the handkerchief – that represented her grandmother's journey acts as this relic of a memory that the younger generations inherit, much like an architectural site with a legacy such as Yeni Camii. But then how do younger generations process these memories – if they can recall them at all, that is – and move on from them without leaving them behind completely? This is related to the poverty of experience in some ways, or how we deal with history.



(right) Veronica Smirnoff, (background) Zineb Sedira

AVF: It's not just memory or history. It is also how we deal with the future in some way. You know, maybe it is easier for someone like Rosana to remember her grandmother than any young European to remember their great-grandparents because of this experience of migration; these stories that those generations carried with them. Immigration is something very important not only as something

negative but also something positive, because migration makes you keep these memories alive.

SB: In thinking about this idea of migration within the context of movement, flow and circulation, I wanted to talk about art as cultural diplomacy. You do come from a school that still sees art as playing a social role – one that could and does act as a political and social mediator. In your view, does art really have so much political and social agency today?

AVF: With the example of the 4th Thessaloniki Biennale opening: there were two points of view for the opening night concert after the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, the anti-fascist rap singer who was killed in Athens the night before the opening by one of the members of the far right Golden Dawn party here in Greece. One, he was an artist and musician and there was an idea that he would have agreed with what we were doing. There was another point of view that we should stop playing music and instead listen to the radio and follow what was happening with the demonstrations all over the country. Now, if the Mayor of Thessaloniki had told us to stop, we would not have celebrated. But, he left us to continue, since we all knew that art is a form of resistance precisely against such acts of fascism.

SB: This makes me think of the protests around Gezi Park in Istanbul and the subsequent calls to cancel the 13th Istanbul Biennial as a result of these protests, which spread across Turkey....

AVF: But the Istanbul Biennial should have happened – it would have been impossible to cancel it.

SB: Then there is the 2014 Manifesta and the issues around that since it will take place in Russia and taking into account the political situation there for artists and other members of society's so-called 'margins'. Thinking about this, it's very interesting what biennials are

facing today, in that they are becoming totally embedded in the politics of their contexts. It seems through these biennial exhibitions, art is coming face to face with some of society's major issues...

AVF: This is not the case for biennials related closely to the art market, such as Venice, where we are facing art produced in a system that has similarities to the Hollywood film industry.

SB: What you say about 'Hollywood art' reminds me of what Andres Szanto noted in the 2013 Art Basel, about the art world really being a tale of two art worlds these days. But there is also the issue of what kind of art is being pushed around the world through such global events as the biennial, or the art fair. I'm thinking now about your choice to include Khalil Rabah in the Thessaloniki Biennale, with an installation that really thinks about how art has been exported from the west somehow, in the form of a painting of people looking at an On Kawara date painting, for instance. He is also presenting works from the series, *Art Exhibition: Ready Made Representations 1954-2010* (2011), which presents a collection of oil paintings based on photographs of exhibitions of Palestinian art that have taken place around the world...

AVF: Well with Khalil, we worked together for the first time when he uprooted olive trees from Palestine to Geneva and planted them in the United Nations Park. In this exhibition in Thessaloniki, he is documenting another exhibition. He performs with a very western attitude of baroque with a very eastern view, and this is very interesting because he is reinterpreting the baroque concept of the 'painting in the painting'. At the same time, this installation is like looking in a mirror – you enter into the room and are not sure what you are looking at – it could be either reflections or a real moment.

SB: You are also showing a series of works by Raed Yassin: China vases produced in the Ming style but depicting the story of the

Lebanese Civil War. The result is a set of complex objects that are inscribed with, through their very production, the history of global circulation and trade. When thinking about the popular trade for Chinese porcelain in the past, but also in thinking about China's manufacturing industry today, and that 'Made in China' tag, both Rabah and Yassin problematize the issues surrounding appropriation within the context of globalization not to mention the global art market...



Ymane Fakhir (from left to right) *Naissance de Badr*, 2005, *Fete du trone*, 2009, *Passage*, 2003, *Podium*, 2003. Printout *Dentelle*, 2003. Printout. Courtesy the artist and galerieofmarseille.

AVF: Yes, but this reminds me of how somebody actually said that there is nothing new in this biennial, which shocked me, because they asked this in Italian and the word related to 'newness' in the fashion sense – in that there were no new 'items' or 'products' so to speak. I asked in return: is there anything new in our world? Because everything is repeating itself – artists are continuing to use the same materials, the same techniques, however it is the attitudes and

dialogues that change. So, you could of course say that there is nothing new in this Biennale, only if you are speaking in the sense of the market and talking about going shopping so as to buy something new. But the question is about how you deal with that. How can we, in such a context of supply and demand, present something new, beyond what the market expects?

SB: This desire for newness today makes me think about Robert Storr when he talked about how the art world can so often reject works because they have been seen so many times, forgetting that there is a public who might never have been exposed to them. I think here about the recent Istanbul Biennial, and a work by Angelica Mesiti, *Citizens Band* (2012), which has indeed been shown around the world most recently at the Sharjah Biennial – but it was a new experience for the public in Istanbul. Do you think this drive for newness is also related to the market influence on art production today and the pressure for artists to constantly produce in relation to the pace with which the art market moves? Biennials are also implicated in this kind of pace, too....

AVF: Thinking about the condition of art biennials today, the mainstream biennales like Sao Paulo and Venice will always be commercially driven. And it is getting worse and worse. Today, the Venice Biennale is practically an art fair, though of course, Venice itself is beautiful. But I am not saying it is not a good thing: if you show in the Venice Biennale, you have amazing visibility, which is useful in our field, and there are good projects, too. But it is not for the public. It is a specialized biennale, more refined in that sense. But it doesn't make the people change their perspectives or their attitudes. They don't give any possibilities, for example, to the Italian public to see things differently.

Of course, in the case of Thessaloniki it is different. The human scale is more low profile than in the past, and this is why I have been

making non-stop comments about opening art up to the public. Because on this scale, as in Thessaloniki, you can do that – make it public. The Biennale is free.

SB: Which makes me think about the legacy of Documenta, which was established precisely to help the public see differently and in many ways to heal after the Second World War. This also brings in the influence of Harald Szeeman's Documenta 5 on your practice as a curator...



Raed Yassin, *Yassin Dynasty (No.2)*, 2013.
Hand-painted porcelain vases. Variable dimensions.
Courtesy Kalfayan Galleries, Athens – Thessaloniki.

AVF: Harald Szeeman's Documenta 5 was the first exhibition I saw in my life, and still to this day I can describe exactly what I saw there. I was very young but I still have in my mind the images of this Documenta. It was for the public. It was revolutionary. Szeeman did a lot of good things after that of course, but that was his masterpiece because it was possible to do something like that, then. Of course we have to say that Christov-Bakargiev's Documenta 13, was great, but

Szeeman was bringing a new vision. It was the way he put things together that made this a groundbreaking exhibition.

SB: How would you say Szeeman influenced the way you curate?

AVF: During my high school studies in Swiss Italian, I don't remember who took me to a village next to Lugano, to the house of the surrealist artist Meret Oppenheim. She was beautiful and full of humour. I adored her immediately. Later on, we worked together for an outdoor exhibition called *Promenades* (1985). She created a small boathouse and put it in a small river. That day in her house, she introduced me to Harold Szeeman. A few years later, I did an interview with him, and then we became friends, as well as with his wife Ingelborg, for quite a long time. He influenced me because he had a strong vision in art. He was courageous and determined. I learned from him how to curate group shows and projects with large perspectives but related to one strong idea. He was a *kunstmacher*.

SB: I wanted to talk now more generally about Art For the World, which is a non-profit organization you founded...could you tell me about the history of this venture, how it started, how it evolved and how it will move forward?

AVF: In 1995, while directing the French National Centre of Contemporary Art in Grenoble, I was invited by the UN General Secretary to curate and organize the 50th Anniversary of the UN in Geneva. For this commemoration, more the 60 of the most promising artists from all over the world such as Buarly Buabre, Alfredo Jaar, Tadashi Kawamata, Kingelez and Chen Zhen, as well as Ilya Kabakov and Robert Rauschenberg, created site specific works in the UN building and its park in Geneva. During that month of May in 1995, while inside the building and closed within the conference rooms, the UN delegates were discussing worldwide issues as the artists were creating artworks on tolerance, difference and Human

Rights. The result was amazing. On the opening day, invitees such as Yasser Arafat, Boutros Ghali, Jacques Chirac, and the Queen of Jordan, freely circulated with the public between the artworks in the park of the UN, talking with the artists about politics and life. *The New York Times* put the show on its front cover!



(left) Priscilla Tea, (right) Marie Bovo

After this very strong experience, friends, collaborators, artists and myself founded Art for The World in 1996 as a non-governmental organization in Geneva. Then, in 1997, we organized an exhibition in Marrakech: *Meditations*, which was held at the Medersa Ibn Youssef, again on the themes of tolerance of beliefs and difference. The show was presented in the ex-cells of the students of the Medersa: we showed artists, poets and musicians from different religions and countries such as Farid Belkhaia, Alighiero Boetti, Shirazeh Houshary, Anish Kapoor, Rashid Korashni, Sol Lewitt, Sarkis, and poets such as Adonis, Juan Guidisolo, Abdelwahab Meddab, Octavio Paz. Later, in 2011, with almost the same subject, I produced a series of short fiction films *Then and Now, Beyond Borders and Differences*, by the filmmakers Jafar Panahi, Huseyin Karabey,

Robert Wilson, Idirssa Oudraogo and Fanny Ardant, on the freedom of beliefs and expression for the Alliance of Civilizations.

In 1998, we were invited by the World Health Organization to curate *The Edge of Awareness* with more than 50 artists from different continents showing their works on the issues of mental and physical health, poverty, aids, etc. with the participation of artists such as Vito Acconci, Ghada Amer, Matt Collishaw, Ennadre, Miyashima. Olu Oguibe, Ouattara, Adriana Verjao and others. It was a travelling show that went from PS1 in New York, to the SESC in Sao Paulo, the Lalitkaka Akademi New Delhi and to the Triennale of Milan. Then in 2000 we produced *Playgrounds and Toys*, a project for the fabrication of playgrounds and toys for disadvantaged children by artists and architects such as Andreas Angelidakis, Daniel Buren, Fabrice Gygi, Soo Ja Kim, Los Carpinteros, Angelos Plessas and Nari Ward. These were small and tender toys and playgrounds full of love for children that had lost everything. This project is still on-going. We were able to present it in many cities and have so far sent toys to refugee camps in Africa and have built playgrounds in Greece, India, Armenia, UK, China and Australia.

Since then, we have continued to curate a number of large exhibitions, in Venice during the Biennale, or participating in film festivals with films and video productions related to Human Rights. We are always working with strong and committed artists and filmmakers from different generations, backgrounds and cultures, united to communicate to a wide audience that, quoting James Arthur Baldwin: life is more important than art, but it's art that makes life important.

Adelina Cüberyan von Fürstenberg is a Swiss citizen of Armenian origin born in Istanbul, currently based in Geneva. She is an internationally renowned curator and one of the field's pioneers in

broadening contemporary art. Whilst a Political Science student at the University of Geneva, von Fürstenberg founded the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, working with prominent artists including Sol LeWitt, Daniel Buren, General Idea, Cindy Sherman, Andy Warhol and Lawrence Weiner. In the same period she organized performances with John Cage, Laurie Anderson, Philip Glass, Joan Jonas and Robert Wilson. From 1989–1994 she directed Le Magasin, Centre d'Art Contemporain of Grenoble, France, where she curated solo exhibitions of such artists as Vito Acconci, Alighiero Boetti, Gino De Dominicis, Ilya Kabakov, as well as symposia and lectures on architecture, science and philosophy. Over the same period she directed the Ecole du Magasin (School of Curators). In 1993 the International Jury of the 45th Venice Biennale awarded her a prize for her direction of Le Magasin and its School of Curators.

In 1995, on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations, she was invited to curate the exhibition *Dialogues of Peace*, an international exhibition presented at the UN headquarters in Geneva. In 1996 she founded Art for The World, a non-governmental organization for the diffusion of the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through contemporary art and cinema. Among her most recent projects is FOOD, a large exhibition exploring questions of survival, health, economy and culture through contemporary art, and the 4th Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art, for which she was Chief Curator. Von Fürstenberg is also a film producer, working between 2008–2011 for the European Commission, the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Council of Europe.

About the author

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Stephanie Bailey is Managing Editor of Ibraaz. She has an MA in Contemporary Art Theory from Goldsmiths College, a BA in Classical Civilisation with English Literature from King's College (both University of London), and a Foundation Diploma in Art and Design from Camberwell College of Art (University of the Arts London). Currently on the editorial committee for Naked Punch, her writing has appeared in publications including *ART PAPERS*, *ARTnews*, *Artforum*, *LEAP*, *Modern Painters*, *Notes on Metamodernism*, *Ocula.com*, *Whitewall* and *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*.