

**Understanding the Context of Contemporary Visual Art in Malta  
from 1989 to 2018: A Curator's Perspective**

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Volume I

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## **Abstract**

This thesis identifies and analyses the shifting of national and global contexts in which contemporary art practices in Malta were developed, understood and negotiated by artists, curators and commentators between 1989 and 2017. It establishes a detailed and comprehensive account of the development of contemporary art in Malta during this period and analyses the specific socio-political and cultural factors that impacted upon its diverse manifestations.

Following an introduction to pre and post Independence Malta, the thesis focuses on the time period from 1989 - the year that marked the reconfiguration of Europe with the fall of the Berlin wall and the subsequent end of the Cold War - and 2017, the year Malta participated in the Venice Biennale and, as a member of the European Union, held the European Union Presidency while preparing to host the 2018 European Capital City of Culture.

A significant part of this research has been the locating and analysing of primary unpublished and published visual and textual material that forms part of the complex history of contemporary art in Malta, including exhibition leaflets, newspaper reviews, policy documents, photographs and contemporary art works in private and public collections. The research is further informed by oral history interviews with key figures that are part of this complex multifaceted and largely previously unaccounted for history.

Drawing upon postcolonial approaches, the thesis engages with definitions of contemporary art within local and global contexts, the practices of artists and curators, and the accompanying infrastructures of exhibition cultures, education and government policy in order to analyse and understand the specific historical and cultural contexts that have shaped the diverse forms and preoccupations of contemporary art in Malta since 1989.

The thesis comprises of two volumes. The first volume is the written thesis of seven chapters, broadly chronological in order, with an introduction and conclusion. The second volume is an image-led, chronological catalogue intended to help future researchers navigate their way through the rich yet relatively unknown maze of contemporary art in Malta and to locate the primary material drawn from diverse public and private institutions, collections and archives during this research.

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## **Introduction**

The overall aim of this thesis is to establish a detailed and comprehensive account of the development of contemporary art in Malta from 1989 to 2017 and to analyse and understand the specific socio-political and cultural factors that impacted upon its diverse manifestations during this period. The main impetus for the research is the existing lack of in-depth published research on contemporary visual art in Malta and its development over the past thirty years. From the perspective of my role as a curator of modern and contemporary art within the Heritage Malta national agency, that oversees and maintains the National Collection, including contemporary art works, and as a freelance curator working mainly with contemporary artists and government entities, the lacunae in knowledge posits a challenge. This significant gap in knowledge has hindered a wider understanding of contemporary art in Malta and its specificities, and the accompanying complex histories of exhibition making pre and post Malta's entry into the European Union in 2004.

The thesis focuses on the time period from 1989 – 2017. The year 1989, marked the reconfiguration of Europe with the fall of the Berlin wall and the subsequent end of the Cold War. The year 2017, was highly significant for Malta from an international and cultural perspective. Malta participated in the Venice Biennale and, as a member of the European Union, held the presidency of the Council of European Union and was preparing to host the 2018 European Capital of Culture. In order to explore the specific nature of the shifts during this time period I engage with definitions of contemporary art within local and global contexts, the practices of artists and curators, and the accompanying infrastructures of exhibition cultures, education and government policy. This is necessary in order to analyse and understand the specific historical and cultural contexts that have shaped the diverse forms and preoccupations of contemporary art in Malta since 1989.

A significant part of this research process has focused on identifying, locating and analysing primary unpublished and published visual and textual material that form part of the complex history of contemporary art in Malta, including exhibition leaflets, newspaper reviews, policy documents, photographs and contemporary art works in private and public collections. The research is further informed by oral history interviews with key figures that are part of this complex, multifaceted and largely previously unaccounted for history.

This research crosses various fields including art history, curating, contemporary critical theory, visual anthropology, politics and cultural sociology. It is a study that uses extensive archival research to gain more understanding of the various contexts from pre independence Malta to the present, as well as anthropological approaches such as oral history interviews and observation to gain an in-depth understanding of the development of contemporary art in Malta.

### **Malta in Context**

Central to an understanding of contemporary art practice in Malta, is an understanding of the country's geo-political positioning. Situated at the centre of the Mediterranean, Malta is an archipelago of several islands (three of which are inhabited) surrounded by three continents, namely Europe, Africa and Asia – each of which has a distinct history, religion, as well as political and social values [Figure 1]. Malta is therefore a place where different cultures and powers have always interacted. This has had its impact on the local language which has a Semitic structure with strong European elements observable in the use of Latinised script; the country's social culture mainly evident in the strong family values upheld which equal those found in the south of Europe and the Middle East, and the traditions that spring from and express vocal and solid adherence to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.



**Figure 1: Map showing the Mediterranean Sea**

From an art historical perspective the rich history of Malta has been extensively researched. The most intensely researched period of Maltese art and architecture is when the Order of St John ruled Malta between 1530 and 1798 as a vassal state of the Kingdom of Sicily. Local and international researchers have covered this period extensively particularly with respect to Malta's Baroque heritage. The next most popular period of study is the late medieval era – which dates from the mid-twelfth century until 1530 in Malta, followed by studies of the island's prehistory mainly undertaken by archaeologists. By comparison, less research interest has been shown in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Malta was part of the British Empire with close artistic ties to Italy, and until recently, the development of modern and contemporary art pre and post-Malta's independence in 1964 has received little attention.

In part, the relative lack of interest in contemporary art developments in Malta until the turn of the millennium can be seen as related to Malta's geo-political positioning on the edge of Europe and its physical size. Malta is one of the smallest countries in the world

measuring 246 km<sup>2</sup> and in 2019 has a population of just under 450, 000.<sup>1</sup> In terms of size it could be compared to a town or small city such as Newcastle in England or Vienna in Austria. Such a concentrated community and over-populated country gives way to the power of habitus, of over reliance on the country's past cultural capital to the detriment of the modern and the contemporary, and the conceptual and material constraints this exerts on ways of behaviour, social etiquette and the politics of the local art world.<sup>2</sup> As I will argue, much changed after 1989 with the increasing awareness of global art developments, the introduction of new communication technologies with the internet and mobile phones, and Malta's subsequent decision to apply for membership of the European Union in 1998 that led to substantial changes in the organisation of culture and opportunities for artists to study, travel and exhibit abroad, establish new networks, and explore new artistic and curatorial practices.

In this study of contemporary art in Malta I address numerous historical and conceptual challenges. Firstly, how did contemporary art develop in a small country such as Malta which had no infrastructure dedicated to modern and contemporary art? Secondly, how did this situation in conjunction with the peripheral geographic position of Malta effect the establishment of contemporary art and artists' practice? And thirdly, how can we understand and define contemporary art in Malta in the above mentioned context? To address these questions, I have kept in mind Malta's rich history, particularly that it had been a British crown protectorate and colony between 1800 and 1964 during which time significant intentional attempts at cultural overhaul were undertaken. Consequently, one has

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<sup>1</sup> Vanessa Macdonald, "Malta's population growth largest in EU - by far", *Times of Malta*, July 10.,2019 accessed July 29, 2019 <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/maltas-population-growth-largest-in-eu-by-far.720748>; and "Medium-Term Fiscal Strategy for Malta: Update of Stability Programme 2019 – 2022" (Ministry for Finance) accessed July 29, 2019 [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2019-european-semester-stability-programme-malta\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2019-european-semester-stability-programme-malta_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> According to Bourdieu, "It is the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus; the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of life-styles, is constituted." Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), trans. Richard Nice, (London, Routledge, 1984). p. 170.



to take into account that this period of forced dependency necessarily exerted a profound impact on the economic, social and cultural fabric of the island.

While several scholars have discussed postcolonial issues in terms of contemporary art in large nations and continents such as, for example, South America, India and China, few publications to date have engaged with how contemporary visual art has developed within a micro-ecosystem such as Malta.<sup>3</sup>

### **Definitions of Contemporary Art**

Definitions of contemporary art have radically shifted since the turn of the twenty-first century when contemporary art was commonly associated with artworks produced after 1945.<sup>4</sup> At the dawn of the millennium, the 1960s and 1970s were indicated as marking the beginning of Western contemporary art due to the transition from medium-specific and object-based work to new types of art practices including performance, video art, minimalism, and conceptual art. Current discourse meanwhile, considers 1989 as the starting point since it is synonymous with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the signing of the peace agreement between George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev during the Malta Summit, and the organisation of key global and transnational art exhibitions. Among the most influential exhibitions of 1989 which changed the yardstick used to measure contemporary art were *Magiciens de la Terre*, held at Centre Georges Pompidou and La Grande Halle, Parc de la Villette, Paris, which included an equal number of artworks from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Australia as from the U.S. and Europe;<sup>5</sup> the 3<sup>rd</sup> Havana Biennale, entitled *Tradition and Contemporaneity in the arts in the Environment of the Third World* curated by

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<sup>3</sup> These include among others Okwui Enwezor, Partha Mitter, Ingrid Rogoff and Chika Okeke-Agulu.

<sup>4</sup> Popular publication include, for example, David Hopkins, *Art After Modern Art 1945-2000*, (Oxford University Press, UK, 2000) and Jonathan David Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being* (Laurence King Publishing, US, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> "Magiciens de la Terre", curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, Centre Georges Pompidou and La Grande Halle, Parc de la Villette, Paris, France between May 18 – August 14, 1989.

Gerardo Mosquera - an exhibition which became a meeting point for non-western artists;<sup>6</sup> and *The Other Story: Afro-Asian artists in post war Britain*, the first retrospective exhibition of British African, Caribbean and Asian artists, inaugurated at the Hayward Gallery, London.<sup>7</sup>

As Claire Bishop succinctly summarises in 2014:

the definition of ‘contemporary’ has become a moving target par excellence: until the late 1990s, it seemed synonymous with ‘post-war’, denoting art after 1945; about ten years ago, it was relocated to start somewhere in the 1960s; now the 1960s and 1970s generally tend to be viewed as high modernist, and the argument has been put forward that we should consider 1989 as the beginning of a new era, synonymous with the fall of communism and the emergence of global markets. While each of these periodizations has its pros and cons, the central drawback is that they operate from a Western purview.<sup>8</sup>

The complexities of what the term contemporary art encompasses has been much debated by various authors. The art historian and critic Terry Smith (2009), for example, traces the meaning of the contemporary in art in detail from the 1940s and argues that the 1980s mark the apparent closure of the historical horizon of the avant-garde, even though different models such as the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde were being introduced.<sup>9</sup>

For Smith, contemporary art is evident from the late 1980s as part of a new understanding of “the multiplicity of relations between being and time” (*con tempus*),<sup>10</sup> marked by new

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<sup>6</sup> Havana Biennial expanded its focus to include Africa and Asia art. The exhibition, held between 27 October and 31 December 1989, included 300 artists from 41 countries.

<sup>7</sup> Curated by artist Rasheed Araeen, *Another Story*, was organised in four sections: 'In the Citadel of Modernism'; 'Taking the Bull by the Horns'; 'Confronting the System'; and 'Recovering Cultural Metaphors'. Inaugurated at the Hayward Gallery, London (29 November 1989 to 4 February 1990), it travelled to Wolverhampton Art Gallery (10 March to 22 April 1990); and Manchester City Art Gallery and the Cornerhouse (5 May to 10 June 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology: Or, What's Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (Köln, Walther König, 2013), pp. 16-17.

<sup>9</sup> Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Terry Smith, ‘The State of Art History: Contemporary Art’, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (December 2010), p. 379.

communication technologies, globalisation, decolonisation and shifts in art infrastructures that recognize “that difference has become increasingly contemporaneous, with more of us more aware of what is essentially different, along with what is shared, relative to others.”<sup>11</sup> From a philosophical perspective Peter Osborne in his 2013 publication *Anywhere or Not at All*, argues for a three-fold periodization of contemporary art: namely, the predominance of American institutions of art and artistic practice after the Second World War; the 1960s with the introduction of new types of work (performance, minimalism and conceptual art) and, the neo-liberal art era after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989.<sup>12</sup>

Evidence of the increasing use of the term contemporary art can be seen in art history and theory publications which started to specify periods and dates in their titles. Examples include *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980*, edited by Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel (2012) which shows contemporary art in flux by presenting the different uses of technology, an awareness of histories from around the world, and a recognition that visual art stimuli can be provided by everyday culture;<sup>13</sup> *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, edited by Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (2012) presents essays on key theoretical perspectives by significant authors including Pierre Bourdieu, Rosalind Krauss and Olu Oguibe;<sup>14</sup> and *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, edited by Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (2013), presents commissioned essays by art historians, artists, critics, and curators on different art practices, locations, and philosophies under fourteen themed sections.<sup>15</sup>

This shift in interest toward the contemporary can also be seen in the introduction of critical theory as part of academic art programmes, especially in a number of universities in

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 380.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, (Verso, UK, 2013) p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980*, (UK, Oxford University Press, 2010) 8.

<sup>14</sup> Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985* (US, Wiley-Blackwell 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson, *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present* (US, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

the United States in the 1980s, which soon became part of the everyday currency of the art world. Various theorems from a variety of disciplines and intellectual perspectives including postmodernism, semiotics, poststructuralism, feminism, and postcolonialism - to name several of the most influential - were applied for the first time by art historians and artists. This is directly commented upon in the introduction to *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, where Kocur and Leung emphasise that as the contexts of art keep shifting and “the role of art continues to be measured against political, economic and technological transformations in society, theoretical discourses continue to illuminate and ground the thinking of art.”<sup>16</sup>

The diverse interpretation of key scholars who champion research into contemporary art show how in such a short time - between, Smith’s *What is Contemporary Art?* publication of 2009, and Bishop’s and Osborne’s contributions published in 2014 and 2013 respectively- the definitions of contemporary art have been extended to reflect issues of the global North and South.<sup>17</sup> As frequently noted, this was only possible after 1989 when global art markets emerged and the visual art sector was no longer totally controlled by the West.

Necessarily intertwined with the definitions and understandings of contemporary art are the geopolitical conditions and indeed the specific conditions of colonisation which interconnect with globalisation. As the late Okwui Enwezor observes in his essay entitled “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition”:

Contemporary art today is refracted, not just from the specific site of culture and history but also—and in a more critical sense—from the standpoint of a complex

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<sup>16</sup> Op. Cit., p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> See Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann (ed.), Catherine Dossin (ed.), Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel (ed.), *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, (London, UK: Routledge, 2015) and Jonathan Harris, “Art History and the Global Challenge: A Critical Perspective” in *Artl@s Bulletin* Volume 6, Issue 1, 2017.

geopolitical configuration that defines all systems of production and relations of exchange as a consequence of globalization after imperialism.<sup>18</sup>

Enwezor's writing and curatorial practice have been particularly informative for my research enabling me to conceptualise local contemporary art within a global context and to think through Malta's positioning within this wider perspective. Similarly, *Globalization and Contemporary Art* (2012), edited by Jonathan Harris, following a conference held in 2011,<sup>19</sup> and *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of the New Art Worlds* (2013) edited by Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel,<sup>20</sup> give greater insight through the analysis of developments in different continents and regions in order to better understand visual art from a global perspective. However, what has been missing to date is a visible effort to contextualise these multi-directional and complex developments within small countries, particularly within southern Europe. This is one of the challenges that this thesis addresses.

At this point, it is important to clarify that certain terminologies used in mainstream Western art history publications bear a slightly different meaning within the setting of Malta's art historical developments. In Malta modern art trends akin to those popular in late nineteenth-century central Europe are evident from the mid-1920s to the 1960s – a period which coincides with the 1926 inauguration of a part-time government art school, and the country's newly gained independence in 1964. However, modern art remained hugely popular in Malta until the end of the twentieth century, overlapping and co-existing with the manifestations of contemporary art which I analyse during the timeframe from 1989 to 2017.

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<sup>18</sup> Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition" in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham, Duke University Press Books, 2009) p. 208.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Harris (ed.), *Globalization and Contemporary Art* (New Jersey, US: Wiley Blackwell, 2011). The series of conference entitled *The Global Contemporary: Art Worlds after 1989* were held between 17th September 2011 and 19th February 2012 at ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art, Germany.

<sup>20</sup> Hans Belting(ed.), Andrea Buddensieg (ed.) and Peter Weibel (ed.), *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of the New Art Worlds* (Cambridge, UK: MIT Press, 2013). The majority of contributions for this publication were originally presented at two conferences "The Global Future of Local Art Museums", held at IFK Vienna, Jan. 19-21, 2006, and at ZKM Karlsruhe, June 24-25, 2006.

Throughout this thesis, I employ the broad definition of contemporary art as proposed by James Elkins who describes this as follows:

...something is contemporary if you can attach it to its region, country, or area - but at the same time it is not problematic to imagine placing the work in an international art fair. A second way of thinking about the contemporary, which is also not often discussed, is that the contemporary would be that period in which art historians, theorists and critics started to worry about the globalization of their own disciplines. (If the work is done in a specifiable region but at the same time it would be impossible to imagine it in a biennale or in an art fair, than I would say that's modernist ...).<sup>21</sup>

## **Literature Overview**

As indicated previously, existing literature on the development of modern and contemporary art in Malta is relatively sparse. Overshadowed by Malta's illustrious baroque past and perceived as less relevant to the country's cultural life until recently, writing on the history of modern art in Malta is predominately one of stylistic analysis that focuses on formal qualities rather than engaging with content and the particular ways in which individual artists and groups negotiated the shifting local socio-economic and political conditions of Malta's modernity from the 1930s onwards.

Dominant histories of Maltese modern art are largely accounts of individual artists that seek to unfold a developmental narrative of their artistic career, largely biography-led, rather than a critical history that situates their work in a wider cultural and political context. They largely operate within the centre periphery model where comparisons are drawn with the work produced in the metropolitan centres of Paris and London rather than

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<sup>21</sup> Loredana Niculet, "The Shifting Condition of Art Discourse: an Interview with James Elkins," *Disturbis* Issue 8, (2010): pp. 8-16.

simultaneously locating the work within the specific social, political and cultural contexts of Malta.

The most significant histories of post-war art are *Malta: Six Modern Artists* (1991), edited by Victor Fenech,<sup>22</sup> and the publications of Joseph Paul Cassar (b.1958) an artist, lecturer, art historian and art critic (now resident in the USA). Cassar's publications focus predominately on modern art developments from the 1930s to the 1970s. Among Cassar's many publications, the two key overview studies that provide a contextual background for my research are: *Pioneers of Modern Art in Malta: The birth of a Maltese modern artistic aesthetic* (2010) and *Conversation with 12 Maltese Artists* (2007). *Pioneers of Modern Art in Malta* is a chronological, image-led study which presents the work of painters and sculptors who developed from a more representational style to a recognisably modern style, and focuses on activities of local art groups, including Spectrum '67 and Vision '74 that I discuss briefly in chapter one. The pioneers according to Cassar are many: the most prominent are the artists Giorgio Preca (1909-1984), Carmelo Mangion (1905-1997), Emvin Cremona (1919-1987), Antoine Camilleri (1922-2005) and Frank Portelli (1922-2004) and the arts patron Vincenzo Maria Pellegrini (1911-1997) who founded the Institute for Cultural Exchanges in Valletta in 1950.<sup>23</sup>

*Conversation with 12 Maltese Artists* (2007) presents twelve interviews conducted over a 25-year period with ceramicists, sculptors and painters whose work dates from the mid-1930s to the early 2000s.<sup>24</sup> The focus is primarily on modern works with 12 images for each artist and the artists' anecdotes from the post war period through to the 1970s. The

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<sup>22</sup> Victor Fenech (ed), *Malta: Six Modern Artists* (Msida, Malta: Malta University Services Ltd, 1991). This focuses on Josef Kalleya, Vincent Apap, Emvin Cremona, Esprit Barthet, Antoine Camilleri and Frank Portelli. Three of these essays are written by Dominic Cutajar, two by Kenneth Wain and one by Emanuel Fiorentino.

<sup>23</sup> V. M. Pellegrini curated and organised 15 art exhibitions at the Institute for Cultural Exchanges between 1957 and 1964. Including a permanent collective exhibition by Esprit Barthet, Emvin Cremona and Antoine Camilleri in 1957 and the first *Modern and Abstract Art Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture* in 1963. For the full list of exhibitions see Joseph Paul Cassar, *Pioneers of Modern Art in Malta*, (Malta: Pin 2010) p. 355.

<sup>24</sup> The 12 interviewed artists are Vincent Apap, Victor Diacono, Esprit Barthet, Antoine Camilleri, Frank Portelli, Frank Baldacchino, Harry Alden, Gabriel Caruana, Joseph Lawrence Mallia, Neville Ferry, Caesar Attard and Joseph Saliba.

interviews with the three artists of particular relevance to my research - Antoine Camilleri (1922-2005), Gabriel Caruana (1929-2018) and Caesar Attard (b. 1947) - focus on their earlier painterly and sculptural work rather than their contemporary conceptual works. In addition, Cassar has produced monographs on individual modern artists which present a general assessment of the artists' achievements, including Antoine Camilleri where he discusses his work thematically, including his use of mixed media such as clay and resin.<sup>25</sup>

Two publications significant to my research for understanding the shifting meanings of contemporary art in Malta before and during the period under study are *Contemporary Art in Malta*, edited by Richard England and published in 1974, and *Cross Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta*, published in 2008 and edited by the artist, writer and critic Raphael Vella.<sup>26</sup> England's publication, as discussed further in Chapter One, captures the spirit of the early seventies by focusing on developments across the arts, including architecture and music, and the shifting cultural contexts from pre and post independence Malta.

*Cross Currents* is the only existing publication which focuses on contemporary artistic developments in Malta since the 1950s to 2008 in terms of the potential meanings of the work within local and global contexts. As I discuss in-depth in Chapter Five, this multi-disciplinary volume brings together artists, an anthropologist, architect, philosopher and a visual arts and education specialist to critically reflect on the current state of contemporary art in Malta in 2008. Although the critical interpretations offer new approaches, the choice of artists is less comprehensive and the resulting history of contemporary art is fragmented. In many ways my research directly builds upon and extends this study both in terms of chronology, methods and personal involvement. As a researcher in modern and contemporary art in Malta I contributed the accompanying timeline to the publication in

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<sup>25</sup> See Joseph Paul Cassar, *Antoine Camilleri: His life and works 1922-2005* (Pieta, Malta: PIN Publication, 2006) and Joseph Paul Cassar, *Carmelo Mangion: His life and Works, 1905-1997* (St Venera, Malta: Midsea Books, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Richard England (ed), *Contemporary Art in Malta*, (Malta, Malta Arts Festival Publication, 1973).



order to situate the works in a wider social and political context.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, as Vella states in his introduction, “A comprehensive history of contemporary art in Malta has still to be written”.<sup>28</sup> This thesis sets out to do this by encompassing a wider range of artists within the specific context of Malta’s contemporary art world and extends the period under study to 2017 when Malta exhibited at the Venice Biennale.

In addition to the above published works, a number of unpublished dissertations have focused on particular aspects of contemporary art in Malta from the 1970s. These include Raphael Vella’s undergraduate dissertation *A Thematic Analysis of Maltese Contemporary Art (1970-90)*, presented in 1991 which, as the title indicates, discusses dominant trends in painting and sculpture in Malta between 1970 and 1990 by theme: The Human Condition, Religious Art, the Local Environment, and Beyond Appearance (Non-Figurative Art). By structuring his research in four sections Vella makes the content of the work of these two decades accessible to readers although these developments are not placed within a wider political and social context. Overall, Vella argues that the diversity of style among contemporary Maltese artists is due partly to the island’s lack of strong modern art roots. He was also aware that the definition of contemporary art practice was in a state of flux in 1990 where his study ends:

‘contemporary’ art will cease to signify simply any art produced in the present but an art which reflects the real aesthetic and social climate of the times.<sup>29</sup>

Building on this observation, my detailed study begins in 1989 and seeks to engage with the specific local and global contexts of contemporary art in Malta.

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<sup>27</sup> Katya Borg, “Socio-political and Artistic Timelines Artists and Architects: Biographical Data” in Raphael Vella (ed), *Cross Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta* (Valletta, Malta: Allied Publication, 2008) pp. 305-318.

<sup>28</sup> Raphael Vella (ed), *Cross Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta* (Valletta, Malta: Allied Publication, 2008) p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Raphael Vella, “A Thematic Analysis of Maltese Contemporary Art (1970-90)” (B.Ed. Dissertation, University of Malta, 1991).

Umberto Buttigieg's *Post-War Modernist Tendencies and the Development of Minimal, Conceptual and Video Art in Malta* undergraduate dissertation was submitted in 2010.<sup>30</sup> Adopting a survey style the study examines the origins of modernist and postmodernist tendencies in Maltese art from the 1950s to the turn of the millennium. As Buttigieg observes, concepts used by international artists in the sixties and seventies took root in Malta only in the nineties; a delay which he attributes to factors such as local censorship and the absence of an official museum of modern and contemporary art. Buttigieg, however, does not engage with questions of postcolonialism and globalisation.

Nicola Petroni's undergraduate dissertation, *A Study of Maltese Installation Art*, presented in 2012, focuses on the work of 7 artists who formed part of the START art group. She discusses their work from 1992 to 2011 and identifies their importance as players in an international contemporary art scene,<sup>31</sup> although the artists were not interviewed. Two unpublished MA dissertations also focus on START. Vicky Spiteri's *Postmodern Trends in Maltese Contemporary Art* (2005) uses two art events organised by the group in 2003 and 2005 to understand how postmodernism influenced local artists.<sup>32</sup> In her conclusion Spiteri identifies that research on postmodern trends in Malta are limited by the absence of documentation on local exhibitions and events, largely due to lack of funding. In his 2008 dissertation, *An Investigation into Contemporary Art on the Islands of Malta*, the Scottish artist Graham Gurr, focuses on the practice of contemporary artists in Malta from the 1950s to the early 2000s, with particular emphasis on the START group.<sup>33</sup> One of his key findings is that the development of Maltese contemporary art had become increasingly independent from government entities.

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<sup>30</sup> Umberto Buttigieg, "Post-War Modernist Tendencies and the Development of Minimal, Conceptual and Video Art in Malta" (B.A. Art Hons Dissertation, University of Malta, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Nicola Petroni, "A Study of Maltese Installation Art" (B.A. Art Hons Dissertation, University of Malta, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Vicky Spiteri, "Postmodern Trends in Maltese Contemporary Art" (M. Phil Dissertation, University of Malta, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> Graham Gurr, "Investigation into Contemporary Art on the Islands of Malta" (Master of Research Studies Dissertation, The Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, 2008).

The fragmented nature of the above research on the development of contemporary art in Malta and the need to establish an in-depth and more comprehensive overview of how contemporary art developed within the Maltese context was the chief impetus for my research. Notably, groups like START, who promoted themselves through the web, are one of the most researched groups whereas other individuals have received little attention. As detailed below, the primary sources for my research have been exhibition leaflets and catalogues, newspaper reviews and interviews with artists, curators, gallery owners and others involved in the contemporary art scene over the period of study.

### **Research Methods and Processes**

Although contemporary art has been widely researched internationally the history of contemporary art in Malta remains patchy and incomprehensible due to the dearth of published material and lack of in-depth primary research. The fragmented narrative of contemporary art developments, particularly in contrast to the well-researched history of pre-nineteenth-century Malta, has had a direct bearing on the extensive scope of my research, the research process, and the methods that I employ in this thesis.

As a result of the absence of published material I started by gathering primary material from archives and libraries located in Malta and in the UK. The principle archives I used in Malta were those of the National Museum of Fine Arts, The Times of Malta, Media Link Communications, and artists' personal archives, and the collections of the National Library of Malta and the University of Malta,

In the National Museum of Fine Arts archive (today the MUŻA Community Art Museum) I used the artists' dossiers and the exhibitions archives from post independence to the present. The artists' dossier files were introduced by the former Modern and Contemporary Art Curator, the late Dennis Vella (1953-2009) who joined the National Museum of Fine Arts in 1999 and initiated the practice in the early 2000s. The artist's

dossier typically contained a short biographical detail which included date of birth and death, and education of the artist, sometimes a list of exhibitions or, more occasionally, exhibition leaflets or catalogues, and newspaper cuttings. The dossiers were of all artists who exhibited at the museum and dated back only to the mid-late 1990s.<sup>34</sup> The museum's exhibition archives are much more incomplete. These are archive boxes which hold only exhibitions leaflet or catalogues and date back to the 1960s, a time when very few catalogues or leaflet were printed. The majority of leaflets or catalogues date from the mid/late 1990s to the late 2000s with only a few before the 1990s. No list of all the collected leaflets or catalogues is available. Most of the leaflets and catalogues found in these archives are of exhibitions held at the National Museum of Fine Arts.<sup>35</sup>

This archive material provided a basis to begin to create a list of exhibitions held in Malta post-independence and to identify participant artists. Following this extensive mapping, I compiled a much shorter list of exhibitions, together with listed artists and curators, that appeared to engage with innovative methods or concepts of display and contemporary themes. This second mapping process enabled me to identify key exhibitions to research further and potential archival gaps during the particular period under study. For example, a notable gap existed between the beginning and the late 1990s, a decade that is central for this study.

The second stage of my research was to cross-reference the relevant archival material with existing published sources held in the National Library of Malta's extremely limited modern and contemporary holdings and the University of Malta's Library that includes unpublished dissertations and thesis, and to embark on a systematic search of Maltese newspapers. Local newspapers were a vital primary source for the creation of a

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<sup>34</sup> Dennis Vella passed away in 2009 and most of the dossiers had not been updated.

<sup>35</sup> It is important to note that due to the relocation and opening of the new museum (MUŻA) all archives were moved to different premises between 2012 and the present day. In 2019, the library and archive section are not yet in place at MUŻA Community Art Museum. During this research I had access to the archives, although with some difficulties, as one of the curators of the museum.

comprehensive mapping of modern and contemporary art through exhibition listings, exhibition reviews and letters that also provided opportunities to analyse the reaction of local audiences. The chief newspaper archives I used were the Times of Malta Head Office (Allied Newspapers) in Valletta and Media Link Communications in Pietà ' which holds hardcopies of *The Malta Independent*, the *Times of Malta*, the *Malta Today* and Maltese newspapers including *In-Nazzjon*, *Kulhadd* and *I-Orizzont*.<sup>36</sup> In total, I searched the print and online contents of 6 local newspapers from 1950s to 2017.

Alongside this, during research visits to the UK, I worked mostly at the Tate Archives and Library, and the British Library. The Tate's extensive library of catalogues were important for researching possible links between Malta's contemporary art and exhibitions in the UK and other countries, and for wider contextual reading on contemporary art and theory. It was also where I located some material related to the Commonwealth Institute exhibitions of the 1960s. The Tate Archive catalogue holdings were mainly donated by individual artists who participated in these exhibitions.<sup>37</sup> The British Library provided access to books, journals and PhD thesis alongside advanced training on oral history techniques that is not available in Malta. Additional publications and journals were also available at university libraries including Kingston University Library, SOAS and the University College Library at the University of London. In particular, it proved difficult to locate material specifically on contemporary art in the Mediterranean Region.<sup>38</sup>

The most significant primary sources, alongside the interviews discussed below, were the artists' archives made available for this research. In these often extensive, private

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<sup>36</sup> Media Link Communications is part of one of Malta's two most prominent local political party's news departments, based in Pietà, a small town located on the outskirts of the capital city Valletta.

<sup>37</sup> According to several sources, including individuals still working at the Commonwealth Offices, most of the material was relocated to the Tate Archives after the institute was closed down. This proved not to be so: Bristol Museum had acquired the British Empire and Commonwealth Collection in 2012. I was informed by the Bristol Archives' archivist that the extensive collection of objects, documents and photographs did not include exhibition catalogues.

<sup>38</sup> For example, *Third Text* carries no reference to Maltese contemporary art and specialist journals on the Mediterranean such as the *Mediterranean Studies: The Journal of the Mediterranean Studies Association* were helpful for a wider cultural perspective but rarely focused on art, contemporary art and its infrastructure in the area.

archives I was able to find documents such as photographs, exhibition catalogues and letters not available in public libraries and archives.<sup>39</sup> Material from these archives has been used in the written thesis and forms a central part of the catalogue in Volume Two. This catalogue was only made possible with the full collaboration and kindness of local artists, organisations, and gallery owners who were willing to show me art works, archives, and personal documents.

A further significant source of primary material was the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity (known as Spazju Kreattiv following the 2015 rebranding) where I spent months looking for documents in 2015. At this time there was no coherent archive section at the centre. All exhibition material including posters, newspapers and exhibitions were dispersed throughout different locations within the centre.<sup>40</sup> The posters and catalogues of important exhibitions held at the centre were found within this collection and are discussed in Chapter Four.

### **Oral History Interviews**

Due to the paucity of material on contemporary art the most relevant primary sources were the one to one interviews with artists and individuals involved in the cultural sector including curators, gallery owners and policy makers. In total, I conducted 39 interviews with 22 individuals as part of this research from 2013 to 2018. The majority of the interviews were conducted in 2013 to 2015 when I was developing the detailed mapping of post 1989 art in Malta and planning the detailed outline of the chapters. I subsequently arranged follow up interviews with several artists where I needed to corroborate new findings or ask for further detail or archival material.

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<sup>39</sup> When visiting the artists in their homes and studios I focused mainly on the interviews and the collection of material available in the artists' archive rather than their ongoing work.

<sup>40</sup> Since my research was in line with the new administration and artistic director's criteria of Legacy, a project was launched in December 2015 entitled *Past! Present. Future?* This project is now part of the annual calendar and its purpose is to build the centre's archive.

Through university and research projects I had already been involved in the local visual arts sector before undertaking this PhD. Both my undergraduate and masters' research were based on interviews and these served as an opportunity to meet artists and visit their homes and studios. Subsequently, as a lecturer at a local art college I was regularly in touch with institutions to organise day research visits for students. My determination to involve students in the culture and visual arts sector made it possible for me to meet key individuals working within cultural institutions.

In particular, my involvement on research projects with three key individuals in modern and contemporary art augmented my position of trust within the local community. These were Dennis Vella, the former Modern and Contemporary Curator at the National Museum of Fine Arts; Joseph Paul Cassar the critic, modern art historian, lecturer and my university theses tutor, and the contemporary artist, researcher, critic and lecturer Raphael Vella. My role as a curator for Modern and Contemporary within Heritage Malta from 2011 further strengthened this status within the institutions and with artists and others in the sector which made it possible for me to gain access to individuals and arrange interviews.

Using a semi-structured qualitative research method, the interviews were individually tailored sets of questions that were usually sent to participants in advance. The majority of the interviews were audio-recorded: some follow up interviews were by skype or telephone. Each interview concluded by asking if there were further points they would like to discuss. On average the interviews lasted an hour, followed up by discussion of a further hour or an hour and a half on personal archives, as discussed below.

In order to compare and cross-reference the interview responses on specific topics in a broadly chronological order, I decided to group several interviews together and to undertake them within the same week or short period of time. This was felt necessary since I wanted to listen to the interviewees' information while comparing their behavioural

reactions, especially when discussing sensitive issues such as Malta's participation at the Venice Biennale in 1999 that is discussed in Chapter Three.

The interviews were significant in establishing specifically how institutions and individuals worked from the late 1980s onwards, including how exhibitions were conceived, the processes of selection and display and the identification of previously undocumented contemporary artworks. The questions also covered artistic training, access to visual material during the period, networks and support. The analysis of the detailed material generated through the interviews has been essential to each chapter of this thesis through contextualising the social and political conditions which effected the development of contemporary art in Malta in the last three decades.

### **Research Framings**

Framing the development of contemporary art in Malta by understanding the local context was key for this research and this was possible by investigating Malta's recent history as a British Colony while applying interdisciplinary methods to capture all the essential information. In view of this postcolonial discourse was essential.

Starting with the fundamentals that Malta was a British colony until 1964 – a situation shared with several other nations that are identified as non-western - the country's constitution is written in British English and the Maltese community still follows certain colonial social structures and customs five decades later. Moreover, this was an important starting point because some of the artists who are part of this research were born before 1964, while others were born in the following decades into families which still embraced a colonial mentality.

Located in the centre of the Mediterranean, on the periphery of Europe, while simultaneously being an ex-colony made Malta's positioning within existing histories of contemporary western and non-western art a challenge. The writing of several postcolonial



theorists provided important perspectives particularly Néstor García Canclini's *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (1995) and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of a 'third space' or in-between space of hybridity in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Partha Mitter's *Modern Global Art and Its Discontents* (2014) similarly opened up a space of potential agency where artists and curators (and others) outside of privileged metropolitan centres could be seen as negotiating the conditions of contemporaneity rather than being locked into a centre periphery model.

Engaging with postcolonial discourse to understand contemporary art within the specific context of this research, I focused firstly on the specificity of the role of an artwork, artist or institution and placed them within the local setting evidencing this through the primary sources of newspaper reviews, exhibition reviews and interviews where possible. I also considered how someone outside of the local setting would interpret art works and exhibitions presented in Malta or by Maltese artists abroad, aided by exhibition reviews and curators' perspectives.

Secondly, aware of my professional role and positionality within the Maltese contemporary art scene, from the beginning of this research I recognised I was also an active observer and participant. This meant that, apart from learning about the individual artists and their work – namely by identifying dates, unearthing titles of works, studying styles and drawing comparisons with other artists - I was also interested in establishing a dialogic relationship of trust with the artists and the few individuals working in the sector. Drawing upon this situated knowledge and experience enabled access to primary material that would be more difficult to locate otherwise. As a result of my approach, I have built strong relationships with the individual artists. The artists' replies and reactions to the questions posed in the familiar surroundings of their homes or art studios fostered a reciprocal commitment and collaboration.

## **Contribution to Knowledge**

Drawing upon my situated knowledge as a curator and local networks, and my archival and empirical skills as an art historian, this thesis makes a significant contribution to art history by providing the first comprehensive history of contemporary art in Malta positioned within and alongside the wider cultural and political changes since 1989. Significantly, there has been relatively little historical research on how contemporary art developed in Malta in the last thirty years following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the intertwined impact of globalisation. In response to the radical changes in the European geopolitical configuration since 1989 and Malta's entry into the European Union in 2004, a transformation and multi-faceted development of Malta's shifting cultural identity can be seen in the work and practice of Maltese artists. As this thesis argues, these changes spanning the last three decades have transformed Malta's contemporary art scene and its positioning in the contemporary art world.

This research also contributes to the history of exhibition making and curatorial studies by mapping the first artists-curators in Malta and their respective contributions to the development of contemporary art in Malta and curatorship. It offers inspiring examples of how artist-curators negotiated the difficult circumstances of working in a setting where there was little infrastructure dedicated to supporting modern and contemporary art and no full-time art educational courses until the latter were launched in 2010 at tertiary level.

In a wider context, this research also contributes to an understanding of how contemporary visual art has developed within a micro ecosystem pertaining to a specific context and history away from the comfort zone of cultural centres and large multi resourceful countries. By engaging with various fields of study including history, curating, critical theory, visual anthropology, political and cultural sociology this extensive research on contemporary art represents a major contribution to Maltese art history and its methods.

## **Structure**

The aim of this research is to identify and analyse the shifting national and global contexts in which contemporary art practices in Malta were developed, understood and negotiated by Maltese artists, curators and commentators between 1989 and 2017. Given the lack of research on contemporary art in Malta hitherto, the thesis comprises of two volumes. The first volume is the written thesis of seven chapters, broadly chronological in order as detailed below, with an introduction and conclusion. The second volume is an image-led, chronological catalogue that works as a quick guide to the many artists, exhibitions and events from 1991 to 2017 that I refer to in the thesis volume. The 76-page catalogue is intended to help the reader and future researchers to navigate their way through the rich yet relatively unknown maze of contemporary art in Malta and to locate the primary material drawn from diverse public and private institutions, collections and archives during this research. References to the Catalogue are contained in the main body of the thesis text.

Following the Introduction, Chapter One of Volume 1 introduces the Maltese art scene focusing on the years immediately before and after Malta's independence from the British in 1964 up to the 1980s as a contextual background to the subsequent chapters that focus on developments in contemporary art in Malta from 1989 to 2017.

Chapter Two identifies the transitions in Maltese artistic practice and exhibition making from 1989 to 1998 that are indicative of a new awareness of international contemporary art developments. These include the significance of the Maltese Biennial inaugurated in 1995 by Dame Françoise Tempra where invited international artists were exhibited alongside local artists, and an analysis of the shift from the dominant aesthetics of painting to the use of found objects and concept-based installations through predominately artist-led exhibition initiatives.

Chapter Three focuses on four major national exhibitions of contemporary art held in Malta in 1999 and Malta's participation at the Venice Biennale for the first time as an

independent nation in the summer of 1999. Taking into account the complex circumstances surrounding their inception, this chapter analyses these key exhibitions and events and evaluates their role in contributing to changes in the understanding and positioning of Maltese contemporary art practice both locally and internationally, for both artists and audiences.

Chapter Four provides a detailed overview of what was happening in the visual arts and culture scene in Malta at the turn of the millennium when several major cultural and economic reforms were initiated. It first examines the processes Malta underwent to become eligible to join the European Union and how its economy radically changed between 1998 and 2003 with the privatisation of public entities. It then analyses how these changes specifically affected the contemporary art sector by focussing on the role played by the Centre for Creativity, initiated in 2000, and artist-led initiatives including Gozo Contemporary (the first artist-in-residence programme in Malta) and exhibitions by the START group, the first and only contemporary art group active in Malta in the 21st century.

Chapter Five focuses on Malta's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004 and examines the local political and artistic scenario immediately before and after this key moment, in order to evaluate its impact on contemporary art in Malta and exhibition making. Placing an emphasis on increased artist mobility and networking, the chapter analyses several exhibitions that reflect a new national outlook towards contemporary art practice and identifies the processes through which artists were selected to participate in EU exhibitions. It further identifies the significance of the first publication on contemporary art in Malta, *Cross Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta*, 2008.

Building directly on the findings of Chapter Five, Chapter Six focuses on the following crucial years between 2007 and 2013 when the Maltese government first officially recognised their obligation to promote and support modern and contemporary art as a member of the EU. Through an analysis of key government initiatives - the Valletta Creative

Forum held for over 6 months in 2007, the new budgetary measures that followed in 2008, and the resulting publication of the first National Cultural Policy in 2011 - this chapter evaluates their impact on the underpinning infrastructure for contemporary art and the challenges artists and curators negotiated by focusing on artist-led curatorial projects and the opening of new contemporary art spaces.

Chapter Seven focuses on the key themes and preoccupations manifested through contemporary art exhibition programmes and events, and the role of artists and curators in building and promoting a new identity for contemporary art in Malta from 2011 – when Malta initially applied for European Capital of Culture – to 2017, when Malta was part of the 57<sup>th</sup> edition of the Venice Biennale, and in the final stages of preparing to deliver Valletta 2018.

The succinct conclusion identifies the contribution to knowledge and the impact of the research to date from a curator's perspective.

**Chapter 1**  
**An Introduction to the Maltese Art Scene: Pre and Post- Independence 1952 to 1989**

**Introduction**

In this chapter I discuss the Maltese art scene focusing on the years immediately before and after Malta's independence from the British in 1964 up to the 1980s as a contextual background to subsequent developments in contemporary art in Malta from 1989 to 2017. The aims of the chapter are to identify the first modern art practices of artists which broke away from the most popular traditional genres of religious and landscape art predominately practiced by artists in Malta prior to independence, and to identify the artistic infrastructure of pre-independence Malta, including national societies, galleries and museums, and the role of critics and education. This chapter also identifies the key shifts that occurred post-independence in relation to modern and contemporary art developments in Malta and their accompanying infrastructures and outlines the key economic and socio-political changes that occurred from the mid 1960s through to the late 1980s. This includes analysis of new exhibition opportunities post-independence and, most importantly, the question of what was perceived as Maltese contemporary art by the end of the 1980s.

Of course, the impact of Independence on the artistic art scene in Malta was not an immediate one and the influence of Britain and British artists and critics is evident throughout this chapter. Artistic initiatives begun under British rule, notably, with the opening of the Commonwealth Institute in London in 1952, continued to have significance for Malta artists post-independence. However, as I will argue, the political and social changes post-independence did re-position Malta and Maltese art as an ex-colony in a wider geo-political sphere that offered some opportunities to artists to both exhibit abroad and to form artistic allegiances in Malta, supported by the British artist Victor Pasmore (1908-1998) who

relocated to Malta in 1965, and to some degree the art historian and collector A.C. Sewter (1912-1983).

### 1.1 The art scene in Pre-Independence Malta

In a context where Malta was governed by the British while having Roman Catholic beliefs at its core, one can observe the presence of two main art genres on the islands. The most popular was religious art, mainly commissioned by the clergy, followed by landscape painting, commissioned by members of the British Army and other British and foreign individuals visiting the archipelago.<sup>41</sup> These two significant but opposing genres shaped the development of modern Maltese art in the first half of the twentieth century when little else was accepted or commissioned.



**Fig. 2 Emvin Cremona, *Annunciation* (detail) (1958) Msida Parish Church (Photo provided by Emvin Cremona's Family) (left), Frank Portelli, *Kingsway Valletta During Wartime* (1944), Private Collection (photo provided by Private Collector) (right).**

By the 1950s Maltese artists who seriously wanted to engage with modernity appropriated formal elements from dominant European modernist art movements, particularly

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<sup>41</sup> Such facts reveal the strong influence of the Roman Catholic Church on the locals while simultaneously betraying a desire to please the foreigner and the coloniser by creating picturesque landscapes showing indigenous natural elements.

Cubism. The first Maltese artworks in this style, exhibited in the 1950s, were supported by locals and the Malta Society of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce even though Modern Art was subject to long and controversial discussions in local newspapers throughout the decade.<sup>42</sup> This style was inventively pursued by Maltese artists such as Antoine Camilleri (1922-2005), Esprit Barthet (1919-1999), and Frank Portelli (1922-2004) [Figure 3]. It was regarded by local researchers as a belated experience of modern art since modern art was first introduced by a few individuals, including Robert Caruana Dingli (1882-1940) and Carmelo Mangion (1905-1998), and exhibited in Malta in the 1950s. Local art historian Joseph Paul Cassar regards work produced in Malta between the 1920s and the late 1970s as modern even though this timeframe diverges from most dominant accounts of western modern art that begin in the 1880s.<sup>43</sup>



**Fig. 3 Frank Portelli, *Study of 'Resurrezione'*, 1957, watercolour on paper, 60 x 40.5 cm. (Private Collection)**

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<sup>42</sup> See S. Casabene, "The Present State of Art in Malta," *Times of Malta*, May, 1951; J.F. Muscat, "Local Art and the Young Generation," *Times of Malta* May 23, 1951; Wilfered G. Flores, "Local Art and the Young Generation; Surviving Severe Test of Time," *Times of Malta*, May 30, 1951; J.F. Muscat, "Aspects of Modern Art," June 25, 1951; Francis Ebejer, "In Defence of Modern Art," *Times of Malta*, July 02, 1951; Joseph Calleja, "In Defence of Modern Art," *Times of Malta*, November 01, 1952; S.M., "Art: Conflict of Styles," *Times of Malta*, November 11, 1952; G.R. Hopson, "Appreciation of Modern Art," *Times of Malta*, July 26, 1954.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Paul Cassar, *Pioneers of Modern Art* (Malta: Pin, 2008).



As Partha Mitter argues in “Modern Global Art and Its Discontents”, such a view privileges ‘influence’ from a dominant art centre to a periphery where: “Set against the originary discourse of the metropolitan avant-garde, other modernisms were marginalized as derivative and suffering from a time lag,”<sup>44</sup> rather than considering the artists’ agencies in appropriating a style in order to devise “new ways to represent the visible world,” particularly in the context of colonialism.<sup>45</sup> Cubism, as several writers argue including Mitter, was at the heart of this decolonising process since it in fact helped develop a critique of colonialism by joining it with local folk traditions or indigenous natural elements as evident in Latin America, North Africa, and South Africa.<sup>46</sup>

The other popular style which emerged in the late 1950s in Malta was abstraction. Geometrical Abstraction was particularly popular in Malta due to the pervasive influence of Cubism and its resonance with the building structures around the islands which are mainly of cubic form. This was followed more or less at the same time in the later 1950s by Gestural Abstraction, similar to Art Informel, Lyrical Abstraction and Tachisme, which is more personal, expressive, and insightful.<sup>47</sup> Compared to that of other European painters, the local palette was highly luminous in colour, indicative of the strong Mediterranean light and the island’s sunny climate. Among the artists who mastered experimental abstraction, Emvin Cremona (1919-1987) was considered to be the leading artist in Malta practising abstraction during this period and exhibited abstract works at the Venice Biennale of 1958. Subsequent practitioners of this style included Frank Baldacchino (1924-2016), Oliver Agius (1910-81),

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<sup>44</sup> Partha Mitter, “Modern Global Art and Its Discontents”, *Avant-Garde Critical Studies*, Vol. 30, (2014), p.42.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p.37.

<sup>46</sup> See Diana B. Wechsler & Antonio Bautista-Trigueros (Translator), “Cosmopolitanism, Cubism and New Art: Latin American Itineraries Art in Translation” Vol. 3 Issue 1 (2011): 69-86, Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonisation in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham, North Carolina, US: Duke University Press, 2015)

<sup>47</sup> Abstract painting dominated Europe from the mid-1940s until the late 1950s. The work of the artists who practised Art Informel, Lyrical Abstraction, and Tachisme signalled a radical break from the dominant art practices of the immediate post-war era. See David Britt (ed.), *Modern Art* (London, UK: Thames and Hudson, 2002).

and Alfred Chircop (1933-2015) [Figure 4]. Notably, this genre was also popular at more or less the same time in numerous post-independence countries including Iraq and Palestine.<sup>48</sup>



**Fig 4. Oliver Agius, *Abstract*, c.1963, oil on board, 35 x 47 cm (courtesy MUŻA – Heritage Malta)**

After the Second World War, one of the first artistic groups to show engagement with abstract elements of modernism was the Malta Art Circle. Founded in 1952, most of its members had studied abroad— mainly in France, England and Rome—and came across modern European art movements. The group – comprising of 12 artists - wanted to work in a modern idiom, represented by using cubist motifs, and free themselves from traditional representational tendencies.<sup>49</sup> Their only public exhibition in October 1952 was part of a larger exhibition organised by the Malta Society of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce in the De La Salle Palace, entitled the *Centenary Art Exhibition*. Their appearance was described as

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<sup>48</sup> Salwa Mikdadi, “Modern Art in West Asia: Colonial to Post-colonial,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, October 2004, accessed October 17, 2017. [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/wacp/hd\\_wacp.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/wacp/hd_wacp.htm).

<sup>49</sup> The members of the group were Frank Portelli, Joseph F. Muscat, Joseph M. Borg, Joseph Calleja, Joseph A. Caruana, John Fenech, Hugo Carbonaro, Oliver Agius, Antoine Camilleri, Frank Baldacchino, Samuel Bugeja and Giorgio Preca who was elected President.

a ‘pleasant surprise’<sup>50</sup> and ‘the most interesting feature’<sup>51</sup> in two separate articles on the *Times of Malta*. However, the group continued to exhibit their work together privately and in 1953 changed their name to the Modern Art Group which was made up of the same members and had the same mission.<sup>52</sup>

It is important to note that exhibitions in Malta pre-independence had no critical structure, nor did they bear any hint of what we understand today by curatorial aspects. Organisers sought out adequate space and informed members about the date and venue accordingly; they received a list of artists' names and works, and the board would decide what to exhibit. The publication of a leaflet followed (rather than a catalogue) featuring the list of participating artists and titles of their work.<sup>53</sup> These exhibition leaflets reveal an interesting phenomenon. It appears that the majority of exhibitions were collective and accommodated extremely large numbers of participants and artworks, typically between twenty and seventy participants, who exhibited at least two works each.<sup>54</sup> The most popular art genres in such large-scale collective exhibitions of the 1950s were religious art, landscape art, abstracted art inspired by Cubism, as well as some abstract art.<sup>55</sup> The works on show varied in terms of standard and local art critic reviews expressed this concern and extensively criticised the way the artworks were displayed throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Nonetheless, collective exhibitions remained popular in Malta until the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Staff Reporter (Anon), “The Opening of Art Exhibition at De La Salle Palace,” *Times of Malta*, October 18, 1952.

<sup>51</sup> Newspaper Art Critic (Anon), “Centenary Art Exhibition at De La Salle Palace,” *Times of Malta*, October 27, 1952.

<sup>52</sup> Joseph Paul Cassar, *Pioneers of Modern Art* (Malta: Pin, 2008).

<sup>53</sup> Some of these catalogues dating between the 1950s and 1960s are available in the MUŻA, Heritage Malta Archive collection, Valletta.

<sup>54</sup> This practice reflects the colonial exhibitions held in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as the idea of inclusion that held that everyone is the same and has the same opportunity.

<sup>55</sup> Among the many collective exhibitions there were those organised annually by the Modern Art Circle and others known as the *Trade and Industry Festival Art Exhibitions*.

<sup>56</sup> These exhibitions remained popular because they were considered as inclusive. Everyone was invited to exhibit with very little or no assessment from exhibition committees so low-quality works were displayed.

In 1956, the Modern Art Group re-named itself once more and became Atelier '56. Supported by the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce of Valletta (whose function was to promote works by local artists), the group organised radio programmes to educate the public in the appreciation of the visual arts.<sup>57</sup> Their main aim, however, was to organise important exhibitions in Malta and abroad, and the group took every opportunity to promote their work overseas. An important encounter in this regard was the one with the English artist, art critic, writer and broadcaster Eric Newton (1893–1965), following which an exhibition was purposely organised in his honour.<sup>58</sup> Held at the Government School of Art in 1957, the exhibition gave Newton and other invitees the opportunity to visit art classes and talk with students. This exhibition led to other shows held both locally and at the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery in Kensington, London. Following Newton's recommendation, the first significant exhibition of Maltese artists in the UK capital entitled *Paintings from Malta* was inaugurated in August 29, 1958 with an opening speech by Newton. The exhibition proved to be a success.<sup>59</sup> The event led Maltese artists to seek other possible opportunities abroad, mainly in London, as discussed below under post-independence Malta.

Another key initiative of Atelier '56 was to explore the possibility of Malta showing at the Venice Biennale for the first time. Preparations to participate started in 1956 when artists of Atelier '56 spoke with the Maltese government.<sup>60</sup> Subsequently, all members of Atelier '56 were invited to participate in the Venice Biennale on two conditions: namely that the work should not have been exhibited before and that it needed to be executed within two

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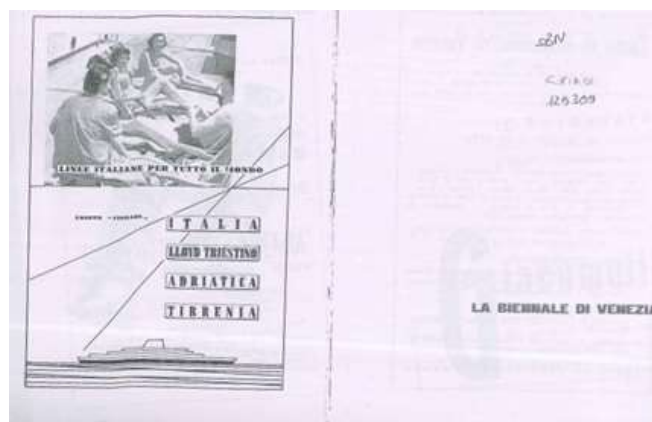
<sup>57</sup> Other groups founded in the same decade, such as the Fine Art Circle and the Art Study Circle, showed their awareness of modernism by learning how to discuss and look at the new up-and-coming styles rather than setting up a series of exhibitions. See Joseph Paul Cassar, *Pioneers of Modern Art*, 2008.

<sup>58</sup> Newton was invited to Malta in 1957 by the British Council to give a series of lectures.

<sup>59</sup> "Maltese Paintings in UK Show," *Times of Malta*, September 25, 1958. This exhibition was originally scheduled in March, then it was moved to June and finally it was inaugurated in August. See Staff Reporter, "Maltese Paintings Safe in London," *Times of Malta*, June 7, 1958.

<sup>60</sup> The Ministry of Industry and Commerce was responsible for the coordination of all the arrangements and logistics through a committee known as the Board of Technical Education.

years of the exhibition, between 1956 and 1958. A selection board was appointed and the government agreed to meet the costs of packing, freight, and insurance.<sup>61</sup> The submission date was 28 April 1958.



**Fig. 5 First Page of Venice Biennale Catalogue. (Courtesy of Venice Biennale Archive.)**

In 1956, the board selected seven artists whose participation in the Biennale was made official in June of that same year. Malta featured as one of the six guest countries to be hosted, in this case by the Italian Pavilion, located in the historic quay leading to the Via degli Schiavoni. The selected artists were four of the Atelier'56 group - Oliver Agius (1910-2006), Josef Kalleja (1888-1988), Frank Portelli (1922-2006), Antoine Camilleri (1922-2005) - and Emvin Cremona (1919-1987) and Carmelo Mangion [Figure 6]. The sixteen paintings selected were partly representational with subjects such as local landscapes and figures in stylised, semi-abstract, and pure abstract formats.<sup>62</sup> Participating through Italy and listed as a foreign artist living in the Biennale's host country was another leading Maltese artist, Giorgio

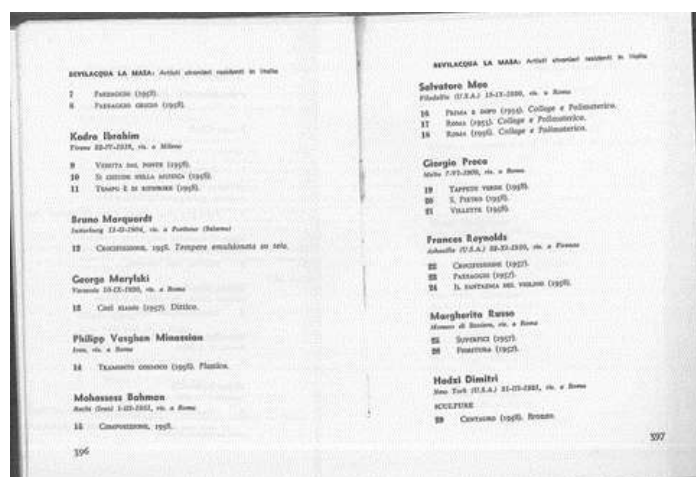
<sup>61</sup> The board members were Hon. Mr Justice Jos. Flores, J. Axisa, E.V. Cremona, R. Soler, Dr. E Vassallo, V. Apap, J.M. Borg Xuereb and R. Castillo. See Joseph Paul Cassar, 2008. P. 242.

<sup>62</sup> Oliver Agius participated with two painting *Dance Rhythm* and *Floriana Landscape*; Josef Kalleja presented *Ombra del Crocefisso*; Antoine Camilleri exhibited *Rock and Roll* and *Ecce Homo*; Hugo Carbonaro presented *Street Hawker* and *Marsa*; Emvin Cremona presented three abstract compositions and a landscape showing Piazza Regina; Carmelo Mangion had one painting representing *St Domenicans Church*; Frank Portelli exhibited *Resurrection*, *Carnival*, and a work representing Piazza San Marco.

Preca (1909-1984), three of whose works were presented within the same pavilion [Figure 7].<sup>63</sup> No extant photographs of the exhibition appear to exist.<sup>64</sup>



**Fig. 6 Venice Biennale Catalogue showing list of Maltese Artists. (Courtesy of Venice Biennale Archive.)**



**Fig. 7 Venice Biennale Catalogue showing Maltese Artist Giorgio Preca listed with Italian Artists. (Courtesy of Venice Biennale Archive.)**

A year after the Biennale of 1958, the members of Atelier ‘56 were in touch with the government to try and participate again. However, in October 1960 they were informed that Malta was not going to be included, and upon once again requesting participation at the 1962 and 1964 Biennale, it was made clear to them that it was difficult to offer Maltese artists a

<sup>63</sup> *XXIX Biennale di Venezia 1958* (Venice, Italy: Venice Biennale, 1958), *Esposizione Internazionale D’Arte* exhibition catalogue, 392, 393, 394, and 397. La Biennale di Venezia Archive does not hold photographs.

<sup>64</sup> La Biennale di Venezia Archive does not hold photographs.

space to exhibit in Venice.<sup>65</sup> Even though this was a huge disappointment it is important to note that following the Biennale of 1958 artists kept on experimenting with media and introduced new styles.

## **1.2 Post-Independence: Visual Art Practices in Malta 1964 to 1970**

The general sentiment in favour of independence went hand in hand with the island's industrial development and construction boom, and the rise of tourism.<sup>66</sup> As an independent country, Malta expanded its industrial base in the mid-1960s and this accelerated further during the 1970s. The economy was transformed from one that depended on Britain's defence to one based on the export of goods and services, the latter of which encompassed tourism.<sup>67</sup> However, new developments, including those in the visual arts, were still affected by the influence of the Catholic Church and the island's specific political leanings at any one time.

At the dawn of Independence, the Nationalist Party which governed Malta was strongly supported by the Catholic Church. Conversely, the Labour Party was involved in a bitter conflict with the Catholic Church which had imposed an interdiction on all members of the party's national executive committee for allegedly steering the party towards the extreme left.<sup>68</sup> After a long period of turmoil, the relationship between the Malta Labour Party and the

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<sup>65</sup> The local Maltese government showed support by dealing with the Biennale officials who in 1964 notified the Maltese government about the lack of space. An official announcement was published in the *Government Gazette* on May 15, 1962.

<sup>66</sup> Arsalan Alshinawi, "Malta's Post-Independence Policy-Making: An International Political Economy Perspective," *Journal of Maltese History*, Volume 4, no.1 (2014) and Aaron G. Grech, *The Evolution of the Maltese Economy since Independence* (Valletta, Malta: Central Bank of Malta, 2015).

<sup>67</sup> See Lino Briguglio, "The Maltese Economy since 1960," *University of Malta*, accessed on July 15, 2017. <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/handle/123456789/24383/The%20Maltese%20economy%20since%201960.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> and Lino Briguglio, "The Economy of a Small Island State Malta, 1960-1993," *University of Malta*, accessed on July 15, 2017. <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/handle/123456789/18207/OA%20-%20The%20Economy%20of%20a%20Small%20Island%20State%20Malta%2C%201960-1993.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

<sup>68</sup> Michael Briguglio, "Malta's Labour Party and the Politics of Hegemony", *Journal of the Research Group on Socialism and Democracy*, October 11, 2011, accessed on July 6, 2017. <http://sdonline.org/53/maltas-labour-party-and-the-politics-of-hegemony/>.

Catholic Church was eventually resolved and formal agreement was reached in April 1969 with the Church promising not to interfere in politics.<sup>69</sup>

The local art sector in Malta was active, albeit limited in 1964. Such limitations were mainly due to the continuing lack of an art education system, including a full-time visual art course, and the absence of cultural infrastructures such as art galleries and modern art museums, the combined effects of which led to a lack of general awareness about art and culture.<sup>70</sup> It is important to note that obligatory schooling was an extremely late experience in Malta since education for all was regarded as a threat by the British colonisers. Obligatory primary education was only introduced after the Second World War in 1946 and obligatory secondary education introduced in 1970. This is significant when contextualising artists' oeuvres and milieus within the broader context of the art world and narratives of the avant-garde. With the general lack of educational opportunities and few government and private institutions supporting the arts, art exhibitions were organised by small institutions such as the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce or independently by art groups and individual artists.

After Malta's independence in 1964, things started to slowly change for local artists. In 1967, a new art group called Spectrum '67 was formed, which focused on organising debates and discussion groups about the local and foreign art scene.<sup>71</sup> Involving the general public in debates and discussions was a major innovation in Malta when compared to the method of working by previous art groups which focused mainly on organising collective exhibitions, an activity that included only members and interested artists. The group also exhibited at the National Museum in Valletta in 1967.<sup>72</sup> Unlike the 1950s groups already

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<sup>69</sup> Uwe Jens Rudolf and Warren Berg, *Historic Dictionary of Malta* (Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2010).

<sup>70</sup> After the Second World War scholarships were introduced by the British government, enabling students to also benefit from study periods in the United Kingdom.

<sup>71</sup> Caesar Attard interview with the author on October 16, 2013, at artist's house and studio. Attard was a member of Spectrum '67 who organised discussions and exhibitions.

<sup>72</sup> *National Museum of Fine Arts Valletta (NMFA) Exhibition Catalogue Dossiers*, MUŻA – Heritage Malta Archive



mentioned, Spectrum 67 members were part of a younger generation of artists, the majority born in the mid-forties, including Caesar Attard (1946), Paul Carbonaro (1948), Francis Galea (1945-1994), Joseph M. Genius (1934-1970), Paul Haber (1940), Mary De Piro (1946), and Tony Sciberras (1946).<sup>73</sup> During this same decade, in 1968, the Artists' Guild was also formed by tenor Paul Asciaq, who started organising exhibitions abroad for Maltese artists.<sup>74</sup> Asciaq also appealed to the Maltese government to purchase a work from each exhibition, through which practice the government started its first collection of local artworks for government buildings.<sup>75</sup>

The mid and late 1960s also saw the presence of two figures from the international scene in Malta. The first of these was the internationally acclaimed contemporary British abstract artist Victor Pasmore who moved to Malta in 1965. The other stimulus for the Maltese artistic scene was A. C. Sewter, former editor of *The Burlington Magazine* and a senior lecturer at Manchester University, who arrived in the late 1960s.<sup>76</sup> Sewter contributed to the development of modern art in Malta by promoting and collecting work by local artists. He also wrote a critical essay about Gabriel Caruana (1929-2018) in 1973.<sup>77</sup> Other prominent British individuals who settled in Malta in the 1960s included the artists Mary Fedden and her husband Julian Trevelyan, and the prominent architect Sir Basil Spence.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Caesar Attard interview with the author on October 16, 2013, at the artist's house and studio.

<sup>74</sup> *Maltese Artists*, Upper Grosvenor Galleries, London, 5 – 13 May. See Anon, "Maltese Artists' exhibition in London," *Times of Malta*, May 14, 1970. *Contemporary Maltese Artists*, Pacem in Terris Gallery, New York, 10 August – 4 September. See Anon "Maltese Artists in New York Exhibition," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 26, 1970 and Anon "Outstanding New York Success for Maltese Art – Exhibition Sold Out," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, October 04, 1970.

<sup>75</sup> Anon, "Artists at the fair," *Times of Malta*, July 12, 1969.

<sup>76</sup> Gabriel Caruana interview with the author on November 21, 2000, and December 12, 2001, at his art studio.

<sup>77</sup> See Richard England, *Contemporary Art in Malta* (Malta: Malta Arts Festival Publications, 1973).

<sup>78</sup> Julian Trevelyan and Mary Fedden arrived in Malta in 1958 on the invitation of Graham Binns who together with his wife lived in Malta until the late 1960s. See Lawrence Pavia, "Julian Trevelyan and Mary Fedden: Their Journeys to Malta and their interpretation of the Landscape", accessed on July 4, 2015 <http://maltahistory.eu5.net/mh4/201203.html>; Conrad Thake essay "Seeking Solace in the Mediterranean: Architect Basil Spence in Malta", in *A Timeless Gentleman - Festschrift in honour of Maurice de Giorgio* (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2014) pp.241-253; Richard England interview with the author, December 10, 2001, at his private residence.

With the rise of tourism, new spaces for exhibiting art emerged, including newly built hotel lobbies as well as privately run art galleries.<sup>79</sup> The first galleries to appear were the Bank of Alderney, the Chains Gallery and the Mazaron Gallery. By 1964, the Bank of Alderney in Zachary Street, Valletta, had established a small gallery in its entrance. The building housed permanent exhibitions of works by contemporary Maltese artists which usually centred on a common theme. When a change of collection occurred, they were occasionally announced in local newspapers.<sup>80</sup> The Chains and the Mazaron were two contemporary galleries inaugurated in 1969. The Chains Modern Art Gallery was situated at 96 Grenfell Street, St Julian's, and had overseas owners like the Bank of Alderney Gallery.<sup>81</sup> A number of collective exhibitions mainly by overseas artists including Jean Dennis Cruchet (Swiss), Robert Dickerson (Australian) and Ellis Jacobson (an American living in Mallorca) together with works by Mary De Piro were organised there.<sup>82</sup> The Mazaron Art Gallery was then situated in Ross Street, Paceville, not very far from The Chains. In addition to an exhibition space, it also had a roof garden and a bar. Temporary art shows were held concurrently with a permanent exhibition of their collection. Hence the commercial art gallery exhibiting modern art became a new feature in Malta.<sup>83</sup> Before the mid-1960s there was practically nowhere for modern artists to exhibit except for the Valletta palace or club.<sup>84</sup>

The establishment of these new exhibition spaces was an initial boost for contemporary Maltese artists and opened up new opportunities and a new market which

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<sup>79</sup> Hotel lobbies also gradually started to be used by modern artists as exhibition spaces during the post-war period. Hotel Phoenicia was one such an example and even featured a personal exhibition by George Preca in 1948, indicating that he was being liberated from conventional boundaries. The Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce at Palazzo de La Salle in Valletta also aided the modern art groups and provided space for exhibiting. This same palace later inaugurated a permanent art gallery in 1970. See Anon, "Permanent Art Gallery Inaugurated," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, March 1, 1970.

<sup>80</sup> "Alderney Gallery Advert," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, June 21, 1964; and "Chain Gallery Advert," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, January 12, 1969.

<sup>81</sup> St Julian's is located on the Maltese coast, North of Valletta. It is around 7.5 km away from Valetta; that is, a twenty-minute drive away. From the 1990s, St Julian's became the most tourist-populated area in Malta, famous for its nightlife including restaurants and clubs.

<sup>82</sup> See newspaper advert, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, January 12, 1969, p. 7.

<sup>83</sup> Matthew Attard, "The Gallerija Fenici and its Fostering of a New Artistic Sensibility" (B.A. (Art) diss., University of Malta, 2008).

<sup>84</sup> "New Galleries," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, June 1, 1969.

included a wider variety of collectors. By the late sixties, Maltese artists had therefore become less insular and the unintentional element of shock brought about by the works of the Modern Art Circle artists in the mid 1950s started being exhibited more often. However, the commercial galleries were short lived and the majority had closed by the late 1970s,<sup>85</sup> even though “demand for public housing, private dwellings and hotels, played an important role in the unexpected economic recovery after 1964.”<sup>86</sup> Consequently, by the early 1970s the gallery spaces available for modern and contemporary art were few and the local art scene became largely dependent upon the Malta Society of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce and government museums.

### **1.3 New Abstract Horizons: The Commonwealth Institute in London and Victor Pasmore in Malta**

The artistic links forged pre-Independence in the mid 1950s by the Atelier '56 group with the artist and critic Eric Newton continued to have significance for Malta's artists post-independence. Prior to Independence, through Newton's networks, several Maltese artists had the opportunity to exhibit at the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery from 1958.<sup>87</sup> Following the first collective exhibition organised by Eric Newton in August 1958, Willie and Vincent Apap were the first artists to exhibit their work in November 1960 in the old institute building.<sup>88</sup> The exhibition was dedicated solely to their work and included Lord Mountbatten

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<sup>85</sup> For example, the Bank of Alderney Gallery was subject to criticism with regards to its choice of exhibited works in an article written by Richard England on April 17, 1966. He argued that the absence of an aesthetic standard lowered the level of the exhibition. This problem was also common with other exhibition places, amongst them the National Museum of Fine Arts.

<sup>86</sup> See Lino Briguglio, “The Maltese Economy since 1960,” *University of Malta*, accessed on July 15, 2017. <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/handle/123456789/24383/The%20Maltese%20economy%20since%201960.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>. p. 206.

<sup>87</sup> Between August and September 1958 the first Maltese collective exhibition was organised at the Commonwealth Insittute. Between November and December 1966, Giorgio Preca (1909-1984)—and later in 1969, Alfred Chircop (1933-2015)—exhibited many works within the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery. The last Maltese artist to exhibit at the Commonwealth Institute was Richard England who presented his architectural drawings with Julie Caprara (1939-2008) in 1975.

<sup>88</sup> *Willie and Vincent Apap*, November 1960, exhibited at the Commonwealth Institute, London, UK. (Willie and Vincent Apap also exhibited at the Grabowski Gallery, South Kensington, London, in January 1962). Refer to *Vincent Apap: Retrospective Exhibition* (Malta: Bank of Valletta, 2000), exhibition catalogue.

caricature statuettes (1960) commissioned from Apap.<sup>89</sup> Subsequent artists to exhibit were Emvin Cremona, Antoine Camilleri, Esprit Barthet, and Frank Portelli, who each presented a painting as part of the inaugural 1962 exhibition of the new Commonwealth Institute building and its new art gallery. Entitled *Commonwealth Art Today*, the accompanying catalogue carried a forward by Newton.<sup>90</sup>

The gallery was a key venue for biennials of Commonwealth art, group shows of artists from Commonwealth countries, and several solo exhibitions. The most important exhibition of Maltese artists at the new institute gallery, and the most important for this research, was *Contemporary Art from Malta*, held in 1967 when the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce was invited to select the works for this collective exhibition [Figure 8]. According to the catalogue, the society wanted to show a spectrum of work reflecting recent innovation in the visual arts in Malta.<sup>91</sup>



**Fig. 8 Contemporary Art from Malta, Exhibition Catalogue Cover (1967), Commonwealth Institute. London, UK.**

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<sup>89</sup> Both Willie and Vincent Apap were regularly commissioned by the Royal Family throughout the 1950s. Vincent was the most commissioned of the two brothers. See Victor Fenech (ed.) *Malta: Six Modern Artists*, (Malta: Malta University Services Ltd., 1991) pp. 60-64.

<sup>90</sup> *Commonwealth Art Today*, 7 November 1962 - 13 January 1963, exhibited at the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, Kensington, London, UK.

<sup>91</sup> *Contemporary Art Malta*, July 27-August 27, 1967, exhibited at the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, Kensington, London, UK.

Based on an empirical analysis of the exhibited works, the society's board members must have perceived the abstract idiom together with the distorted presentation of local landscapes with indigenous native elements as the best examples to exhibit in London. Perhaps this is not surprising given that the exhibition opened less than three years after independence and such works were enjoyed by the British who used to live in or regularly visited Malta when it was still a colony.<sup>92</sup>

Two representative examples are Emvin Cremona's "Summer" (undated) where from an abstracted composition one can identify a local harbour with boats and fortified bastions, and Joseph M. Borg Xuereb's (1928-1996) "Backyard's Clash" (undated) representing a geometrical statement of the local cubic like building [Figure 9]. These two works were illustrated in the catalogue.



**Fig. 9 Emvin Cremona, *Summer*, undated, oil on canvas (left) and Joseph M. Borg Xuereb, *Backyard's Clash*, undated, oil on canvas (right).**

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<sup>92</sup> This preference by the British is indicated in *Colonialism: An International Social, Cultural and Political Encyclopedia*: "Art was a central element among the elite classes in the colonial society... colonial artists and their patrons often turned to locally distinctive aspects of the colonies either in the natural environment or in the indigenous culture" See Melvin E. Page, *Colonialism: An International Social, Cultural and Political Encyclopedia*, (US, ABC-CLIO Ltd., 2003) VOL 1 p. 29. See also the speech by the Governor General Sir Maurice Dorman where he stated that Maltese artists would listen with interest and concern to exceptional British artists Julian Trevelyan and Victor Pasmore who at the time were spending a lot of time in Malta. See Anon, "Contemporary Art from Malta in London," *Times of Malta* July 28, 1967.

Arguably, by exhibiting recent works, the Commonwealth Institute might be seen as considering the artists' agencies in appropriating these modernist styles in order to devise, to use Mitter's words "new ways to represent the visible world," particularly as the venue was an important part of the infrastructure for modernist artists from ex-colonial countries who wanted to establish themselves in London.

Some works represented abstracted religious subjects and landscapes or subjects showing local indigenous motifs such as village skylines and Catholic symbols, while others appropriated formal elements from popular modernist movements, particularly Cubism and Abstract Art. The dynamic work used for the exhibition cover was an abstract painting by Emvin Cremona entitled "Volcanic Substance" (undated) [Figure 8].<sup>93</sup>

Based on this exhibition, the use of the term 'contemporary' in relation to Maltese art meant painting and sculpture that broadly embraced modernist forms including abstraction. As discussed in the introduction, the terms 'modern' and 'contemporary' were frequently interchangeable at this time. In Kobena Mercer's terms, the exhibited artworks reflect a form of 'indigenous modernism' which he names as *postcolonial internationalism*: works created by ex-colonial artists from native lands showing abstracted indigenous elements.<sup>94</sup>

Mercer uses the designation of 'New Commonwealth Internationalism' to refer to this new movement of artists (and artworks) from ex-colonial countries to London in the late 1950s and 1960s. For Mercer, this movement was politically engaged by infusing forms of modernism with specific local references while being clearly obliged to a continuing sense of empire.<sup>95</sup> According to Mercer, "this signalled an internationalism-from-above that tried to 'manage' the end of the Empire by 'modernising' Britain's relationship with the newly

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<sup>93</sup> Emvin Cremona's work was also included in the *Commonwealth Artists of Fame 1952-1977* exhibition. This brought together some of the leading British artists of the time, including Henry Moore, together with their counterparts from the British Commonwealth. See *Commonwealth Artists of Fame, 1952-1977*, Commonwealth Art Gallery, London, 1 June-3 July 1977.

<sup>94</sup> Kobena Mercer "Black Atlantic Abstraction: Aubrey Williams and Frank Bowling" in Kobena Mercer (ed.) *Discrepant Abstraction*, (Cambridge and London, UK: The MIT Press, 2006) p.186.

<sup>95</sup> Ruth Craggs and Claire Wintle (ed.), *Cultures and Decolonisation: Transnational Productions and Practices, 1945-1970*, (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2016), p.55.

independent countries, rather than breaking ties completely.”<sup>96</sup> Certainly, the Commonwealth Institute was an important part of the infrastructure for modernist artists from ex-colonial countries who wanted to establish themselves in London.<sup>97</sup> However, by saving ties with Empire, Mercer perceives this as a way for London to achieve status and assert itself as an artistic metropole, a centre that would attract people from all around the world, similar to Paris and New York. The art of the New Commonwealth Internationalism was strongly promoted not only at the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, but also at Gallery One, the New Vision Centre Gallery and the Whitechapel Art Gallery in the late 1950s and 1960s.<sup>98</sup>

The complexities of post-colonial Malta and artists’ negotiations of their new positioning is further complicated by the continuing strong connections with Britain within Malta. This is evident in the significant role that the British artist Victor Pasmore played for contemporary artists. Pasmore and his wife, the painter Wendy Pasmore, settled in Malta in 1965. The local artists who met Pasmore during the mid and late 1960s, notably Antoine Camilleri, Emvin Cremona, Josef Kalleya, Gabriel Caruana and Alfred Chircop, were already in the process of mastering abstraction in their art practice or in concept. What Pasmore did was encourage them to continue experimenting and to place their trust in what they were creating. His own work was in transition when he moved to Malta; in the early 1960s he was working on a series of constructions and reliefs, but by the end of the same decade he had moved onto larger colourful paintings that embedded his recognisable style.<sup>99</sup>

Pasmore played a pivotal role in creating a professional artistic network in Malta in the late 1960s. A small group of artists, including Gabriel Caruana and Richard England (b. 1937) first met Pasmore who subsequently knew most of the abstract artists in Malta as well

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<sup>96</sup> Op. Cit. Mercer, p.186.

<sup>97</sup> Significant twentieth-century British artists including Henry Moore, Victor Pasmore, and Peter Lanyon also exhibited in these galleries alongside artists from ex-colonial countries including four artists from Malta in *The Commonwealth Art Today Exhibition*, Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, 7 Nov. 1962 - 13 Jan. 1963. See Kobena Mercer “Black Atlantic Abstraction: Aubrey Williams and Frank Bowling” in Kobena Mercer (ed.) *Discrepant Abstraction*, (Cambridge and London, UK: The MIT Press,2006) p.186.

<sup>98</sup> Op. Cit., p. 45.

<sup>99</sup> See Katya Borg, “Victor Pasmore in Malta” (BA diss., University of Malta, 2002).

as local architects and philosophers. Pasmore showed his interest by attending local exhibitions and following up with personal letters that offered his thoughts on their work and often expressed the wish to discuss them further with the artists.<sup>100</sup> Pasmore met other artists by chance or contacted them via telephone. The local presence of such an important figure in the development of international abstract art encouraged these Maltese artists to concentrate more wholeheartedly on the creation of abstract works from the late 1960s.

As discussed previously, abstract art was practised in Malta from the fifties and gained momentum with examples of Cremona's works shown at the Venice Biennale in 1958. However, abstract art had not yet been fully accepted on the Islands. For example, although Cremona was best known abroad for this abstract art, he regularly undertook representational church commissions in Malta. An episode that occurred in 1970 when an exhibition by Victor Pasmore was held in Valletta, at the Malta Society of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce, is also indicative of this local resistance to abstraction.<sup>101</sup> For this specific occasion, Pasmore's recent works were collected together under one roof. These included a very large work from the *Apollo* series [Figure 10]. At the end of the show Pasmore wanted to donate the *Apollo* work on the condition that all board members of the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce would accept the donation without reserve.

Unfortunately, not everyone agreed to accept the gift and the work was soon after acquired by the University of Queensland, Australia.<sup>102</sup> The local artist community was disappointed and shocked to learn about this decision.

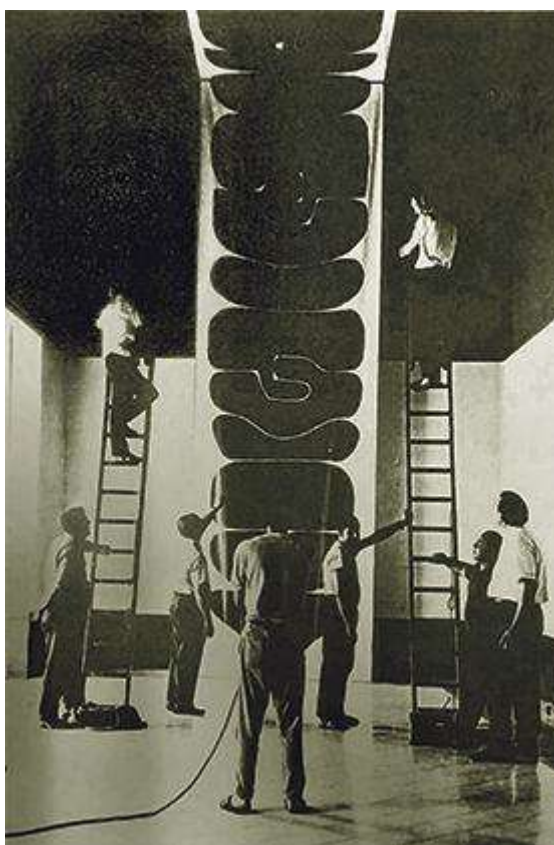
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<sup>100</sup> Original letters are only available in the various artists' private collections. For examples see Katya Borg, "Victor Pasmore in Malta" BA diss. (unpublished), University of Malta, 2002.

<sup>101</sup> Victor Pasmore, *Space Within*, July 18 – August 15, 1970, Society of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce, 1970, Valletta.

<sup>102</sup> Gabriel Caruana interview with the author on November 21, 2000, and December 12, 2001.





**Fig. 10 Pasmore Victor, *Apollo II: Ascending Development*, 1970. Valletta, Malta. This image shows the installation of the works at the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. The first person on the right is Gabriel Caruana. (Courtesy of the Malta Society of Arts.)**

Following this incident, Pasmore continued to support the local artists' community but little abstract work with a contemporary sensitivity was publicly exhibited during the early 1970s. In fact, it was only in 1975 that another exhibition of abstract art was held in Malta at the National Museum of Fine Arts in 1975: a solo exhibition by Pasmore.<sup>103</sup>

As the above suggests, it is evident that while abstract art could be exhibited abroad, including at the Commonwealth Institute during the 1960s and early 1970s, the reception of abstract art in Malta was rather negative. While the circle of artists that had the opportunity to meet Pasmore on a regular basis from the mid 1960s onwards continued to develop abstract

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<sup>103</sup> *The Image in Search of Itself*, National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, Malta, 1975.

idioms in their private studios, only a handful of artists such as Gabriel Caruana and Emvin Cremona showed such work to the public during the 1970s.<sup>104</sup>

#### **1.4 The Maltese Art Scene in the 1970s**

Little to almost no research has been conducted on how Malta's independence affected artists working in Malta in the late 1960s and 1970s. Researchers of this period have earmarked key artists of the time, but with the exception of some biographies and analysis of artworks, no detailed studies in relation to the changing artistic and social-economic context have been undertaken. Moreover, art reviews in local newspapers were written by staff reporters and the newspapers' art critics who were kept anonymous, making it difficult to create an analytical understanding of this period. An insight into the changing circumstances from the 1960s to the early 1970s is briefly given in a 1973 article dedicated to the launch of the book *Contemporary Art in Malta*. The author of the article, Paul Xuereb, writes the following in the introduction:

Despite the constant flow of literary publications and the odd exciting event such as Ebejer's *Vum-baraia-zungare* or Richard England's recent exhibition, art and literature in the early Seventies is far removed from the fervour, the sense of adventure, which characterised them during the mid- and late Sixties. There are no simple explanations for this change, but some of the causes are clear enough, such as the change that has occurred in the economic climate, and thus in the degree of artistic patronage; the rise of an unbalanced criticism strong enough to dissuade all but the best or the incurably complacent from keeping up their efforts; in some fields, the dominance of a single figure and the consequent

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<sup>104</sup> Exhibitions included: *Maltese Contemporary Art Exhibition* (1976) Malta Society of Arts Manufacture and Commerce, Malta, *Maltese Contemporary Art Exhibition* (1977) De La Salle College, Malta; *Contemporary Collective Exhibition* (1974), Freedom Square Valletta, Malta.

discouragement of others who might have made significant if minor contributions.<sup>105</sup>

Although we know of a number of art groups created after Malta's independence, it is interesting to note that interest in the idea of group and peer support started to generally diminish among local artists by the 1970s.<sup>106</sup> There are many possible scenarios for this change. A possibility might have been the lack of support from the few institutions available such as the Malta Society of Arts Manufacture and Commerce which after independence became more autonomous and probably had less financial support to offer. While the artists who managed to establish themselves with the few available commissions and the collective exhibitions decided to develop and strengthen their work on their own. This is evident in local art reviews where specific named artists were pointed out and greater attention was attributed to these individuals rather than to group initiatives.

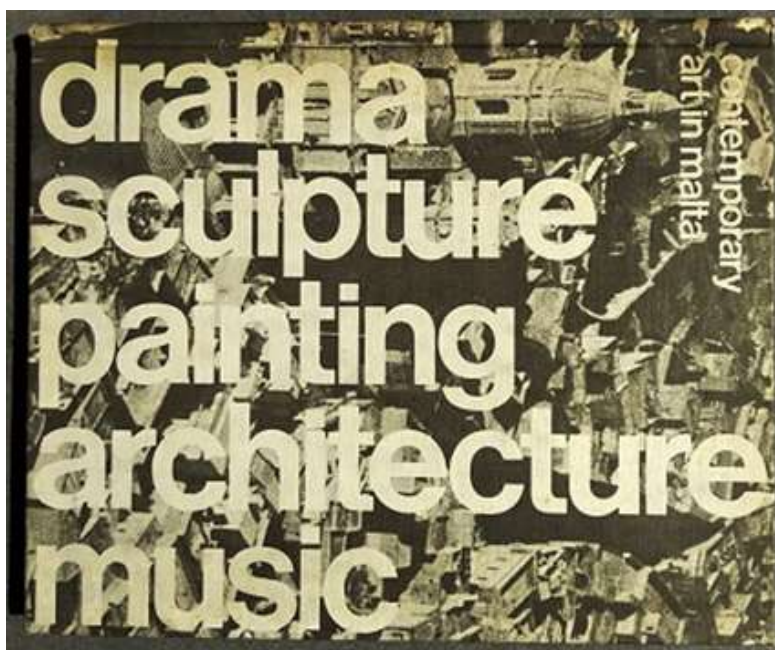
In fact, one of the first publications to focus on contemporary art in Malta serves as an example: *Contemporary Art in Malta*, edited by Richard England and published in 1973, was dedicated to individuals across the arts and not to art groups [Figure 11].<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Paul Xuereb, "Artists' Quintet," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, December 30, 1973.

<sup>106</sup> In 1967 and 1974, two art groups were formed, Spectrum '67 and Vision '74, respectively. Both groups focused on the organisation of discussions apart from exhibitions. See Joseph Paul Cassar, *Pioneers of Modern Art*, (Malta: Pin Publications, 2011).

<sup>107</sup> Richard England, *Contemporary Art in Malta* (Malta: Malta Arts Festival Publications, 1973).



**Fig. 11** *Contemporary Art in Malta* book cover, edited by Richard England (1973).

The publication focuses on the artistic activities of five Maltese individuals working in different spheres: namely the music composer Charles Camilleri, the playwright Francis Ebejer, the sculptor Gabriel Caruana, the painter Emvin Cremona (who had shown in the 1958 Venice Biennale and the 1967 exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute), and Richard England himself an architect. With a foreward by Fr. Peter Serracino Inglott, the five separate essays were by Joe Friggieri (on Francis Ebejer), A.C. Sewter (on Gabriel Caruana), Richard England (on Emvin Cremona), Frank Jenkins (on Richard England), and Ates Orga (on Charles Camilleri). According to a staff reporter for the *Times of Malta*, this publication, launched during the Malta Arts Festival, was purposely created to show the many tourists visiting the island during the 1970s that the arts in Malta did not stop with the departure of the Knights of the Order.<sup>108</sup>

However, the realisation of this publication did not necessarily reflect a local market or indeed acceptance of these contemporary art forms. The artists who were practising and exhibiting in the early 1970s were those who had been part of art groups and had exhibited

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<sup>108</sup> Anon "Contemporary Art in Malta," *Times of Malta*, November 16, 1973.

regularly since the 1950s, alongside those few individuals who had returned to Malta from their studies in England including Anton Agius (1933-2008), Harry Alden (1929-2019) and Emvin Cremona. The few who succeeded to sell their art locally were those being commissioned by the Church or government such as Emvin Cremona, who was extremely popular for church commissions, and Anton Agius, who is still known today for the public monuments commissioned by the government.<sup>109</sup>

A key political factor here was that, following the Labour Party victory at the general election in 1971, successive Labour governments throughout the 1970s and 1980s adopted ideologies reminiscent of socialism on the one hand and nationalism on the other. The emphasis was on the role of the state in the economy and social welfare.<sup>110</sup> This was stressed by several commissioned public artworks by Agius whose chief work the *Workers Monument* (1980), adopts a Socialist Realism style [Figure 12].



**Fig. 12 Agius Anton, *Workers Monument*, 1980. Msida, Malta.**

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<sup>109</sup> Anton Agius interview with the author on November 8, 2001 at this art studio. See also Victor Fenech (ed.) *Six Modern Artists* (Msida, Malta: Malta University Services, 1991).

<sup>110</sup> These policies led to heavy state intervention within a mixed economy, especially where there was a lack of initiative from the private sector. Import substitution and bulk buying were implemented, frequently resulting in inferior local products. At the same time, however, Malta developed as an export-oriented economy. See Lino Briguglio, "The Maltese Economy since 1960," *University of Malta*, accessed July 15, 2017. <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/handle/123456789/24383/The%20Maltese%20economy%20since%201960.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

As discussed above, the majority of commercial galleries in Malta had closed by the early 1970s and the infrastructure to support contemporary artists primarily rested with the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. In 1970, the society inaugurated a permanent art gallery at Palazzo De La Salle in Valletta where all genres were exhibited collectively, from abstract to landscape art. The opening of the space was part of the aims of the society: that of assisting local artists. Many solo and collective exhibitions of local contemporary Maltese artists were subsequently shown here. The society also organised other exhibitions throughout this decade, including those at the Trade Fair grounds.<sup>111</sup>

Another initiative was the inauguration and opening of the National Museum of Fine Arts, in 1974 when the fine arts collection was transferred there from the National Museum at the Auberge de Provence in Republic Street to South Street, Valletta.<sup>112</sup> The permanent display included medieval art works, Maltese furniture, ecclesiastic silverware and artefacts which formed part of the Order of St John including Sicilian maiolica jars and paintings from the 16th and 17th century. It also comprised works by British artist Edward Lear (1812-1888), Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) and a number of works by Maltese artist practicing in the 19th and early 20th centuries

If, as I suggest above, the artistic climate of the 1970s was particularly fractured due to a lack of infrastructure, with on one side a younger generation of artists pursuing abstraction through their contact with Pasmore, and on the other, strong state and church patronage that favoured more representational work, there were also important examples of new contemporary experimental works being produced.<sup>113</sup> Most notably, Caesar Attard (b. 1946), one of the founding members of Spectrum 67, was becoming one of the most

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<sup>111</sup> “Art Exhibition at Trade Fair,” *Times of Malta*, July 9, 1974.

<sup>112</sup> Auberge de Provence had been used for art exhibitions since 1954 and, after the transfer of the art collection, it was used as an exhibition space for contemporary artworks mainly in the top floor salon and later in a small gallery at basement level.

<sup>113</sup> The younger generation of abstract artists in contact with Pasmore included Marco Cremona (b. 1951), Pawl Carbonaro (b.1948) and Luciano Micallef (b.1954).

prominent artists of the mid 1970s. In the three years between 1975 and 1978, Attard produced six self-organised art projects, four of which were live participatory actions, a mode of art practice not seen in Malta before. The playfulness used by Attard in his participatory works has a resonance with developments in Europe from the 1960s and early 1970s, most notably with the landmark collective exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*, curated by Harald Szeemann and held at the Kunsthalle Bern between March 22 to April 27, 1969.<sup>114</sup>

The most daring works by Attard were *Search for Your Self* (1975), held at the Upper Barracca Gardens, Valletta; *Artist as Model* (1977), part of the *Maltese Contemporary Art* exhibition held in the Libyan-Arab Cultural Centre, also in Valletta; and *The identity Card* (1978), held at the Argotti Gardens in the fortified town of Floriana, just outside of Valletta. [Figure 13]. Whereas Attard's contemporaries focused mainly on experimental abstraction, Attard was in tune with international developments, dissociating himself from painting, and engaging with performance. According to Attard, he was only aware subsequently of the parallels between his work and developments abroad, especially in England.<sup>115</sup> In Malta his work of the 1970s were perceived "as a curious event and that's it." He further commented that there was a social protest element in the works that referenced ordinary workers and other disenfranchised people beyond the art world.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> See Bruce Altshuler, *Biennials and Beyond: Exhibitions that Made Art History, 1962–2002* (London UK: Phaidon Press, 2013). See also Anna Dezeuze (ed.), *The do-it-yourself Artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media*, (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010), Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, (London, UK: Tate, 2005), and Claire Bishop (ed.), *Participation*, (Cambridge and London, UK: The MIT Press 2006).

<sup>115</sup> Caesar Attard interview with the author on October 16, 2013, at artist's house and studio.

<sup>116</sup> As mentioned later in the conclusion the works by Attard were an isolated example and no artist followed his experimental practice. It was only in the late 1990s that local artists started creating similar works.



**Fig. 13 Caesar Attard, *The identity Card*, 1978, live participation at the Argotti Gardens. Floriana, Malta. (Photo provided by Caesar Attard)**

### 1.5 Perspectives on Maltese Art in the 1980s

Local art reviews that appeared regularly in all local newspapers throughout the 1980s, refer to this decade as a mature phase for contemporary art where the dominant experimental idiom was abstract art.<sup>117</sup> These reviews suggest that this decade was a mature phase because of the number of solo and collective exhibitions organised primarily by two new art spaces: the commercial gallery Gallerija Fenici in Valletta and the extremely short-lived Museum of Contemporary Art in St Julian's.

Gallerija Fenici, inaugurated on 12 November 1980 was situated within the Mediterranean Conference Centre – a building on the outskirts of Valletta run by the government. During the 1980s the gallery became an important landmark for contemporary Maltese Art and it reflected the growing local art scene.<sup>118</sup> The conception of the gallery was developed and run by the artist Norbert Francis Attard, the event organiser George Glanville and philosopher Kenneth Wain who were later to become major champions of Maltese art as I discuss in subsequent chapters. The gallery also became known as a venue where new ideas were launched.<sup>119</sup> It hosted diverse exhibitions both from local and foreign artists ranging

<sup>117</sup> See Katya Borg, "Abstract Painting in Malta in the 1980s" (M.A diss. University of Malta 2006).

<sup>118</sup> Norbert Francis Attard, George Glanville and Kenneth Wain conceived of the idea of opening this gallery.

<sup>119</sup> Gallerija Fenici was 40 meters long, with three levels divided with the help of a number of stairs between each level. Source



from collective to individual, from sculpture to painting, posters and installations, including the work of Victor Pasmore and Victor Vasarely side by side with Maltese artists' work.<sup>120</sup> Most particularly, it placed importance on promotion and corporate identity so that each exhibition had individually designed invites, brochures and catalogues that represented a new departure in commercial gallery organisation in Malta.<sup>121</sup>

An indication of the local contemporary art scene in the mid-1980s is evident through the compendium-style publication *Contemporary Maltese Artists* (1985) by Adrian Stivala who was involved in the organisation and promotion of the events at the Fenici gallery while writing exhibition reviews on a local newspaper.<sup>122</sup> Stivala dedicates one page to a total of 93 established and emerging artists including a short biography and an image of their work predominately in black and white. Although the publication offers little detailed discussion, it represents a cross section of contemporary artists engaged in painting, ceramics, sculpture and photography. Notably, no performance or installation art was included. It also marks the recent closure of Gallerija Fenici with a small section in the forward dedicated to the gallery which had to close in October 1984 when the organisers received a letter from the government who owned the building.<sup>123</sup>

The first Museum of Contemporary Art in Malta was inaugurated by the government on 5 July 1986 [Figure 14].<sup>124</sup> As the name indicates, this was an important embracing of the contemporary. The inauguration ceremony is still remembered by many and in one newspaper review a detailed description of the event was given, however only this review and another article reported the opening.<sup>125</sup> The catalogue, or rather leaflet, contained a full

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<sup>120</sup> See Matthew Attard, "The Gallerija Fenici and its Fostering of a New Artistic Sensibility" (B.A. (Art) diss., University of Malta, 2008).

<sup>121</sup> By the 1980s, repetitive exhibition trends were broken with the opening of Gallerija Fenici which used to organise solo and collective international shows and exhibit experimental works like installation art. A number of catalogues were kindly donated for research purposes by George Glanville, who was one of the main organisers, in October 2001.

<sup>122</sup> Adrian Stivala, *Contemporary Maltese Artists* (Malta: North Star Publication, 1985).

<sup>123</sup> See Katya Borg, "Abstract Painting in Malta in the 1980s" (M.A. diss. University of Malta 2006).

<sup>124</sup> See Katya Borg 2006, pp 76-77.

<sup>125</sup> Artisticus, "Contemporary Complex," *Weekend Chronicle*, July 12, 1986.

historical description of the building but unfortunately it did not include a list of the participating artists or of the director/curators looking after the museum. In the same building there was a social security office, a restaurant and cafeteria and a disco, apart from the space where arts, crafts and folklore objects were displayed. While the designation of a Museum of Contemporary Art suggests a recognition of new developments, leafing through the information one wonders if it was really the inauguration of a contemporary museum or the opening of a social complex.<sup>126</sup> The exhibition galleries consisted of five very small rooms on the third floor of the building where painting, sculpture and ceramics were exhibited together. By the end of the next year the museum was closed down in 1987.<sup>127</sup>



**Fig. 14 Main Entrance of Spinola Contemporary Museum (1986)  
(Courtesy MUŻA, Heritage Malta)**

As these short-lived initiatives suggest, most Maltese artists until the late 1980s were still executing artworks that met their patrons' expectations while simultaneously experimenting where possible. Religious art, mainly painting and sculpture, remained current. Some artists created these works in alignment with their personal Catholic values while

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<sup>126</sup> *Il-Palazz Spinola*, complex inauguration leaflet, 1986.

<sup>127</sup> See Katya Borg 2006, p. 77.

others did this solely to please patrons and the general public. Most artists who explored this theme would distort the formal elements of the composition but they failed to create something that could make the work stand out. Those who scrutinised this theme managed to do so by looking into concealed spirituality. The most influential artists who interpreted spirituality were Josef Kalleja and Antoine Camilleri while the only artist who managed to gain patron's support while working with an avant-garde language was Emvin Cremona.<sup>128</sup> Artists in Malta interpreted spirituality by using different means and styles. Some, for example, presented distorted or nearly abstract compositions, while others represented spirituality by linking it to contemporary social aspects which was not always appreciated or understood by the general public.<sup>129</sup>

The second significant subject matter which remained extremely popular into the 1980s was landscape painting which represented Malta's indigenous natural elements visible in rural areas and villages. This genre, long practised by artists who lived under British rule, can be seen as continuing a colonial legacy. Within a broad definition of modernism, most of these works could not be regarded as engaging with modernist forms. Nevertheless, these were - and still are - the most popular artworks among local people and tourists visiting Malta.

Other artists combined abstract elements with more popular themes that included religious compositions, landscapes and related figurative painted artworks in a recurrent manner until the 1980s. Nonetheless the exhibitions presenting abstract art were regarded as the most contemporary, albeit without the general public's acceptance. On the other hand, these works were highly praised by artistic communities, most of which were in touch with Victor Pasmore.

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<sup>128</sup> In the 1950s, Emvin Cremona started experimenting with abstraction in line with European developments (Tachisme and Art Informel). In the meantime, he received several church commissions in which he used a representative form of art accepted by the Church. See Dominic Cutajar, "Emvin Cremona" in *Malta: Six Modern Artists* (Malta, Malta University Services Ltd: 1991).

<sup>129</sup> See Katya Borg 2006.

One could argue that the encounter with and encouragement of Pasmore might have led some of these artists to decide to focus mainly on the production of abstract art, dominated by modernist abstraction, even though this style, like former modernist styles before it, was regarded as passé when measured by an international westernised scale by the late 1980s.<sup>130</sup>

From the above, it is evident that throughout the post-independence decades, the artists who were regarded as contemporary were those who created abstracted subjects influenced by cubism or abstract art. From a European-based modernist perspective, one might argue that the advent of abstraction in the local art scene was in line with the rest of Europe, since it involved a number of artists experimenting with new painterly forms, while others in Malta were still working in traditional and acceptable styles. This combination of painterly styles encapsulated the visual art ecosystem of post-independence Malta.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

Based on the analysis of the fragmented and partial documentation of modern Maltese art immediately prior to and post-independence, and readings of postcolonial art, this chapter has identified the key aspects of the Malta's art scene prior to 1989.

What has become evident in terms of infrastructure and support is that the Malta Society of Art, Manufacture and Commerce, set up in 1852 on the British model of the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), played the most significant role for the art sector throughout this period by promoting Maltese art both locally and abroad through organising major exhibitions. In the 1950s they supported new art groups such as Atelier '56 and Spectrum

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<sup>130</sup> Pasmore's first solo exhibition in Malta was held on the Malta Society of Art, Manufactures and Commerce premises in 1970. His second was held at the National Museum of Fine Arts in 1975. The next solo exhibition was held at Gallerija Gaulos in Gozo between April and June of 1993 and the fourth one at the Cathedral Museum in December 1993. The majority of collective exhibitions were held at Gallerija Fenici. For example, *International Graphics I* held in 1981 and *Untitled* in 1982. In 1983, Pasmore participated in two exhibitions at the gallery: *International Graphics II* and *Magritte, Pasmore, Vasarely and...* See Borg, "Victor Pasmore in Malta" 2002.

'67, and secured and organised Malta's participation at the Venice Biennale of 1958 in the Italian Pavilion. Post-independence, the same society organised a series of exhibitions at the Commonwealth Institute in London, including the 1967 *Contemporary Art from Malta* exhibition, and in 1970 opened an exhibition space in Malta's capital.

As shown, the commercial and gallery infrastructure supporting contemporary developments in Malta was highly unstable: immediately after independence economic growth facilitated the opening of a number of private run galleries which offered new spaces for artists to exhibit. However, the majority were closed by the 1970s due to the economic downturn and it was not until the 1980s that the commercial sector, primarily through Gallerija Fenici, together with the inauguration of the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1984, offered brief opportunities. In parallel to this scenario art production by key local artists were supported by the British artist Victor Pasmore who encouraged a more abstract language and art critic A.C. Sewter who regularly encouraged artists.

As identified, the dominant patrons pre-Independence and post-independence were the Church and the government which favoured figurative and religious art. The emergence of a more contemporary style, predominately modernist in form, is evident through Maltese artists involvement in the pre-Independence Venice Biennale of 1958 and subsequent post-Independent exhibitions at the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery that Kobena Mercer describes as "New Commonwealth Internationalism." Here paintings and sculpture incorporate a mix of modernist visual language and indigenous native elements, prevalent in Malta as elsewhere, including artworks exhibited at the institute by artists from ex-colonies in Africa and South Asia.

However, as I have argued, the political and social changes of post-independence did re-position Malta and Maltese art as an ex-colony in a wider geo-political sphere that offered some opportunities to artists to exhibit abroad and to recognise that their works were part of a wider engagement with modernist languages of painting that adopted cubist inspired and

abstracted forms. As discussed, through the analysis of specific exhibitions and the sparse recorded histories and publications of this time, 'contemporary' art was in most cases synonymous with or interchangeable with modernist art meaning painting primarily. 'Contemporary' did not mean the exploration of new media or experimental forms of presentation beyond painting. The one exception to this was the work of Attard who experimented with participatory art in the mid 1970s as discussed.

In conclusion, this chapter shows the blurred and often indistinct boundaries between modern and contemporary art in Malta and the gradual emergence of a sense of the contemporary as being part of wider international developments predominately abstract in form. The understanding of what contemporary art practice might encompass becomes more diverse from 1989 onwards as discussed in subsequent chapters.

## Chapter 2

### A Time of Transition: Artistic Practices in Malta and Exhibition Cultures: 1989-1998

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to identify the transitions in Maltese artistic practice and exhibition making from 1989 to 1998 that I argue are indicative of a new awareness of international contemporary art developments. In this research, I employ the definition of contemporary art developed by James Elkins:

[S]omething is contemporary if you can attach it to its region, country, or area—but at the same time it is not problematic to imagine placing the work in an international art fair. A second way of thinking about the contemporary, which is also not often discussed, is that the contemporary would be that period in which art historians, theorists and critics started to worry about the globalization of their own disciplines.<sup>131</sup>

The works of art discussed here and in the following chapters are by local artists and are “not problematic to imagine [...] in an international art fair”, as I will show. Furthermore, the artists and few supportive curators were aware of this globalised framework and also acutely aware that contemporary art developments in Malta were regarded as a belated experience compared to central European developments. Less evident, following Elkins’ definition, is the concern of art historians, theorists and critics in Malta to the threat of globalisation given the general lack of such a supporting infrastructure. As I will argue, artists became the main theorists and their anxieties were not about the global per se, given their recognition of the much needed visibility of Maltese art that had not been addressed in either the European context or the north-south debates, but more about how their shifting practices would be supported by an under-developed infrastructure, and government-led policies and initiatives.

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<sup>131</sup> Loredana Niculet, “The Shifting Condition of Art Discourse: an Interview with James Elkins,” *Disturbis*, no. 8, (2010) pp. 8-16.

From one perspective, this chapter focuses on Malta as an island with little resources on the periphery of Europe, and analyses postcolonial influences on its art production and exhibition making, the role of the Roman Catholic church, and of collective exhibitions during this period, including the inauguration of the Maltese biennial in 1995 by Dame Françoise Tempra who invited foreign artists to exhibit alongside local artists. Although exhibition standards were dissimilar to international biennials abroad, I discuss and analyse Tempra's initiatives from a local standpoint and the subsequent first attempts at contemporary curatorial practice in Malta by museum curators, and artists, through self-organised solo and collective exhibitions.

The second important perspective is the identifiable transition from the aesthetics of painting to the use of found objects and concept-based installations from 1989. The first examples of installations and concept based works are identified and analysed to show how this gradual transition occurred and how artists' initiatives shaped this approach to contemporary art in Malta. In this context, the chapter acts as a fulcrum to the whole thesis by identifying the varying practices of artists that were recognisably contemporary in their concerns and accompanying shifts in exhibition cultures, chiefly installation art.

## **2.2 From Isolation to Globalisation**

The year 1989 is regarded by many as an important date in twentieth-century world history. From a political perspective, 1989 led to the end of communism in Europe and the break-up of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. These tumultuous events opened the door to German unification with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the enlargement of NATO, accelerated globalisation, and the rise of Asia. The years which followed were a time of change and



transition for Eastern Europe and Africa, as well as other countries which were affected by the Cold War.<sup>132</sup>

Malta, by chance, was a protagonist within this positive turmoil of events which changed the socio-political appearance of the world.<sup>133</sup> In December 1989, just a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a summit was organised to discuss the rapid changes taking place in Europe. Here, the leaders of the two superpowers, the United States President George H. W. Bush and the Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, were to meet. This significant meeting was planned on ships anchored in the Mediterranean Sea but bad weather resulted in the summit being moved to Malta [Figure 15], in the Marsaxlokk harbour.<sup>134</sup>



**Fig. 15 Mikhail Gorbachev and George H. W. Bush during the Malta Summit, 1989, Malta. (Courtesy of Department of Information (D.O.I), Malta)**

Contemporary art in Malta was still at an embryonic stage in the 1990s even though significant singular events and exhibitions throughout the seventies and eighties have been identified and discussed in Chapter 1. Arguably, the immediate factor that changed the radical oeuvre of practising artists, who were hitherto predominately ‘painters’, was the

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<sup>132</sup> See Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel (eds.), *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Arts Worlds* (Massachusetts, USA: MIT Press, 2013).

<sup>133</sup> Refer to “Bush and Gorbachev at Malta,” *The National Security Archive*, accessed on January 10, 2015. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB298/index.htm>.

<sup>134</sup> The Malta Summit was held on December 2 and 3, aboard Maksim Gorkiy, a Soviet cruise ship chartered to the West German tour company Phoenix Reisen, anchored in the harbour at Marsaxlokk, Malta.

internet. Public internet access was first introduced to Malta in 1995 and was still very limited until the start of the millennium when broadband started to reach most households. This new medium had an impact on everybody and meant a great deal to a small country which, in terms of size, could be compared to a town or a small city such as Newcastle in England or Vienna in Austria.<sup>135</sup> Access to the internet was particularly important for an island with limited resources, where most goods and food have to be imported, and it enabled access to knowledge. Prior to this, for example, the small number of bookstores on the islands held few art books and art journals were unavailable. Students, artists, or researchers had to place orders on an individual basis, thus incurring high costs and late deliveries. Until the late 1990s, the main type of imported books were academic and curriculum textbooks rather than contemporary literature.<sup>136</sup> The internet hence facilitated access to knowledge both in terms of information on latest developments internationally and the freedom to order publications online.

The evening-only School of Art in Malta (Valletta) held old magazines and books, while publications held at the University were limited and outdated. The two university departments offering fine-art-related subjects were the Faculty of Education, where students could choose art as a teaching option, and the Faculty of Arts within which a History of Art Unit was introduced in 1987, with a focus on Medieval and Baroque periods which occupied the chief position in Malta's important heritage. For the few students who opted for this university course, the most recent art period covered in the curriculum was early Modernism: that is, up to the introduction of Impressionism.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> The archipelago of Malta is 316km<sup>2</sup>, while Newcastle is 360 km<sup>2</sup> and Vienna is 414.6 km<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>136</sup> These observations are based on my experience as one of the alumni at the University of Malta between 1999 and 2006. For an economic overview of the period see Aaron G. Grech, *The Evolution of the Maltese Economy since Independence* (Malta: Central Bank of Malta, 2015). For details on the increase of students following tertiary education in the 1990s see the *Malta National Report 2002*, University of Malta, accessed on January 20, 2018. [https://www.um.edu.mt/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/63699/Malta\\_WSSD.pdf](https://www.um.edu.mt/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/63699/Malta_WSSD.pdf) page 20.

<sup>137</sup> Until the 1990s, the core text used at college or sixth form level was *The Story of Art* by Ernst Gombrich (1995).

The curriculum focused exclusively on western art and artists—predominantly central European and North American art—and it was only in 2011 that courses covering contemporary art and new histories of the world of art were introduced. As these examples drawn from my experience indicate, documentation and research on art and architecture in Malta was extremely narrow with most researchers focusing on the medieval and baroque heritage of the islands. This slowly changed with the large influx of university students in the early 1990s, following the Education Act of 1988, when different and specific topics began to be tackled by individual academics,<sup>138</sup> while other students studied abroad on scholarships and bequests.

At a national level, the change in governments in the late 1980s and 1990s affected the ongoing understanding of what was international and what may be described as national. Again, due to the size and limitations of the Islands, elections and propaganda disseminated by the local political parties attracted much of the nation's attention. The recurring topic in the nineties was Malta's role in the European Union. The government in office at the beginning of the decade, the Nationalist Party who were pro-Europeanism, formally applied for full EU membership. While the opposition, the Labour Party, was dubious about the European Union; Labour "was avowedly internationalist in outlook and saw its purpose as looking after the interests of the Maltese people—writ large, as a worker proletariat. It was sceptical about the Euro-oriented Nationalist Latinity and developed stronger links with Gadaffi's Libya and Soviet Russia."<sup>139</sup> This caused ongoing debate and controversies between the government and the opposition that opposed entry.

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<sup>138</sup> This influx of student followed the Education Act of 1988. The act consolidated and amended the law related to education, including the right of every citizen to receive education and instruction without any distinction of age, sex, belief, or economic means. Refer to the *Education Act XXIV 1988, c.327*, accessed on February 14, 2016. <http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=8801>.

<sup>139</sup> Mitchell, Jon P. "Looking Forward to the Past: National Identity and History in Malta." *Global Studies in Culture and Power* Volume 10, 2003 - Issue 3. p. 382.

With a change in government in 1996, the application for full membership was suspended but not withdrawn. A new agreement was being discussed between the new government, the Malta Labour Party, and the European Union Commission. However, a non-confidence vote in the government resulted in a snap election in 1998, won by the Nationalists, and the membership application was reactivated by September 1998.

The main advantage that the generation emerging in the 1990s had over the previous one was that new ideas were developing at a quicker pace due to the introduction of the internet and a cultural climate that had come to be more open to discussion. Apart from the internet, new cable television and radio stations were introduced alongside mobile telephone services in 1990. By the second half of the nineties most of the population owned a mobile phone.<sup>140</sup>

From an educational point of view, more students enrolled at university and politically, three elections were held in one decade, something never witnessed before in Malta. Further developments occurred in housing and the tourism industry, and the rapid development of privately owned properties and luxurious hotels also had an impact on the art scene in Malta.

### **2.3 The Artistic Scene in Malta and Exhibition Cultures**

Solo and group exhibitions by different artists were the order of the day in the 1990s, organised by public entities, including national museums, and private run galleries. The art scene etiquette at this time was predicated on receiving a personal invitation at a home address to be able to attend, very much like a private party. This unconsciously, or rather consciously, made such events elite and many wanted to be part of such a fashionable lifestyle at all costs.

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<sup>140</sup> See Anon "British Telecom lowers rates for access to cellular phones," *Mobile Phone News*, Jul 28, 1997, Vol.15(30), p.4 and "Vodafone Group Preliminary Announcement of Results for the Year Ended 31 March 1998", *Business Editors Business Wire*, June 2, 1998, p.1.

Few premises were available for holding such events. In fact, the most ‘popular’ exhibitions were held at two main venues in Valletta, both of which were coordinated by the Museum Department.<sup>141</sup> These were the National Museum of Fine Arts in South Street, Valletta, and the New Gallery at the Archaeological Museum in Republic Street in Valletta. An annual national event, where visual arts exhibitions played a key role, was the Malta Arts Festival or MaltFest, initiated in 1976. This was held in the summer at different premises within the capital city. In addition, an art biennial was launched in 1995, organised by the Italian-born, French-educated art historian and writer Dame Tempira, as discussed below.

A further significant change occurred in 1999 when one of the local financial institutions, the Bank of Valletta, began organising retrospective exhibitions of Malta’s leading twentieth-century artists at their Head Office in Sliema and later at Santa Venera.<sup>142</sup> The bank’s exhibitions can be considered a turning point in Maltese art because for the first time a curator was appointed and a catalogue was published. Now the role of the curator was that of a researcher and an author who, together with the artist, would select a number of works which represented their retrospective artistic achievements. Although no contemporary works were included, nonetheless, the published catalogues accompanying these exhibitions was a breath of fresh air: they included an essay on the artist and a catalogue of the exhibited works accompanied by photographs. Prior to this initiative, a leaflet format was used where the only information was the exhibition title, the dates of the event, the artists’ name and biography, and occasionally a list of works.

The exhibitions mentioned above all embraced a late modernist painterly approach with only a handful of works following contemporary developments. The few exhibitions that had a more contemporary feel took place in alternative venues and were organised by the

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<sup>141</sup> Until 1999, all sites and museums were looked after by the government museum department.

<sup>142</sup> Sliema is a resort town and touristic area on the east coast of Malta, and it is a twenty-minute drive away from Valletta. Santa Venera is a town in the Central Region of Malta and it is a fifteen-minute drive away from Valletta.

artists themselves. Loosely, these can be considered as ‘underground’ when compared to the ‘popular’ exhibitions.

Artists working within the otherwise minimal infrastructure available at the time exhibited on a regular basis as a means of being accepted by the general public. All exhibitions were free of charge so whoever was interested—foreigners, locals, and especially students—could view the works. However, art and culture were always perceived as an amateur activity rather than a professional activity by the local general public. It was difficult for family members and friends to accept that somebody could be an artist by profession. In fact, in the 1990s there were only two artists, Marco Cremona (b. 1951) and Pawl Carbonaro (b. 1948) who worked as professional artists, producing works as the sole means of earning a living; coincidentally, both their fathers were well-known established artists.<sup>143</sup> Other practitioners were mostly engaged in teaching jobs. Within this limited scenario, a very small group of artists unconsciously or consciously influenced the system. They influenced the way art should be created and exhibited. They also had an impact on education and on exhibition organisation, apart from having a strong artistic influence on their followers.

In 1991, the annual summer exhibition at the National Museum of Fine Arts was for the first time entirely dedicated to abstract painting [Figure 16].<sup>144</sup> Here, four leading artists - Carbonaro, Cremona, Luciano Micallef (b. 1954), and Norbert Francis Attard (b. 1951)- displayed their best work of the time [Figure 16]. Such a major public event had never before solely focused on pure abstract work by Maltese artists.<sup>145</sup> Following a great deal of uncertainties, this exhibition received positive feedback and criticism. This marked an important move in the local artistic scene, which had finally welcomed the abstract idiom,

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<sup>143</sup> Pawl Carbonaro was the son of Hugo Carbonaro (1908-1979) and Marco Cremona was the son of Emvin Cremona (1919-1987). Hugo Carbonaro was heavily involved in the local art scene in the first half of the twentieth century. Together with Emvin Cremona, he participated in the 1958 Venice Biennale. In 1995, Norbert Francis Attard (b.1951) stopped working as an architect and became a full-time artist.

<sup>144</sup> Kenneth Wain, “The State of Maltese Art,” *Times of Malta*, August 3, 1991.

<sup>145</sup> Emmanuel Fiorentino, “Maltafest’s Focus on Abstracts,” *The Sunday Times of Malta*, August 4, 1991.

thus paving the way for its subsequent extreme popularity. In fact, whatever was produced by the participating four artists from this time on started to be held in high consideration by both the media and new patrons, including hotel and restaurants owners.



**Fig. 16 *Maltafest - Four Maltese Painters - International Arts Festival, Exhibition Catalogue, July-August 1991, National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, Malta.***

The significant difference between the reception of abstract art in the 1970s and 1980s that Victor Pasmore had done much to support is that in post-1991 exhibitions, new abstract artworks started being commissioned by luxurious hotels and local banks. A new market was launched and this was supported by the many exhibitions that took place at important venues, including the National Museum of Fine Arts.<sup>146</sup> This new tendency was important as abstract art had come to be considered the ultimate and most contemporary form of art, and no artists, at least until the introduction of the internet, dared work in any other fashion. After so long, artists were finally selling work at reasonable prices and they did not want to risk compromising this newly achieved status by working in art forms that went against the grain.

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<sup>146</sup> This new market was supported by hotels and passionate collectors since art galleries did not have a strong financial structure and had no relation to public cultural institutions. Unfortunately, these were very short-lived. See Matthew Attard, "The Gallerija Fenici and its fostering of a new artistic sensibility" (B.A. Hist. of Art Dissertation, University of Malta 2008). These will be further discussed later in this chapter.

## 2.4 The Impact of Collective Exhibitions and Exhibition Organisers

As previously indicated, collective exhibitions were always popular in Malta. One might deliberate that this phenomenon existed as an indirect influence from the impact of colonial exhibitions held in Malta from the mid-nineteenth century until the early twentieth-first century. As many as seventy participants were usually found at the annual Malta Festival exhibition, the Tempra Art Biennial—organised by Dame Tempra and held every two years in different premises, and the *Sacred Art* exhibitions which were religious-themed art exhibitions usually held at the Cathedral Museum, Mdina.

These collective exhibitions followed more or less the same formula. The organisers acted as ‘curators’, although this term is misleading as at this time in Malta the curator was actually the exhibition coordinator. By the 1990s, the only curators were those appointed by the government to safeguard the museums. The curator was usually a connoisseur of fine arts with a strong background in western art history. The organisers or a selection committee made of distinguished members would choose the works and theme, which varied according to the taste of the committee. No further planning or research was carried out and no specific exhibition narrative was proposed that was related, for example, to the specific context of the exhibition space. Hence, there was no understanding of an exhibition narrative or working with the exhibition space to create different impacts. For example, the Malta Festival exhibition aimed to give everyone the opportunity to exhibit by coming up with a broad theme.<sup>147</sup> On the other hand, all art works presented for the *Sacred Art* exhibitions, inaugurated in 1968 at Mdina Cathedral, had to relate to Roman Catholicism and its influence.<sup>148</sup> For these exhibitions figurative art was the favoured idiom varying from works

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<sup>147</sup> Emmanuel Fiorentino, “Art Surfeit at Maltafest,” *The Sunday Times of Malta*, August 26, 1990.

<sup>148</sup> The *Sacred Art* exhibitions started in July 1968. These comprised of an annual exhibition at Mdina Cathedral Museum and a Biennial at St John Cathedral. See “A Success and a Revelation,” *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 7, 1968; and “Modern Art in Mediaeval City,” *Times of Malta*, July 15, 1969.



reminiscent of Baroque and Romanticism to more recent representations inspired by European Modern movements.<sup>149</sup> On a few occasions where abstract works were considered by the committee, they determined whether these were actually conceived through religious sentiment or spiritual feeling.

The most contemporary aspect present in the organised collective exhibitions mentioned above was the idea of the Biennial itself, a large exhibition format very popular abroad in the 1990s, but its innovative aspect was unfortunately not visible in these exhibitions in Malta which tended to be repetitive in subject and theme, as discussed below.

The Biennial concept was initially promoted by Dame Tempra in 1995.<sup>150</sup> Arriving in Malta in 1990, Tempra launched the Malta International Art Biennale for the general art community of the time. The event was sensational. One has to keep in mind the wider historical context in which art events were organised in Malta by the Maltese for the Maltese, especially since the British military service left Malta in the late 1970s. The phenomenon of this individual of French-Italian descent, who had lived in London for a long time, and then came to Malta to organise something with an international oeuvre to promote Maltese art, was extraordinary. Additionally, Tempra was supported by one of the most powerful former curators of the National Museum of Fine Arts, Fr. Marius Zerafa.<sup>151</sup>

Through the Biennial Tempra brought artists from 105 countries to Malta exhibiting mainly painting and sculpture, with limited examples of installation and performing art

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<sup>149</sup> *Contemporary Sacred Art in Malta: an exhibition commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the opening of the Cathedral Museum*, edited by Dominic Cutajar (Malta: Cathedral Museum, 1994), exhibition catalogue; *Contemporary Christian Art in Malta: the first Biennial of Christian Art in the Maltese Islands* (Malta: Cathedral Museum, Mdina, 1996), exhibition catalogue; *Contemporary Christian Art in Malta: The second Biennale of Christian Art in the Maltese Islands*, edited by Vincent Borg (Malta: Cathedral Museum, Mdina, 1998), exhibition catalogue.

<sup>150</sup> Dame Tempra was born in Italy and raised in France. Later she moved to London where she married an English Baronet. Her articles were published in various European Journals and she organised various exhibitions. For more information, refer to the following site, accessed October 22, 2015. [http://www.gdepass.com/cv/malte02/cv\\_tempra.htm](http://www.gdepass.com/cv/malte02/cv_tempra.htm).

<sup>151</sup> Fr. Zerafa and Dame Tempra met in 1978 when Dame Tempra sponsored a large exhibition about art in Malta just off Bond Street in London which Fr. Zerafa curated. When she arrived in Malta, he was still curator of the National Museum of Fine Arts (1975-1987). See <http://artsmalta.org/award/zerafa-fr-marius-o-p/>

works.<sup>152</sup> The entire organisational process entailed choosing exhibits, exhibiting the works, publishing leaflets in newspaper format, and holding a grand opening with event speeches, music and performances. Occasionally, some of the works presented in Malta were shown abroad in places such as art centres in Cairo and Paris, while participating artists were given awards by the organisers and their sponsors [Figure 17].<sup>153</sup> Some exhibited works thus became part of an international biennial network. Ultimately, it was an important event appreciated by many, but not by all. The artistic network in Malta was limited and not all its representatives were of a high standard, at least when compared to leading artists abroad.



**Fig. 17 At the opening of the Malta Biennale Awards show in Paris at ASAC, 62 Avenue de la Grande Armée on October 20, 1998. From left to right: Francois Gros, Dame Françoise Temptra, and Fr. Marius Zerafa. (Courtesy of Allied Newspapers)**

By 1995 the definition of a biennale was going through a radical change internationally. From the 1990s biennials were a reflection of the contemporary context, a time when the term globalisation started being used for the first time to describe artists' movement and influences.<sup>154</sup> The rapid increase in the number of biennales across the globe were part of an increasing interest in contemporary artists and their practice according to the

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<sup>152</sup> Installation and performing art during the exhibitions organised by Dame Temptra were very limited in number and concept. These were mainly music performances and works by one artist installed in one space.

<sup>153</sup> Dame Françoise Temptra, "Malta Biennale at Cairo Modern Art Museum," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, October 3, 1999; and "US \$ 1.000 biennale award to Malta," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, February 12, 1995.

<sup>154</sup> See Carlos Basualdo, Rafal Niemojewski, Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebo, *The Biennial Reader* (Stuttgart and Berlin, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2010); Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials, Documenta: The Exhibitions that created Contemporary Art* (New Jersey, USA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

specific needs of the different countries. The art presented in Malta's local biennial was not a reflection of this. In fact, artist and art critic Raphael Vella heavily criticised the Biennial in one of his articles published in the local newspaper, *The Malta Independent*.<sup>155</sup> Vella's chief argument centred on the low quality of the works which reflected the organiser's taste. Following Tempra's response to Vella's criticism,<sup>156</sup> he justified his criticism in a further article in the same newspaper where he quoted from an article by Marisilva Zanini in the Italian newspaper *Messaggero Veneto* that also criticised the Biennial.<sup>157</sup> By the end of the 1990s, the excitement around this event started to decrease slowly and the more Maltese artists travelled abroad, especially after Malta became part of the European Union in 2004, the success of these biennials increasingly diminished.<sup>158</sup>

However, Tempra further promoted these biennials by donating a number of artworks to one of the local councils.<sup>159</sup> The small council building in Mġarr, the village where she resided, was adorned with artworks, a first for Malta. Tempra kept in touch with this council, and continued working on this project until 2012 when the enlarged three-storey building was inaugurated as the 'first contemporary museum' in Malta: the Tempra Contemporary Art Museum.<sup>160</sup> This initiative should be considered within a specific context. The collection donated by Tempra consisted of artworks left by the biennial participating artists, including both foreign and local artists, while the entity concerned is a small local council of an outskirt village in the Northern Region of Malta, a thirty-minute drive away from Valletta. The definition of a museum is also an exceptional one here as Malta's ubiquitous Parish museums usually focus on historical material. The various colourful contemporary art works of

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<sup>155</sup> Raphael Vella, "The Unbearable Lightness of Biennales," *The Malta Independent*, October 5, 1997.

<sup>156</sup> Dame Françoise Tempra, "Reply to 'The Unbearable Lightness of Biennales'," *The Malta Independent*, October 19, 1997.

<sup>157</sup> Raphael Vella, "The Unbearable Lightens of Biennales Part 2," *The Malta Independent*, November 2, 1997.

<sup>158</sup> These exhibitions are still being organised today but on a much smaller scale. Until 2013, they regularly featured in local newspapers.

<sup>159</sup> "Tempra Art Donation to Mġarr," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, October 6, 1996.

<sup>160</sup> "Contemporary Art Museum," *Times of Malta*, February 12, 2012; Anon, "First Contemporary Art Museum in Malta," *Malta Independent*, January 29, 2012.

different styles and media hang next to each other in the interior space of the building, comprising oil, watercolour, etching, ceramics and sculpture by artists from over twenty countries including Malta.<sup>161</sup>

Dame Tempra played an important role in Malta during the 1990s as organiser of the biennale. Her individual and innovative approach challenged the dominant conventions where art committees were limited in ideas and artistic works were becoming repetitive. The biennials revitalised the local art scene by offering opportunities to encounter work produced by artists outside of Malta and to exhibit in this wider context. With reference to recent studies such as Charles Green and Anthony Gardner's *Biennials, Triennials, and Documentas: The Exhibitions that created Contemporary Art* (2016) and Terry Smith's *Biennials: Four Fundamentals, Many Variations* (2016), biennials are a source of mobility mainly for artists followed by curators, critics, collectors; they offer a platform for international work which is no longer called Western art but is rather South and East; while at the same time biennials reshape networking and communications in the contemporary visual art sector.<sup>162</sup> In a limited sense, this was so for the Malta Biennale. The idea of a local biennial was very appealing to many and especially to the artistic community. Although exhibitions had been held before in Malta which served as a promotion for new art and new patrons, nonetheless, having a foreign individual supported by a number of key figures including the former National Museum Curator, organise exhibitions with both Maltese and foreign artists was seen by many local artists as a good opportunity to exhibit their work. Nevertheless, the ground-breaking approach usually associated with biennials was not visible including the exhibited work which became increasingly repetitive in subject and theme.

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<sup>161</sup> No complete catalogue of the collection is available. The following publication is a collection of articles and memorabilia related to the exhibitions organised by Dame Tempra: *A Third of a Century (1976-2010) Reference Book Maltese Art & Creativity in the World in 5 Continents within the Tempra Cultural Circle* by Francoise Tempra, France: Koenig Edition, 2010.

<sup>162</sup> Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials, Documenta: The Exhibitions that created Contemporary Art* (New Jersey, USA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016); Terry Smith Biennials: "Four Fundamentals, Many Variations" (2016) <http://www.biennialfoundation.org/2016/12/biennials-four-fundamentals-many-variations/> accessed 27 May, 2017.

## 2.5 The Artists' Community

Becoming part of the local artistic community was imperative for artists working in Malta. This varied according to individuals but generally the majority of contemporary artists went through a sequential process of exhibiting and later being commissioned for work. This cycle of events leads to public visibility and the accompanying understanding of which artists or groups of artists have left an impact and secured a place in a nation's history. In the early 1990s there was little available infrastructure to facilitate this professional artistic trajectory. The Government School of Art, which had been extremely influential throughout the century, had by this decade changed into an evening school offering an art course. It was no longer the place to discuss new ideas while following art classes by leading local artists. The same happened at the Society of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce, established in 1852. The management was of an older generation and it was difficult to build a bridge with new and upcoming artists. Moreover, both entities were mainly supported by the government and limited funds were available. Maintenance of the buildings incurred a high cost and little could be invested to make both places more appealing.<sup>163</sup>

Although small galleries were opening in the early 1990s where enthusiastic owners would try to sell and promote artists, these were short-lived. Among the several galleries there were Galerie 100, Creative Design, and the Melitensia Art Gallery.<sup>164</sup> The local artistic infrastructure did not cater for gallery owners since most of the artists, especially by this decade, understood that art could sell locally and so conducted their own business.<sup>165</sup> This

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<sup>163</sup> Little information is available on the recent developments of both the Government School of Art and the Malta Society of Arts, Manufacturing and Commerce. The information provided here is from conversations with individuals looking after the two premises, including Joseph Micallef, Head of the School of Art for several years; different members and one of the presidents of the Society.

<sup>164</sup> The majority of galleries were active for only a few months, except for the Melitensia Art Gallery, located in Lija. This gallery organised and exhibited modern and contemporary art by foreign and local artists from 1992 to 1996. See Matthew Attard, "The Gallerija Fenici and its Fostering of a New Artistic Sensibility" (B.A. (Art) diss., University of Malta, 2008).

<sup>165</sup> The small size of Malta made it easy to get in touch with the artist to see the work and set a price on private premises. Artists started collaborating with galleries only recently. This was one of the many artistic

means that artists acted as their own managers and after public exhibitions, they personally followed up with possible patrons whether Maltese or foreign visitors.

Apart from the lack of infrastructure, there was also a generation gap. The key artists of the twentieth century in Malta, born between the late 1920s and the 1930s, were by this time no longer meeting as a group and holding discussions on art. That community sensitivity, popular between the 1930s and the 1970s, had disappeared by the 1990s. By this decade, the artists who had acted as pioneers in the post-war and post-independence period were elderly or had passed away. Among the most active pioneers, one has to mention Antoine Camilleri and Gabriel Caruana who both acted as a bridge between artists of different generations. However, the art scene remained formal in character and it was difficult to get in touch with artists unless one knew exactly where to find them.<sup>166</sup>

From my own experience, borne out by the experience of my contemporaries studying and working in the late 1990s, it was difficult to meet with artists unless an appointment was set up at their home or studio. It was also not easy to establish contact unless one looked up home addresses and sent a formal letter, or unless one was brave enough to telephone and introduce oneself. Few of these artists delivered lectures at the university, the local sixth form, or other schools, and there was still that teacher-student barrier which was difficult to contest.<sup>167</sup> Thus, younger artists had no group or community to engage with and discuss ideas: in fact, a more isolated mentality was becoming more apparent.<sup>168</sup> The art groups that were popular since the post-war period had no ground roots in the 1990s.

Everyone could, however, visit the exhibitions that were generally free of charge in the hope of encountering an artist, but this was a rare occasion. Others opted to visit the

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developments required of a country to become part of the European Union. This was achieved by awareness campaigns delivered by the Arts Council Malta.

<sup>166</sup> Antoine Camilleri (1922-2005) was in his seventies by the 1990s, while Gabriel Caruana (1929-2018) was in his sixties. Other influential artists and teachers, such as Esprit Barthet (1919-1999), Carmelo Mangion (1905-1997), and Frank Portelli (1922-2004) were also elderly.

<sup>167</sup> Apart from the local sixth forms there was the Government School of Art and the Art and Design School.

<sup>168</sup> This isolation was partly due to the lack of a meeting place and the emerging private market evident in the newly built hotel lobbies in St Julian's and Sliema.

exhibitions at the National Museum of Fine Arts in South Street where the curators might be available. Nonetheless social etiquette was constraining and set up an invisible barrier: one had to inform the curators of the visit in advance or be confident enough to go unannounced. Exhibitions were another space where discussion could have developed further but artists or students had to plan their visit and have a good excuse to talk to the curators, at least on first meeting.<sup>169</sup>

The only potential place where one could meet artists and discuss art-related subjects in a ‘casual’ environment was at exhibition openings where social etiquette still played a strong role. Limited groups and individuals were invited so the same people used to attend. Everything was formal and elitist at this time. One had to show the invitation before going in, while government ministers and influential people in the arts sector used to deliver the speeches. All exhibition openings were executed in the same format: the organiser or committee leader would welcome the invitees, then an art connoisseur would introduce the work, and finally, a minister or the President of the Republic would officially inaugurate the exhibition. This was standard procedure, as was the catering made available to entertain the guests.<sup>170</sup> Yet, the invited participants were mainly collectors, prominent figures in society, key senior artists, museum curators, art organisers, and politicians. The only new comers allowed to attend were journalists who were normally invited by the artists or organisers in the hope that they would write a newspaper feature on the exhibition. Young people such as art students and young artists were not invited. In view of this limited participation and the

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<sup>169</sup> The meeting had to be set by phone or by writing a formal letter. It used to take long to set a meeting with the curator or artist, unlike today where communication via email and social media is instant. Before this decade, small groups of artists used to meet at the museum with the curators, mainly Fr. Marius Zerafa. Also, one must note that there were small art groups at the time but very little information is known. Following an interview with Ruth Bianco, she told the author of an art group led by E. V. Borg, who at the time was an art critic on a local newspaper. Ruth Bianco interview with the author on November 15, 2014.

<sup>170</sup> These standard procedures or habits can be further analysed by using Pierre Bourdieu’s Habitus theory. In his paper, “The field of cultural production, or, the economic world reversed”, *Poetics* 12, (1983): 311-356, p. 312 he states that “the artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces. The network of objective relations between positions [within the field] subtends and orients the strategies that the occupants of the different positions implement in their struggles to defend or improve their positions.”

formal atmosphere, few or rather no controversial arguments were tackled at such events, including discussion about what was happening in contemporary art abroad. These rigid conventions were definitely one of the many reasons that kept the artistic community apart.<sup>171</sup>

The above issues are indicative of the strong sense of isolation felt in Malta at the beginning of the 1990s, a country cut off from central European artistic developments with few intellectual tools such as lectures and publications available to understand what was happening outside of the archipelago. This isolation affected the development of younger artists' visual language, both as individuals and as members of an almost non-existent community. The only community available was that of established artists from an earlier generation which by this decade were elderly and could only be found at the exhibitions mentioned above.<sup>172</sup>

## **2.6 The Transition: From Aesthetic to Concept**

A discernible shift in exhibition cultures was evident however in collective exhibitions and in largely self-curated artist shows in the early 1990s by younger artists that are indicative of a transition towards a contemporary visual art sensitivity as understood internationally and globally.

As briefly mentioned, an exhibition that made a huge impact on the island was the 1991 collective exhibition featuring four Maltese abstract art painters born between 1948 and 1954, Norbert Francis Attard, Pawl Carbonaro, Marco Cremona, and Luciano Micallef. These artists were presented for the first time as part of the annual summer *Malta Arts Festival*, held in Valletta. Kenneth Wain described these four artists as the leading representatives of the third generation of post-war artists who had just come to maturity and should constitute the

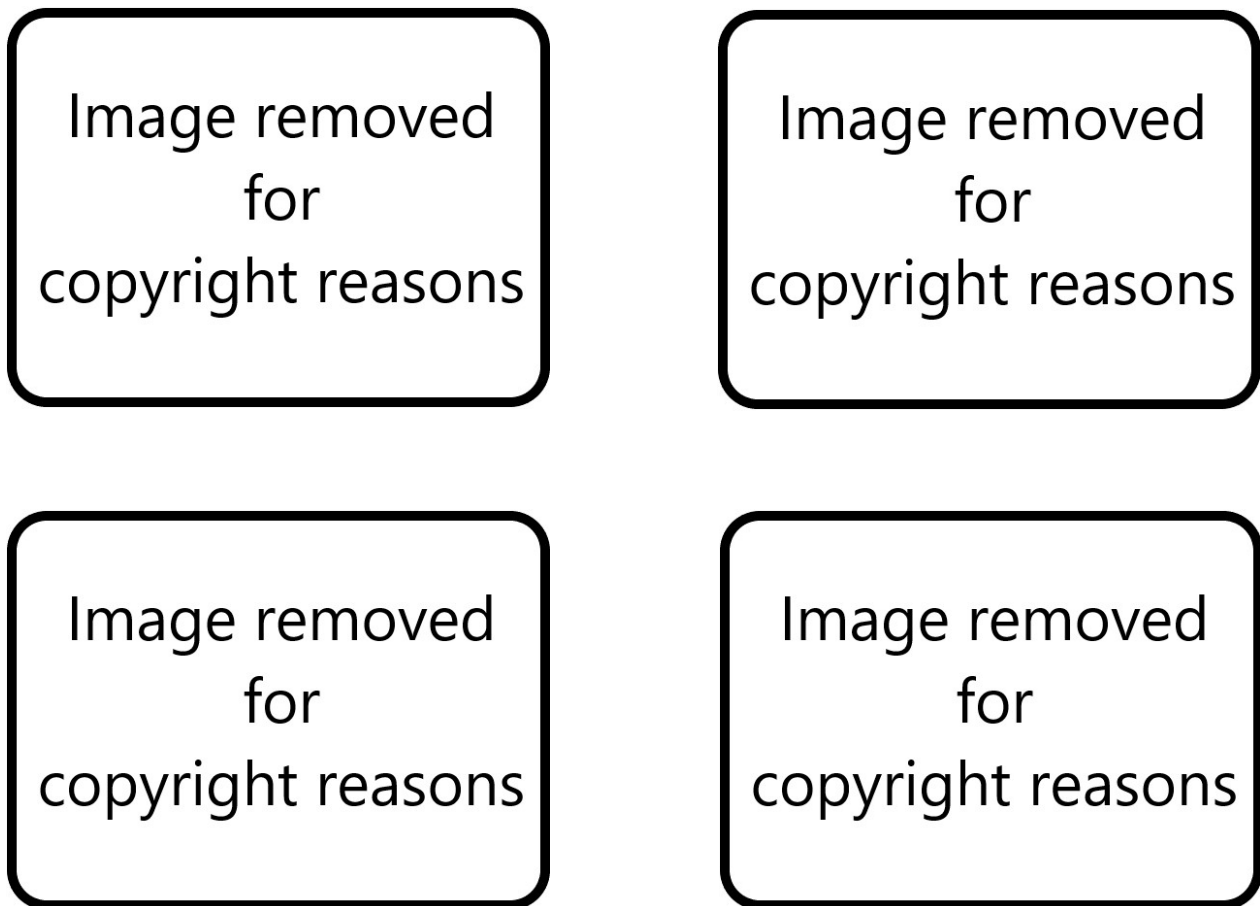
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<sup>171</sup> From the mid-2000s, contemporary art exhibition openings were less severe and those few interested in participating in this artistic social gathering were more involved. High-end and historic exhibition openings are still by invitation, which is the norm both locally and abroad.

<sup>172</sup> The established artists were the ones mentioned in Chapter 1 who were born between the first and the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



point of reference for their successors.<sup>173</sup> The works exhibited by Carbonaro were mostly black in colour with a focal point that was rendered with chromatic and textural gestures. Micallef's work demonstrated a logical approach showing an architectural control where colours strategically overlap while Attard's abstract compositions reflected a synthesis of influences which varied from oriental elements to signs reminiscent of popular European artists such as Paul Klee and Joan Miro. By contrast, Cremona's abstract works were sophisticated compositions in which he combined a constructivist and minimal approach [Figure 18] [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue - Page 2 Catalogue No. 1].



**Fig 18. Shows four works exhibited in 1991 Malta Arts Festival Exhibition. Upper Left *Untitled* (1991) by Pawl Carbonaro, Upper Right *Painter of Thoughts* (1989) by Luciano Micallef, Bottom Right *Soliste* (1990) by Norbert Francis Attard and Bottom Left *Untitled* (1991) by Marco Cremona.**

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<sup>173</sup> Kenneth Wain, "Maltafest: The State of Maltese Art." *The Times of Malta*, August 3, 1991.

The artists' works were remarkable in their technique and compositions and within Malta the exhibition was perceived as a major achievement with the contemporaneous reviews by local critics implying that the move towards abstraction showed a more contemporary approach.<sup>174</sup> While the exhibition did not reflect the aesthetics represented abroad at key locations such as contemporary museums in central Europe and biennials, it was a reflection of the contemporary context found on the islands.

Even though abstract interpretation was considered the utmost achievement of contemporaneity by local art critics in the early 1990s, not all artists followed this tendency. Indeed, some artists sought to escape the trap of abstraction. Two artists worthy of note here are Caesar Attard (b. 1947) and Isabelle Borg (1959-2010), both of whom focused on identity issues and conceptual ideas via painterly works exhibited within key spaces, including national museums. Their mastery in paint was the tool used by both artists to engage and focus on contemporary issues, and not vice versa as with most of the artists at the time for whom aesthetics and composition were the final outcome of the artwork.

Attard, an artist who was already working with experimental ideas in the late seventies and now, in 2019, is associated with works that follow relational aesthetics principles, was going through a quiet phase in the 1990s. According to the artist, this was a time when he felt balanced with his surroundings and this affected his production of artworks.<sup>175</sup> In fact, his first exhibition of this decade was a set of etchings and drawings representing the life and passion of Christ, held at the New Gallery at the National Archaeology Museum in 1992. Although the theme and technique are part of the traditional local environment, his works were not the usual representations of the 'Life and Passion' that were frequently presented locally. The compositions were experimental in the rejection of a traditionally symmetrical approach and typical figurative representations [Figure 19]. The

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<sup>174</sup> Fiorentino, Emanuel, "Maltafest's focus on Abstracts," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, August 4, 1991.

<sup>175</sup> Caesar Attard interview with the author on October 16, 2013.

representation of the human body was always a quest for Attard, evident in his later exhibition at the New Gallery at the National Archaeology Museum in 1994 where he showed his initial ideas for the series [Figure 20] [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue – Page 3 Catalogue No. 3]. During the 1990s he manipulated the representation of the body and this ongoing research was finally exhibited in 2000 at the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, discussed in chapter four.



**Fig. 19 Caesar Attard, *Feeding the Crowd*, 1991, etching on Arches Cover, 280 x 375 mm, *Life and Passion* exhibition, New Gallery at the National Archaeology Museum, 1992. Valletta, Malta. (Photo provided by Caesar Attard)**



**Fig. 20 Caesar Attard, *Eye of the Storm*, 1993, oil on canvas, 40 x 51.5 cm, *Paintings and Drawings* exhibition, New Gallery at the National Archaeology Museum, 1994. Valletta, Malta. (Photo provided by Caesar Attard)**

Isabelle Borg, who died in 2010, was in her late twenties when she made an impact on the local scene with her first solo exhibition in 1985 at the National Archaeology Museum—a prominent exhibition space for a first solo show—that featured a set of paintings combining the idea of primitivism and femininity. In terms of artistic vision, the concept of Borg’s work was contemporary in her exploration of the female role, but she also infused her work of the 1980s with inspirations taken from the Neolithic and Palaeolithic period.<sup>176</sup> In her first solo exhibition she displayed a number of key works, large in size, surrounded by much smaller works on paper that, compared to the big pieces, seemed like research studies. This combination was not well received by the weekly critics: in fact, one in particular noted that the artist’s representations appeared to be rather immature because she had not mastered painting techniques!<sup>177</sup> Most probably the small works were selected on purpose to show the understanding of the idea while also revealing her artistic process.

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<sup>176</sup> The female figure, particularly *The Sleeping Lady* is the most important and popular representation of the Neolithic period in Malta, National Museum of Archaeology Collection – Heritage Malta, Malta.

<sup>177</sup> Emmanuel Fiorentino, “Two Visions but Related,” *The Sunday Times of Malta*, March 24, 1991.

Borg was born in the United Kingdom where she trained as a painter in the late 1980s, but her main inspiration was Malta as evident in the set of works she presented in the early 1990s.<sup>178</sup> Her first exhibition consisted of maritime paintings while the second engaged with the bastions and harbours around Malta [Figure 21].<sup>179</sup> These themes focus on the distinctiveness of Malta as an island surrounded by the sea and fortified, high strong walls built to stop the invader, both in the past and in recent times. All her work can be interpreted as a statement of identity of the islands and the islander. Inhabitants of such a small space have to follow certain customs to survive living together. Borg certainly needed strength to survive in the local art scene where few women were to be found.<sup>180</sup> Additionally, whenever new artistic notions were proposed, these were definitely more difficult to be accepted by the majority and her work was largely misunderstood, particularly in relation to the dominant mode of abstraction.



**Fig. 21 Isabelle Borg, *Senglea and the Grand Harbour*, 1990, oil on canvas, 25 x 48 cm, *Marine and Maritime Paintings*, Royal Malta Yacht Club, 1991. Ta' Xbiex, Malta. (Photo provided by Private Collector)**

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<sup>178</sup> Born in London, in 1986 Borg studied painting at Camberwell School of Art, London. She also had a Master's degree from the University of Malta. See <http://www.isabelleborg.com/>, accessed 21 February 2014 and Abigail Pace. "Isabelle Borg: Art and feminist perceptions" (B.A. (Hist. of Art) diss. University of Malta. 2016).

<sup>179</sup> Borg's first solo exhibition in the 1990s was *Marine and Maritime Painting* at the Royal Malta Yacht Marina in 1991. Her second, in 1992, was entitled *Bastions and Harbours*. On average Borg had an exhibition every year in the 1990s.

<sup>180</sup> A notable example is Mary De Piro (b. 1946) a female artist practising in the 1960s and 1970s whose works featured in important collective exhibitions and were highly regarded by local art critics. In the 1980s and 1990s, she stopped exhibiting locally. Just recently, she has had two solo exhibitions in Malta. Her work was of high standard and very ingenious in that specific context. De Piro last two exhibition were at Palazzo De Piro, Mdina in 2014 and at the Bank of Valletta Headquarters in 2016, See Exhibition Catalogue *Mary De Piro – A Bank of Valletta Exhibition*, 21st October – 1st December, 2016, BOV Centre, Malta.

An example of this was when a local critic assumed that Borg was working to develop an abstract idiom, comparing her to Pawl Carbonaro, one of the national leading abstract painters who used to combine abstraction and landscape and showed in the above mentioned 1991 abstract exhibition. At the time, Carbonaro, among others, led the local artistic scene and it was hence difficult to remain unaware of his artwork. The art critic assumed that, like Carbonaro, Borg was trying to understand gestural abstraction, a form of abstract painting popular in Malta. Stylistically and conceptually there was no relation or comparison. Borg had previously explored gestural abstraction when she was studying in the United Kingdom in the 1980s. The sort of abstraction she was attracted to in the 1990s was one inspired by the German-born American artist, Josef Albers: that is, colour field abstraction [Figure 22].<sup>181</sup>



**Fig. 22 Isabelle Borg Isabelle, *Blue Island*, 1985, oil and mixed media on canvas, 149 x 180 cm, the Camberwell School of Art BA(Hons) Degree show, 1986. London, UK. Exhibited at *Sol*, St James Cavalier, 2001. Valletta, Malta and *Paintings of the Last Eighteen Years*, National Museum of Fine Arts, 2002. Valletta, Malta. (Photo provided by Private Collector)**

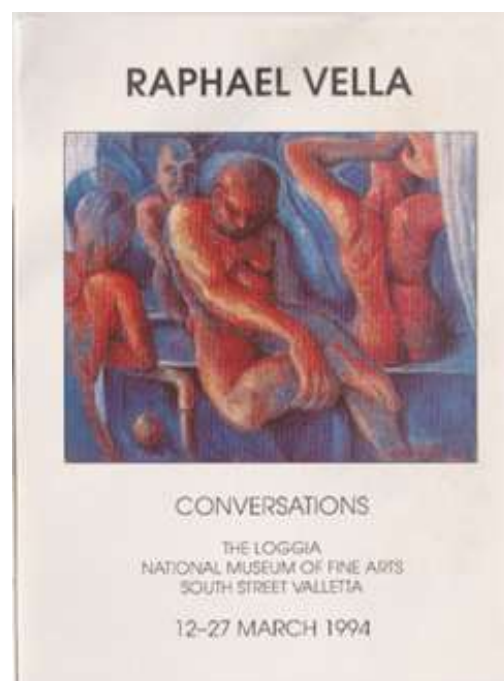
Another artist who worked along the same lines as Caesar Attard and Isabelle Borg at this time was Raphael Vella (b. 1967) who had recently graduated from the University of Malta in 1991.<sup>182</sup> A theoretical approach was always key to Vella's oeuvre but since painting was the 'accepted' medium of the time he produced painted works to put forward his ideas.

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<sup>181</sup> Borg exhibited her earlier abstract works in 2001 and 2002 in *Sol*, St James Cavalier, 2001 and *Paintings of the Last Eighteen Years*, National Museum of Fine Arts, 2002 in Valletta, Malta.

<sup>182</sup> 1987-1991 B.Ed. (Hons) at University of Malta, specialising in art and art history.

His first solo exhibition was entitled *Conversations* and was held at the National Museum of Fine Arts in 1994.<sup>183</sup> On this occasion, Vella questioned the power of the image and asked whether the current Maltese generation could relate to past artworks. He argued the importance of context in relation to the selection of the images and was trying to make the viewer react to his statement. The curator and art historian Dominic Cutajar, in his supportive review in the *Times of Malta*, highlights the possible different interpretations Vella was tackling by using iconic past images within a contemporary context.<sup>184</sup> However, since the compositions were mainly nude figures placed in a space, these were probably perceived by the general public as yet another exhibition representing the human figure [Figure 23].



**Fig. 23 Raphael Vella, *Conversations* Exhibition Catalogue Cover, March 12 - 24, Valletta, National Museum of Fine Arts. (Photo provided by Raphael Vella)**

The following year, Vella developed his theoretical ideas further. For the exhibition entitled *Graven Images* held at the New Gallery within Auberge de Provence, Valletta, the artist presented figurative representations that were reminiscent of Christian iconography and

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<sup>183</sup> *Conversation* (Malta: National Museum of Fine Arts, March 12-27, 1994), exhibition catalogue.

<sup>184</sup> Dominic Cutajar, "Raphael Vella at the Museum of Fine Arts," *Times of Malta*, March 24, 1994.

which could easily be interpreted as Roman Catholic representations [Figure 24]. Apart from the painted representation, statements were included in the paintings, with the ‘religious’ figures being singled out and placed against an empty background. Only the position of the figure and the clothing were there to identify the figure. An extremely colourful palette that is not usually found in religious representation was used. Various critics and even philosophers reviewed this exhibition: the weekly art critics questioned this sort of art while others realised that Vella was trying to create some form of national discourse through his work.<sup>185</sup> The artist stressed his position of being intrigued by the way people read into paintings.<sup>186</sup>



**Fig. 24 Raphael Vella standing next to his work at *Graven Images* exhibition at the New Gallery at the National Archaeology Museum in 1995. Valletta, Malta. (Courtesy of Allied Newspapers)**

Similar concerns with engaging local audiences in re-interpreting well-known images were reflected in the works of Vince Briffa (b. 1959) that were exhibited under the title of *Voyage* at the New Gallery at the National Archaeology Museum, Valletta, in 1994. Iconic works popular in art history such as *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve* by Andrea Massaccio and *The Triumph of Death* by Pieter Breugel the Elder were the first inspirations to lead the artist in his voyage to create the twenty-seven works shown in this exhibition [Figure 25].<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> See Kenneth Wain’s article, “Framing and Enframing the Picture,” *The Malta Independent*, September 24, 1995; Mario Cassar, “A different kind of Sacred,” *The Malta Independent*, September 3, 1995; and E. V. Borg, “Ambigwita u Dubju [Ambiguity and Doubt],” *In-Nazzjon*, October 2, 1995.

<sup>186</sup> Emmanuel Fiorentino, “Paradoxes of Interpretations,” *The Sunday Times of Malta*, September 24, 1995.

<sup>187</sup> Emmanuel Fiorentino, “The Multiple Voyage,” *The Sunday Times of Malta*, December 4, 1994.



According to Raphael Vella, who at the time was closely following the local contemporary scene as an artist and art critic, “Briffa had passed from a purely representational and descriptive approach to objects and people to a metaphysical vision of the world,” and he concludes by saying that “his present paintings are more evocative. The viewer is led to compare, evaluate and think.”<sup>188</sup> Briffa, like his contemporaries, still opted for canvas, paint, and mixed media as his main media, probably because he felt comfortable expressing himself with paint and it also served as a bridge for the audience; even though the artist’s concept seemed to be much more sophisticated than the media of its presentation.



**Fig. 25 Vince Briffa, *Troia*, 1994, oil on canvas, 86 x 120 cm, *Voyage*, New Gallery at the National Archaeology Museum, 1994. Valletta, Malta. (Photo provided by Private Collector)**

At the same time artists like Austin Camilleri (b. 1972) and Ruth Bianco (b. 1955) were also creating art which went beyond aesthetics and abstract art form. Their artistic processes and development were working towards a more current contemporary idiom evident within international artistic fora. Bianco started exhibiting in 1993 and in less than

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<sup>188</sup> Raphael Vella, “Vince Briffa’s Artistic Metamorphosis,” *The Malta Independent*, November 13, 1994. Vella was aware of engaging with local themes within a global perspective. This is evident in all the catalogue entries he wrote by the end of this decade. Two interesting entries were the one published in Vince Briffa’s unpaginated catalogue for his exhibition entitled *Relics* and the one published in *Sacred Austin’s* unpaginated catalogue – work by Austin Camilleri. Both exhibitions were held in 1998 and are discussed below.

three years, she managed to have numerous exhibitions both locally and abroad.<sup>189</sup> According to her writing, included in most of her leaflets or catalogues, the aim of her work was chiefly to understand her role as an artist from an island. For one project, *Portals, Monoliths and Horizons of a Small Island*, she wrote that she tries to “release [her] conceptual and contemplative ideas.... imbue [her] painting with universal content: the island floating in its embryonic waters is an analogy of our planet, floating in expanding space.”<sup>190</sup> Bianco also underlined that “emphasis was laid on both the process and the end result.” This was not usual practice in Malta where only Isabelle Borg had presented her process side by side with the final work in 1984. Between 1996 and 1997, Ruth Bianco created Open Studio sessions. Here, people were invited to see the ongoing installation work by the artist, including a work entitled *Retrievals*, which was a found object installation.<sup>191</sup> Bianco described the Open Studio as an artwork, not a space, with the nature of the work produced in this space changing accordingly, although the artist did not call it ‘installation’ at the time.<sup>192</sup> The idea of both an Open Studio and found object artwork were innovative practices in Malta in the 1990s.

The perceptible shift away from painting was also evident in the work of Austin Camilleri who was going through an artistic transformation in the late 1990s. He graduated from an art course at the Accademia di Belle Arti Pietro Vannucci, Perugia, in 1995 with a thesis that emphasised “the sublime subject of light–atmosphere–space.” Some of his many abstract paintings were exhibited in Malta soon after the school art show in Perugia.

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<sup>189</sup> Ruth Bianco had five solo exhibitions between 1993 and 1996. In 1993, two exhibitions in Malta at the AZAD Centre and the National Museum of Fine Arts, both in Valletta. In 1995, a solo exhibition at Galerie der Stadt, Adenau, Germany; in 1996 she exhibited at the Stadtbibliothek Neuss in Dusseldorf, Germany and the Galeri het Bourlahuis, Antwerp, Belgium. She also contributed regularly to group shows in Malta during this period.

<sup>190</sup> Emmanuel Fiorentino, “Maltese Art in Antwerp,” *The Sunday Times of Malta*, December 8, 1996.

<sup>191</sup> The idea of the Open Studio was already promoted by the renowned local artist Gabriel Caruana (1929-2018). Caruana promoted modern and contemporary art by opening his studio to everyone. He started by inviting over good friends in the late 1960s. Having discussions about art, while working on his art work was normal for Caruana. Author visited Caruana’s studio many times. Caruana interview with the author on 21 November, 2000.

<sup>192</sup> Ruth Bianco interview with the author on 15 November, 2014.

However, the main focus was not the paintings but the computer-controlled spotlights that aimed to manipulate the visitors' attention by producing atmospheric effects by highlighting the space surrounding the visitor and the work.<sup>193</sup>

A further step towards this transition from the prominence of aesthetics, ever-present in painted abstracted and figurative works, to the representation of a concept which could be interpreted by the artist in which ever media deemed best to grasp the audience's attention, is evident in the work of Pierre Portelli (b. 1961). Owing to family circumstances, Portelli lived partly in England until his permanent return to Malta in 1982. Before this he had studied Graphic Design at Swindon School of Art and Design in England. In the 1990s Portelli decided to embark on an artistic career and, influenced by his design background, his works were always considered experimental, especially for the local scene.

Portelli participated in his first collective exhibition in 1990, entitled *St John of the Cross*, in a space dedicated to temporary exhibitions at the National Archaeology Museum. Here he exhibited *Me and Him*, a collage work with newspaper cuttings and acrylic, showing a portrait in photographic negative effect against black areas. The medium and artistic interpretation reflected the punk design elements that influenced the artist as a student studying in the United Kingdom and was evident in his later design work and now in his artistic output.<sup>194</sup> Other collective exhibitions followed, and once again Portelli did not exhibit mainstream painterly work. In the sponsored *Teacher's Whisky Art Award* exhibition, held at the National Museum of Fine Arts in 1994, he exhibited a collage entitled *We Bought a Farmhouse in a Sqaq* ('sqaq' being a Maltese word for 'alley') [Figure 26]. Following the assigned theme of 'Maltese Village' for that year's competition, the artist brought forward a local social issue. It was fashionable for rich people at the time to opt to buy a farmhouse in a local village and transform it into a luxurious home rather than living in a villa in a premium

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<sup>193</sup> Emmanuel Fiorentino, "An Abstracted Light-Dark Syndrome," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 21, 1996.

<sup>194</sup> Pierre Portelli interview with the author on April 24, 2013.

area. This is purposely highlighted in the title where Portelli used both English and Maltese that also foregrounded class issues.<sup>195</sup> With this provocative interpretation and mixed media technique Portelli won the award.



**Fig. 26 Pierre Portelli, *We Bought a Farmhouse in a Sqaq*, 1994, acrylic and collage, 60 x 90 cm, *Teacher's Whisky Art Award*, National Museum of Fine Arts, 1994. Valletta, Malta. (Photo provided by Pierre Portelli)**

For his next exhibition, Portelli intended to exhibit similar works but after being approached by Dennis Vella, the curator of the National Museum of Fine Arts, Portelli chose to exhibit other works from his studio.<sup>196</sup> Selections of these new interpretations were available for the first time in September in 1994 for the *Arti Indipendenza* (Independence Art) exhibition. Work by relatively young artists—Christopher Azzopard (b.1972), Paul A. Stellini (b.1971), and Portelli—were chosen. It was only the latter who went against the popular convention of painting and sculpture. According to the catalogue Portelli exhibited assemblages, while a local newspaper review by Raphael Vella described them both as an installation and as *objets trouvés*. Vella discussed the works in his article entitled “Young

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<sup>195</sup> Language on the islands is a tool to spot social classes. Although less evident today, in the 1990s, one could immediately identify who lived in the north or the south of the island of Malta. In the central part or north of the island, the use of the English language was strongly encouraged through independent schools and the church; in the south where state schools predominated everyone spoke in Maltese. All textbooks, except for religious studies and Maltese studies, were in English.

<sup>196</sup> Due to the local mentality that flat painterly work was the ultimately real art, Portelli did not consider these works for exhibition purposes. Portelli interview with the author on April 24, 2013.

Artists in Valletta” under the section ‘Strange’, while Portelli labelled them as “provocative, humorous and silly”.<sup>197</sup> This might be considered one of the first occasions when such works were exhibited in Malta in the 1990s, resonant with Antoine Camilleri’s assemblages exhibited back in the 1960s.<sup>198</sup> These very small objects, termed installations by Vella, may be seen as one of the turning points towards contemporary art practice in Malta aligning with international standards. It was the first time that an artwork was described as an installation in a newspaper caption and also throughout the article.

Apart from the artist who produced them, the curator Dennis Vella insisted the artist exhibit them.<sup>199</sup> According to Portelli, it was Dennis Vella and himself who decided to call the works ‘assemblages’. This collaboration can be considered a turning point not only for the artist but also for the local curators and artists in general, and for the new interpretations it offered local art critics and audiences at a usually well-attended summer exhibition.

According to Portelli, Dennis Vella, as the art curator for modern and contemporary art, kept on pushing him to keep on exhibiting works which were out of the norm and from this exhibition onwards Portelli kept working with installation concepts in mind.<sup>200</sup>

## **2.7 The First Examples of Contemporary Installation Art in Malta (1995-1997)**

This new internationally-inclined momentum initiated by the museum curator Dennis Vella and Portelli was also seen at the National Museum of Fine Arts in 1995, in a collective exhibition entitled *Women in Maltese Art* where Portelli presented *HEX*. Here, four female mannequins were used by the artist to represent the women of the present [Figure 27]. The work was centrally positioned and was treated more like a group of sculptures rather than an

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<sup>197</sup> Raphael Vella, “Young Artists in Valletta,” *The Malta Independent*, July 25, 1994.

<sup>198</sup> Antoine Camilleri (1922-2005) was one of the pioneers of twentieth-century art in Malta, introduced new concepts and techniques, including assemblage. See Joseph Paul Cassar *Antoine Camilleri: His Life And Works 1922-2005* (Malta:Pin Publication Malta, 2006).

<sup>199</sup> Pierre Portelli interview with the author on April 24, 2013.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

installation. However, this idea of readymades was still unknown at public visual art events in Malta. Other artists who participated in this collective exhibition presented painterly works and small sculptures.<sup>201</sup>



**Fig. 27 Pierre Portelli, *HEX*, 1995, mannequins, spray paint, wire, fabric and snails, 155 x 250 cm, *Women in Maltese Art*, National Museum of Fine Arts, 1995. Valletta, Malta. (Photo provided by Pierre Portelli)**

After these two exhibitions Portelli pursued work related to Malta's social contemporary context. The material used for his art work varied from the dominant painterly approach or traditional ways of making sculpture. The work that was shown the following year in 1996 at the *Maltafest* demonstrated a maturity in concept and in final outcome. Portelli showed three works *Tlaqt 'l Hemm* (I am Leaving) (1996); *Menhir! Yes but...* (1996); and *Magical Mystical* (1996) [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue – Page 8 Catalogue No. 9]. The critic of *The Sunday Times of Malta* (August 4, 1996) wrote:

...though we are here dealing with a contemporary art exhibition, it seems all too obvious that a sizable amount of artists are still treading traditional forms of expression. This is saying it without necessarily implying that they are inferior to the more avant-garde and thought-provoking modes as typified, for

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<sup>201</sup> *Woman in Maltese art: c1600-1995* (Malta: National Museum of Archaeology and National Museum of Fine Arts, October 1995), exhibition catalogue.

instance, by the works of Pierre Portelli.<sup>202</sup>

The “thought-provoking” approach Portelli presented in these collective exhibitions made him stand out as a contemporary art practitioner whose work was perceived in content and form as similar to what was happening internationally in the contemporary art scene.

Portelli continued experimenting and as part of the *Maltafest* of 1997, he exhibited *Hobżna ta' Kuljum* (Our Daily Bread) (1997) using ‘bread’ as his medium [Figure 28]. This experiment was key to Portelli’s artistic development. With the help of the flexibility of the medium of bread dough and found objects, he created lifelike sculptures which represented local habitats and customs. As discussed below, in 1998, Portelli created a series of works with this concept and medium which were exhibited in the United States of America. [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue – Page 13 Catalogue No. 18].



**Fig. 28 Pierre Portelli, Detail *Hobżna ta' Kuljum* (Our Daily Bread), 1997, bread and cartridges, 216 x 26 cm, *Maltafest*, 1997. Valletta, Malta. (Photo provided by Pierre Portelli)**

The second half of the 1990s, especially 1996, was a decisive moment for a number of Maltese artists including Norbert Francis Attard, Bianco, and Austin Camilleri. This might be considered as an experimental phase where the artists were trying to make the quantum leap from painting to something else. In retrospect, although painting can be a medium

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<sup>202</sup> Emanuel Fiorentino, “Some examining on Summer Exhibition”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, August 4, 1996.

through which a contemporary concept may be presented, ‘installation’ in the 1990s, which was internationally popular, remained difficult for local artists to assimilate. As Norbert Francis Attard alleges, before 1996 he only visited exhibitions that followed the more traditional forms of art and did not engage with other exhibitions even though he travelled extensively abroad.<sup>203</sup> In contrast, artists like Camilleri and Bianco were studying abroad and that experience, together with an open mentality, made them aware of international developments.

Nonetheless, not everyone’s professional situation was a comfortable one. In the case of Norbert Francis Attard, who by the 1990s was already a locally renowned artist, a radical change was more difficult. Unlike Portelli, who was exhibiting for the first time in the 1990s, Attard’s networks and clientele were mostly accustomed to his two-dimensional painterly work. Further, as he states in interview, when an artist is creating a painting he is on his own unlike in more contemporary visual art where a concept develops into a project and more people have to be involved.<sup>204</sup> This was a change in mentality, especially for Attard, as the relationship between the artist and the artwork becomes part of a larger relationship between the artist, the artwork, and the collaborators. The role of his art was no longer a personal expression of a spiritual and intimate experience. Aware that with these new developments and changes his art had to transform into something beyond everyday life, engagement with the outside world became imperative. Meanwhile, he felt that his painterly work was becoming repetitive. Attard also realised that never or rarely before this period had the local visual artists considered the value of a concept as being as important as aesthetics.<sup>205</sup> Attard’s

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<sup>203</sup> Norbert Francis Attard interview with the author on April 6, 2013, at artist’s house and studio.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid. Attard’s reflections on the shifts in practice were as follows; “This might have happened because by the 1990s a new market for painterly works was created. The artists in general were not comfortable to lose their followers and clients ‘only’ to produce work that was more conceptual. The inclination of the artist was to be modernists. Apart from that everyone, still today, prefers tangible things.” This view was further supported by Dominic Cutajar (former art critic and curator at the National Museum of Fine Arts). Attard interview with the author on April 6, 2013.



interest was in the idea of the aesthetic versus the concept and the complexities that this encompasses.<sup>206</sup>

Attard consequently experienced the transformation of his art in a more drastic scenario compared to Portelli. While Portelli's shift in focus was supported by the cultural organisation and the museum curator Dennis Vella, according to Attard when he presented an experimental work of art for a foreign competition the same curator was appalled.<sup>207</sup> At the time, all art pieces that were presented abroad had to be reported to the National Museum of Fine Arts. Although the current curator did not agree with the choice of the artist, the work was still shipped and exhibited at the Art Addition International Gallery in Stockholm in 1997, bearing the exhibition title *Most Talented Artists*. The international jury, composed of judges from the United Kingdom, Italy, France, the United States of America, and Sweden, awarded Attard first prize. The two award winning exhibits were composed of found objects, a new idiom for the artist [Figure 29].<sup>208</sup>



**Fig. 29 Norbert Francis Attard, *Untitled*, 1997, mixed media/found objects, 40 x 40 cm, artist's collection. The works exhibited in Stockholm are not in the artist's collection. (Photo provided by Norbert Francis Attard)**

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<sup>206</sup> Throughout the above interview Attard emphasised that after this period he wanted to express ideas and concepts. Attard said that there was a time in his life when he wanted to express other ideas but these were no longer personal and intimate. Unlike before, he wanted to deal with things which were happening in the outside world and in everyday life, including globalisation. He wanted to understand the 'now' of the outside world.

<sup>207</sup> Norbert Francis Attard interview with the author on April 6, 2013.

<sup>208</sup> Attard's artistic development will be discussed below and in Chapter 3.

Attard's new venture was little understood in Malta. Two local critics expressed opposing views about his change in approach and medium. Raphael Vella had a positive view on the transformation of Attard's work, noting in one of his articles in February 1997: "With his mind firmly set on three-dimensional work, Norbert Attard plans to surprise all those who think he stopped at abstract painting."<sup>209</sup> In contrast, the critic of *The Sunday Times of Malta* describes these new works as "an aesthetic venture of order", like an extension of Attard's calculated abstract in a three-dimensional format.<sup>210</sup> Unfortunately, this experimental phase made up of various works of different sizes and approaches is the only body of work that Attard never documented or published.<sup>211</sup> [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue – Page 9 Catalogue No. 12]. In less than a year, Attard was to create large-scale installations in different countries, as discussed in chapter three.

## **2.8 Understanding the New Contemporary Sensitivity in Malta in 1998**

Reading local art reviews and exhibition catalogues of the 1990s, it is notable that the starting point of a contemporary art sensitivity in Malta can be identified in 1998. Various artists started exhibiting works in line with contemporary international art practices, which at the time was popularly referred to as 'postmodern'.<sup>212</sup> This change is retrospectively evident in the printed leaflets and exhibition posters. Although the shift was not specifically commented upon or highlighted by contemporaneous commentators, it is clear through the printed material that this was a gradual process. Two straightforward examples are the exhibition *Sacred Austin: Works 1992-1998* by Austin Camilleri and *Relics 1996—1998* by Vince

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<sup>209</sup> Raphael Vella, "Within the Academic," *The Malta Independent*, February 2, 1997.

<sup>210</sup> Emmanuel Fiorentino, "It's an OR for Norbert Attard!" *The Sunday Times of Malta*, March 22, 1997.

<sup>211</sup> Until 2014 these transitional works were never published. A retrospective exhibition organised by Attard included these works in Easter 2014. Curiously, these works were not exhibited in the main area of the artist's studio gallery but in the entrance area where the artist's car is usually parked.

<sup>212</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge", in *Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 10 (Minnesota, US: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

Briffa, discussed below. [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue – Page 11 Catalogue No. 14 and Page 12 Catalogue No. 17].

This phenomenon of 1998 can be linked, in part, to the local historical and political contexts. In 1996, there was a change in government. After nine years, the Labour Party was leading the country again - although this new government lasted only twenty-two months owing to a series of disputes within the party itself. One has to realise that then, as now, politics in Malta has a large impact on people because of the size of the country and its relative recently gained status of republic in 1979, only two decades earlier. As an independent country in 1998 the Prime Minister called for an early election for the first time.<sup>213</sup> The newly elected Labour Party demanded Malta's withdrawal from the NATO Partnership for Peace Programme and the freezing of Malta's application to join the European Union. The latter remained a hot issue throughout the remaining decade with the country equally divided on this matter and it was public knowledge that representatives of the same party did not agree between themselves on such a nationally important issue.<sup>214</sup> This instability and the potential of not becoming part of the European Union may have affected artists, directly or indirectly to consider their positioning nationally and internationally.<sup>215</sup>

### **Exhibitions and Display of Works**

The first artistic challenge to the provincial mentality in 1998 was by the Gozitan artist Austin Camilleri, a recent graduate from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Perugia, Italy, where he studied from 1991 to 1995 and where he also exhibited his final work related to abstract

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<sup>213</sup> Michael Schiavone, *Elezzjonijiet f'Pajjiżna* (Malta: Publikazzjonijiet Indipendenza, 2014.), 1021.

<sup>214</sup> In the 2003 EU Referendum results, 270,663 voted out of 297,881 registered voters: 46.4 % were against while 53.6% were in favour.

<sup>215</sup> Artists in general are aware of artistic developments happening abroad. Travelling makes artists more conscious of this; in fact, undergoing work experience and receiving education in foreign countries is very normal. Before 2004, Maltese citizens required visas, and general expenses—including university course fees—were very costly.

reality, spirituality and space.<sup>216</sup> Initially Camilleri's work was abstract painting produced on canvas but soon after his studies abroad, he started oscillating between experimental work and painting until 1998, by which time he had also lived and worked in New York, Guatemala, and London.<sup>217</sup> The exhibition entitled *Sacred Austin: Works 1992-1998* was held at St James Church in Victoria, Gozo, in April 1998.

This solo exhibition combined new values that had not yet been exploited in Malta.<sup>218</sup> The artist opted to show an experimental process within the traditional-building of the Roman Catholic Church in Gozo rather than in a more usual and popular exhibition space in Malta. Furthermore, displaying the fine art works alongside the objets d'art in the church was an essential part of the concept.

The catalogue essay by Raphael Vella situates Camilleri's work alongside religious statements and arguments offered by such diverse individuals as Pope Gregory, Leo Tolstoy, and Joseph Beuys.<sup>219</sup> Catalogue essays, as previously stated, were a new phenomenon in Malta. This one took a highly theoretical approach in line with the postmodern idiom that was popular internationally. Vella argued that the functions and forms of artworks change and he emphasised the need for a contemporary language that moves beyond traditional Christian forms, in this manner endorsing Beuys' notion that the essence of Christianity is not reached by the depiction of Christ. Rejecting Pope Gregory's belief in the function of art as a teaching aid to deliver the scriptures to the illiterate masses via pictorial representation, Vella concludes by linking Camilleri's work with Tolstoy's thesis on the relationship between good

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<sup>216</sup> The concept developed for Camilleri's final show at the Art Academy in Perugia was along the same lines as *Sacred Austin*, the exhibition held in Gozo in 1998.

<sup>217</sup> *Austin Camilleri Paintings*, March 1-29, 1997, exhibited at SAI Gallery INC., New York, USA; *Austin Camilleri: Etchings and Drawings*, December 1997, exhibited in Guatemala.

<sup>218</sup> Research is currently being carried out on the first contemporary exhibitions held in a Catholic church. The material found to this date shows that this kind of exhibition was held post-2000.

<sup>219</sup> *Sacred Austin: Works 1992-1998* (Gozo: St James Church, Victoria, April 1998), exhibition catalogue.

art and ‘True Christianity’. For Tolstoy, Christian art had to be universally accessible since this had to accentuate feelings and experience to unite people.<sup>220</sup>

Camilleri’s main tenet for the exhibition was that art can be a means to break iconographic traditions, in this case by presenting installations that had a symbolic relationship with Christian motifs.<sup>221</sup> Reducing Christian artistic language to the bare essentials of colour, texture, light, space, and fire, Camilleri simplified narrations by using colours and shadows to create holiness. For example, instead of the usual Christian representation of the crucifixion, a source of light illuminated the internal area of a large wooden frame with the shadow of a crucifix (placed strategically in front of the light source) projected onto this framed area.<sup>222</sup> The audience could walk between the light and the frame, and thus entered the picture space since their own shadow was also projected. Moreover, the relationship with the representation of the crucifixion took on different dimensions and was transformed every time the shadow of another individual was projected onto the picture space [Figure 30].



**Fig. 30 Austin Camilleri, *Untitled*, 1998, mixed media, 150 x 150 cm in 3 x 3 m space, *Sacred Austin: Works 1992-1998*, St James Church, 1998. Victoria, Gozo. (Photo provided by Austin Camilleri)**

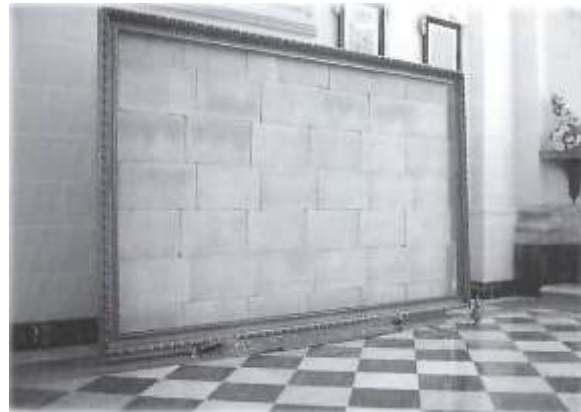
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<sup>220</sup> Raphael Vella, “Tempting Orthodoxy: The ‘Sacred Art’ of Austin Camilleri,” *Sacred Austin: Works 1992-1998* (Gozo: St James Church, Victoria, April 5-19 1998), unpaginated exhibition catalogue.

<sup>221</sup> Austin Camilleri interview with the author on April 27, 2013, at artist’s studio.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

These new forms of translating Christian faith definitely made regular churchgoers question why the Church gave permission for the intrusion of such pictorial standalone interpretation of saints and the Roman Catholic scriptures into daily traditional religious customs. Indeed, a painting representing St Theresa was obstructed by a framed Maltese brick wall created by the artist to obscure the painting representing the saint [Figure 31].



**Fig. 31 Austin Camilleri, Untitled, 1995, mixed media, 300 x 180 x 60 cm, *Sacred Austin: Works 1992-1998*, St James Church, 1998. Victoria, Gozo. (Image provided by Austin Camilleri)**

Vella's text also questioned the role of art, identifying it as the "original problem", and arguing that art should not be justified by anybody, including the artist, the patron, or even the public. He concluded that each setup will necessarily be accepted or refused by the social context rather than according to the properties of the work.

When analysing this exhibition, it should be placed in a context where first the priest responsible for the church accepted Camilleri's proposal; secondly, a new concept was presented within a traditional environment, namely a church in Gozo; and thirdly, the exhibition opening fell on Good Friday.<sup>223</sup> Moreover, the artist managed to present his personal conceptual development in his homeland. Also, for the very first time, an exhibition

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<sup>223</sup> Good Friday is a Christian Feast commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and his death in Calvary. In view of this commemoration, Good Friday is a day of mourning where no bells are rung and no mass is held.

with postmodern values was rendered possible with the collaboration of various individuals: the artist, Camilleri; the priest, Mgr J. Curmi; the critic, Raphael Vella; the catalogue designer, Pierre Portelli; and others, including the audience.

Arguably, this provocative exhibition was possible for a number of factors related to Camilleri's status and artistic career, and his character. Firstly, Camilleri belongs to a renowned family of artists known for Church commissions both in Malta and Gozo. Camilleri's grandfather, father, and uncles were all professional artists, a rare occurrence in Malta. Camilleri's talent was identified early on in his life and nurtured. However, Camilleri did not follow in the Camilleri and Camilleri-Cauchì family's footsteps. As early as the 1990s he was identified as an artist who "challenged what may be called the 'artistic institutionalization' within ecclesiastical circles,"<sup>224</sup> in the series of works commissioned for Gozo Cathedral and at St Lucy's Church in Kercem. Although recognised as "strikingly original and that they do not betray any formal language," he was heavily criticised by local ecclesiastical art connoisseurs, for not conforming to the traditional artistic protocols expected of ecclesiastical artists.<sup>225</sup> Nonetheless, his fame as an artist was established and Mgr J. Curmi seemed ready to face the potential consequences of the 1998 exhibition.<sup>226</sup>

The second factor related to Camilleri's success is linked to his studies in Perugia. His experience and research, especially that which led to his final project, made him move away from conventional painting on a flat surface and traditional festive papier-mâché sculptures to semi-abstract treatment of Christian themes that informed his series of installations in *Sacred Austin*. Later, in 2012, Camilleri was retrospectively credited as one of the first Maltese artists to adopt installation art:

a non-conformist who has been challenging the Gozitan society with his progressive unorthodox works since the early 1990s. The artist even rejected his

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<sup>224</sup> Jason Joe Farrugia, "The Art and Architecture of Twentieth Century Gozo," *Gozo Observer* No. 26, June 2012, accessed June 24, 2015.

[https://www.um.edu.mt/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/162098/Gozo\\_Observer\\_26\\_Final\\_sml.pdf](https://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/162098/Gozo_Observer_26_Final_sml.pdf).

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> Austin Camilleri interview with the author on April 27, 2013.

earlier artistic establishment and turned his art into complete abstraction. From 1993—the year in which he introduced his abstracts in Gozo—onwards, Austin embarked on new projects which saw his artistic work wander in uncompromising and unlimited directions. Austin Camilleri was one of the first Maltese artists to pick the ephemeral language of Installation art.<sup>227</sup>

A month before the 1998 Gozo exhibition opening, Camilleri offered an insight into his current thinking during an interview for a local newspaper when the journalist Lily Said asked Camilleri about his art. In answer to this question the artist negotiated with the journalist to publish a blank page that he saw as his first contemporary artistic act.<sup>228</sup>

According to Camilleri, there was a negative response to this act and a formal interview took place soon after.<sup>229</sup>

Three months later, in July 1998, Ruth Bianco also organised an unusual art event entitled *Anima Mundi*. The event took place inside the male division of the Corradino correctional facilities in Paola, a town in South East of Malta, and can be referred to as an aesthetic relations act or a site-specific intervention.<sup>230</sup> Bianco initiated this interactive ‘performance’ to encourage people to encounter one another through art.<sup>231</sup> For her, it was more challenging to do this in a prison, particularly a male prison, than in an art museum.

Bianco recalls that she was rather apprehensive on the day as she wondered how the inmates were going to react and whether they would take her seriously or ridicule her.<sup>232</sup> This sense of apprehension is particularly understandable as the artist did not bring the colour and brush materials usually used for art ‘education’ sessions; instead she brought fifty black

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Lily Said, interviewed Camilleri in March 1998. When the journalist asked Camilleri to describe his art, he replied that he could not answer that question by using words. In response to this, the journalist asked Camilleri to express himself ‘through art’, at which point the artist decided to leave the page blank. See Catalogue 2: 10, no. 16. See Lily Said, “L-intervista minn Lily Said: Austin Camilleri u l-Pagna Vojta [Interview by Lily Said: Austin Camilleri and the Blank Page],” *Għalik*, March 28, 1998.

<sup>229</sup> Austin Camilleri interview with the author: “Regarding her article dated March 28, 1998, Said later mentioned that readers had reacted negatively towards the blank page.”

<sup>230</sup> Raphael Vella, “Breaking into the Prison,” *The Malta Independent*, August 16, 1998.

<sup>231</sup> Bianco’s artistic act might have been inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s Reception Theory, which appears as the central argument of his book *The Love of Art* (1997), co-written with Alain Darbel. While conversing with Bianco on this particular artwork, she referred to Bourdieu.

<sup>232</sup> Author’s Interview with Bianco. 15 November, 2014.



boxes filled with fragile strands of brightly coloured veneer which flapped around wildly in the wind. The performance event took place in the courtyard of the prison with Bianco cautiously proceeding to make a sculptural arrangement with the boxes. It seems that the inmates started asking questions straight away, such as, “why does she spend time doing such things?”<sup>233</sup> The artist talked back to the inmates and soon they started helping her with the arrangement of the first sculpture which looked like a cell [Figure 32]. However, the wall of this cell was colourful and airy, and the inmates kept walking in and out of this cell ‘space’. The performance went on for several hours, with inmates creating shapes and forms that also followed colour coding. To show gratitude to the artist, the inmates spelt out her name with the swinging pendants before she left.<sup>234</sup>



**Fig. 32 Ruth Bianco standing in front one of the many compositions created by the prisoners under the project title *Anima Mundi*, 1998. (Photo provided by Ruth Bianco)**

In an interview I conducted with the artist, she remembers that it was a very challenging experience at the time since she was not sure what to expect although the prison authorities had determined which group of inmates the artist could interact with and identified them as low-risk. Bianco further described the event as “both conceptually liberating and a challenge as it concerned ‘boundaries’ on various levels of thinking.” It encapsulated her interest in exploring non-art sites and working with interactive sculptural

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<sup>233</sup> Vella, “Breaking into the Prison.”

<sup>234</sup> Author’s Interview with Bianco. 15 November, 2014.

installation, while investigating the idea of an ‘unfixed’ object. She managed to finally gain approval for the interactive action because the prison authorities had no idea that this was an art installation and perceived it as a social activity. The prison courtyard where the installation took place was guarded and she was not allowed to photograph the prisoners’ faces. It also had a predetermined fixed duration.

The experimental idea of using the mobile boxes had emerged through Bianco’s Open Studio. The interchangeable value of an artwork was something that had fascinated the artist for years, even when doing paintings, however, she wanted to experiment further by using her art to create a relationship with new and challenging audiences.<sup>235</sup> Through the prison event, Bianco can be seen as the first woman to practise a postmodern approach in Malta.<sup>236</sup> The artist’s socially engaged practice with the prisoners falls in the postmodern model discussed by Bourriaud while her work engages with postmodern conceptions that art is “inclusive of much more than simply making things called art”.<sup>237</sup>

A further manifestation of a shift in practice is evident in Vince Briffa’s solo exhibition *Relics 1996-1998*, held at the Fine Arts Museum in November 1998, where the artist moved away from painting, the medium he was known for, and used media considered untraditional in Malta.<sup>238</sup> The exhibition can be considered a quantum leap in his artistic career and reflected his recent artistic experiences of studying abroad. In 1996, he studied graphics and sculpture at Edinburgh College of Art, under Eduardo Paolozzi (Master Class), and he had just started a master’s degree in Fine Arts at Bretton Hall College at the

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid. A similar approach of involving the public was used by Caesar Attard in the late 1970s in Malta but Bianco’s was the first attempt since then, and the context was more challenging.

<sup>236</sup> Isabelle Borg was more contemporary in her thinking but at the time she was still looking into aesthetics by using paint rather than at the concept.

<sup>237</sup> See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relation Aesthetics* (France: Les Presse Du Reel, 1998) p.137 and P. G. Taylor, “Service-learning as postmodern art pedagogy,” *Studies in Art Education*, Volume 43, 2002, pp.124-140.

<sup>238</sup> Interestingly, between 1995 and 1996, Briffa was the co-founder of the Institute of the Visual Arts (IVA), a local art school whose approach to teaching visual art was traditional. IVA, situated in Valletta at 84 Old Mint Street, to the side of the Manoel Theatre, was founded by Enrico Borg, Joseph Farrugia, and Briffa and ran from 1994 to 1996. The skill-based course focused mainly on painting and ceramics, with artists as tutors. Conceived of as a place for artists and students to meet, in the winter it operated as a full time art institute; in the summer it served as a summer school for young people. Briffa Interview with author on May 14, 2014.

University of Leeds, also in the United Kingdom. These combined experiences made a strong impact on Briffa, especially with regard to his thinking on visual art. Earlier in the 1990s he was engaging more with the aesthetics of art but gradually tried to understand art as a personal voyage of discovery over time.<sup>239</sup>

*Relics 1996-1998*, presented three projects completed by Briffa during his time abroad that mainly focused on time, past and present, using media and imageries that were more common in a forensic lab than within an exhibition hall.<sup>240</sup> This is especially true of the 1996 series entitled *Where have I known you before?* consisting of X-rays on paper, fixed on wood and the 1997 series *No One's Reliquary*, using human hair mounted onto wooden cases. The final pieces exhibited, all dated 1998, were more complex reflections on the artist's identity bearing the titles *I have no Boundaries/1*, *I have no Boundaries/2*, *Tam bella non aspiret Christ* (Christ never brought a more beautiful woman to life), and *Elegy to Being and Time*, the largest work (90 x 180 cm). The media used took the audience by surprise since it was not usual to have human hair, a bird skeleton, cloth, earth, and X-rays on the art work surface.<sup>241</sup> For Briffa, the media established a connection with his idea of a relic as something which encapsulates a portion of matter and time rather than the most commonly understood form of relics within the Catholic Church of the bodily remains of saints.

Once again Raphael Vella wrote the essay in the accompanying catalogue arguing that the aspect of time was the link between the series of works presented. He notes that the collection of reproduced X-rays in *Where have I known you before?*, showing different fragments of the human body, were retrieved from hospital records. While the layers of paint and chalk act as a veil that reveals the bones and skin of the body parts, small prints, just

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<sup>239</sup> *Vince Briffa: Selected Works 1983-1991*, November 15 - December 1, 1991, exhibited at the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, Malta; and *Vince Briffa: Voyage*, November 19 - December 18, 1994, exhibited at the National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta, Malta.

<sup>240</sup> *Vince Briffa: Relics, 1996-1998*, November 1998, exhibited in the Contemporary Room, National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, Malta.

<sup>241</sup> The use of mixed media on flat surfaces was exercised earlier by Antoine Camilleri (1922-2005). His earliest work in this technique was produced in the 1960s.

visible, are inserted in each image. For Vella, the reproduced X-ray prints question the identity of the person within the present self as future nothingness. Vella presumably perceived the X-ray as a picture of one's body which capture the present moment of the internal self-identity while the future is unknown or does not exist at all. In *No One's Reliquary*, the artist presents the viewer with a body relic, namely a lock of hair clipped from the scalp of an anonymous individual [Figure 33]. As Vella notes, hair is culturally related to death or growth and is also linked with personal identity. Here Briffa provides an additional link by including fragments from Holocaust poetry. Acting as the central piece of the exhibition, *No One's Reliquary*, echoes the number of nameless victims of this tragic episode that are visible around the central 'hair-section' of these works, where the artist included the poetry fragments.



**Fig. 33 Vince Briffa, *No One's Reliquary*, 1997, mixed media reliefs, human hair mounted in wooden cases, 32 x 27 cm each (Series of 16 works), *Relics 1996-1998*, National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, Malta. (Photo provided by Vince Briffa)**

According to Vella, the last series suggests that “matter and time are temporal and fleeting.”<sup>242</sup> Featured here are several bony relics and human figures that appear to have grown too thin for their anatomical limit. Scientific ‘lines’ marking some kind of human ‘average’ are contrasted with the requirements of the relic or figure. Here, the relic no longer

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<sup>242</sup> Raphael Vella, “The Body as Relic,” *Vince Briffa Relics 1996-98* (Valletta, Malta: Contemporary Room, National Museum of Fine Arts, November 1998), unpaginated exhibition catalogue.

represents the triumph but the tragedy of the body. Unlike the medieval relics of saints, Briffa's works expose the raw visible traces of the effects of time, death and decay.

If concepts of time and identity may be seen as a popular theme in postmodern art, this collection of work still exist within the margins of traditional art since they were presented as two-dimensional works, hung in a contemporary hall on museum premises.<sup>243</sup> This dichotomy was recognised by reviewers as the example of Joseph Paul Cassar's review in the *Times of Malta* shows;

The subject of this exhibition remains basically the same, but the characterisation changes. Human references occur even among the seemingly inexplicable traces that give this exhibition its enigmatic aura. Briffa's figures are no longer representational in the realist sense, nor are they depicted whole. Their presence is implied through body parts. These fragments evoke a whole. The way they function is an abstract component in an overall pictorial structure which points to the sense that they are integrally tied to something larger. They appear in a process of disintegrating—a constant state of evolution is thus conveyed.

Cassar only hints at a more contemporary idiom in the artist's work in the last phrase of the article when he writes, "In this exhibition Briffa combines the contemplative and spiritual with everyday reality."<sup>244</sup>

It is highly likely that the majority of the viewers 'appreciated' the exhibition for its aesthetic impact rather than the questioning of identity that lay behind it. This is evident in the sardonic remarks of *The Sunday Times of Malta* art critic;

possibly the same thing holds for those poor feathery creatures which have been mummified and stuck on the large composition entitled *Elegy to Being and Time* and which I was forced to view without a feeling of compassion, though I do not suppose that life was forced out of them by the artist with the sole intention of creating this particular work.<sup>245</sup>

The last three exhibitions of 1998 that indicate the transition in Maltese art toward more contemporary modes of presentation and preoccupations took place abroad and featured the new work of Norbert Attard and Pierre Portelli. As previously discussed in this chapter, both

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<sup>243</sup> Among the most popular postmodern artists who presented time, identity, and death in their work was Christian Boltanski.

<sup>244</sup> Joseph Paul Cassar, "Icons of Human Presence," *Times of Malta*, November 19, 1998.

<sup>245</sup> Emmanuel Fiorentino, "A Dialogue Through Relics," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, November 22, 1998.

artists had already begun to embrace found objects and installation formats: Attard in his *Untitled* work that won the 1997 ‘Most Talented Artist’ award in Sweden, and Portelli in 1994 at *Arti Indipendenza* (Independence Art) exhibition. For Attard, the Stockholm award was a turning point, and throughout the remainder of 1997 he experimented with space, structure, and form (drawing upon his education as an architect) combining these with his keen interest in current philosophical concepts. According to Attard, these two aspects were crucial for his development since they made it possible for him to keep pace with the international art scene and to create art in collaboration with artists from abroad. In 1998 Attard was invited on two occasions, first to Munich and later to Korea,<sup>246</sup> to come up with a structure that would enhance a chosen environment and its relationship with nature and the spirit of place. This was an opportunity for Attard to venture into an art form that had never been presented in Malta - an installation created and sited within an outside space—commonly known as site-specific art—which artistically promoted the importance of the environment and ecology, otherwise termed Environmental Art.<sup>247</sup>

The first project executed in June 1998, *Transcutan* [Figure 34], formed part of the international summer cultural festival of Tollwood held in Munich. The collaborating artists came from four different countries - Germany, Austria, Korea and Malta - and they had to produce a structural composition-installation which reflected the temples on the pastoral hammocks of Munich’s Olympia Park. Together with the five artists—Ludwig Frank (Austria), Heinrich Hoffman (Germany), Stefan Sakic (Germany), Chong Yeun-Min (Korea), and Moon Byung Tak (Korea)—Attard had to create and construct the Temples of Air, Water, Fire and Earth.

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<sup>246</sup> Author’s Interview with Attard. 6 April, 2013,

<sup>247</sup> Adrian Bartolo, “The Double Frustration of Painting,” *The Sunday Times of Malta*, November 15, 1998.



**Fig. 34 Norbert Francis Attard, *Transcutan*, 1998, timber round poles, earth and pebbles, Site-Specific work at Tollywood Festival, Olympia Park, 1998. (Photo provided by Norbert Francis Attard)**

Attard focused on the Temple of Earth. This installation consisted of eight right-angled triangles, coupled at the shortest perpendicular, to form corridors in a Latin cross format, the sides of which were made out of clean shaven beams of wood nailed vertically [Figure 16]. The hypotenuse of both triangles stood buttressed by a plethora of selected pebbles sloping down the landscape into the park in the form of a circle, twenty metres in diameter. The temple was thoroughly consistent with the geography and revealed its architectural qualities in the large scale and the technical and engineering principles behind its creation.

Attard saw the temple as a piece of architectural sculpture although, for local critics, it was perceived as a natural extension of his earlier abstract paintings and could be considered an environment painting. In an article on this work, the curator and writer Adrian Bartolo observed:

The analogy holds in that the most important decisions on his three-dimensional pieces are made in the studio. Then the temple is consistently artful, clearly arranged and full of finesse, aspects of a consummate control in his painterly expression. The freeing from painting is incomplete.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

He then continues by claiming that “[t]he two monumental projects are indeed another primary colour on his palette.”

Three months later, in August 1998, Attard was invited to participate in an ecological art exhibition entitled *Breath* in Korea. Here he produced a site-specific work *Breath of Mind*, a 2.7 square metre cage made out of wood and Korean rope which Attard had discovered on site [Figure 35]. The rope, the friendliest industrial material of a nearby village, was for the first time being used as an abstract element in a work of art by a Maltese artist. The powerful form of a cage was made to sit on the bed of a lake whose water level rose or fell unpredictably. This created dramatic effects within the structure as the cage was transformed into a prison as the water rose.



**Fig. 35 Norbert Francis Attard, *Breath of mind*, 1998, wood and Korean rope, Site-Specific work, Korea, 1998. (Photo provided by Norbert Francis Attard)**

The last exhibition of 1998 that signalled a new departure by a Maltese artist was a series of works by Pierre Portelli exhibited in July at the Central Connecticut State University in Connecticut in the USA. As previously discussed, Portelli’s work from 1994 consisted of conceptual installations or assemblages made up of common and sometimes discarded



material not usually associated with fine art which reflected upon current social issues.<sup>249</sup> The new collection, entitled *Breadworks*, brought together several interconnected concepts. Each work challenged the viewer by presenting items or symbols that could be associated with everyday life experience. Bread as a medium was chosen by the artist to represent the subject of suffering in human life since, unlike traditional material, bread eventually dries out, grows mouldy and ultimately perishes.

However, the overall artistic statement presented was of a more optimistic nature. The loaf of bread was twisted in such a way as if Portelli had brought it to life. Sometimes it looked like a piece of sculpture captured in chicken wire as if in a cage, while other loaves resembled faces that experienced a journey or daily emotions. [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue - Page 13 Catalogue No. 18]. Irony was key in these pieces as they transmitted everyday realities to the viewer, amused to see works of art composed of bread.

The exhibition was made possible through the support of several people including Marta V. Kot, an American artist and educator who had discovered the works in Malta and did her utmost to exhibit them as a whole collection.<sup>250</sup> Due to their ephemeral quality, none of the original work still exists.<sup>251</sup> Also, the exhibition received little coverage in Malta.<sup>252</sup> The only available published material is found in the artist's own documentation archive and the accompanying exhibition catalogue [Figure 36].<sup>253</sup> This included a short essay by the curator and writer Dennis Vella who had earlier championed Portelli's move to found objects. Vella's essay focused mainly on bread making as the focal point of Maltese villages, arguing that Portelli was aware of how urban life had transformed this daily task into a fully computerised and mechanised process. Little to no emphasis was placed on the exhibited

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<sup>249</sup> The use of discarded material in Malta was used in the 1960s by Gabriel Caruana.

<sup>250</sup> Marta Violette Kot, EDD Certified, EDM in Art and Art Education, Teachers College Columbia University; Masters Degree in Studio and Environmental Art, NYU. Kot currently teaches at Silvermine Arts Center, Connecticut, USA.

<sup>251</sup> The few remaining examples are from Portelli's mould-infested collection.

<sup>252</sup> Emmanuel Fiorentino, "Art-turned-culinary in *Breadworks*," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, October 18, 1998.

<sup>253</sup> *Pierre Portelli: Breadworks* (Connecticut, USA: Central Connecticut State University, July 1-29, 1998), exhibition catalogue.

works and it is only in the last two paragraphs that Vella discusses how the artist used the ingrained concepts of bread as a symbol, concluding that such compositions “might carry a rather topical and timeless meaning.” Even though Vella offers no specific argument about the works it is imperative to point out the idea of time and identity were two recurrent themes (amongst others) used by the artists working within the then contemporary postmodern sensitivity.<sup>254</sup> As Vella implies, both time and identity are conceived of in terms of Malta’s continually shifting identity.



**Fig. 36 Portelli Pierre, *Breadworks*, Exhibition Catalogue, Central Connecticut State University, July 1998. Connecticut, USA. (Photo provided by Pierre Portelli)**

## **2.9 Conclusion**

Based on analysis of key exhibitions, exhibition reviews, catalogues, artist interviews and empirical analysis of the artworks and exhibition cultures, this chapter has identified an overall shift in Maltese art from 1989 to 1998 as one from isolation to globalisation. As shown, the selected artists acknowledged and adopted contemporary art developments which were described as postmodern. They moved beyond painting (mainly abstract in form) and adopted new media and themes including reflections of the self, critical thinking on local

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

identities and placing the local into a more global perspective. This gradual transition, visible throughout the decade, is particularly evident from 1996, a year when new experimental work was created or exhibited. Key factors that effected this change are various. They include increased transnational communication through the internet and the artists' recognition of the need to expand their experience by studying contemporary art theory and practice abroad and cultivating contact with overseas artists. Notably, six of the key contemporary artists discussed - Ruth Bianco, Isabelle Borg, Vince Briffa, Austin Camilleri, Pierre Portelli and Raphael Vella - availed themselves of the opportunities to study abroad. This enabled the artists to move beyond the aesthetics of painting to the use of found objects and the introduction of concept-based installations.

The next important milestone identified was 1998 for several significant reasons. The most evident was that artists also acted as curators' questioning how and what to display, and the published catalogue was introduced as a new form of documentation and theoretical debate that included artists' biographies and critical essays. Notably, the two significant examples discussed were written by the same individual, Raphael Vella. In the first part of this chapter I discussed Vella in relation to his important input as an art critic who against all odds tried to critically analyse art works and exhibitions without following the generalised models of past reviews or those of local popular art reviewers. In the last section of this chapter we encounter Vella as the author who wrote a theoretical essay for both Austin Camilleri's *Sacred Austin: Works 1992-1998* and Vince Briffa's *Relics 1996-1998* catalogue.

A further important transition visible through this research is the shift in the making of exhibitions. The chapter started by discussing the artistic scene and the exhibition culture which was dominated by collective exhibitions organised by public and private entities. Collective exhibitions, including the Malta International Art Biennale organised by Dame Tempra, were all significant for the artist community, but by the second half of the 1990s the artists became more critical and self-determined. Notably, although museums were the

primary spaces for exhibiting contemporary art at this time, there is only one example of a close collaboration between a museum curator and an artist. In fact, it is noticeable that all exhibition logistics and curation of solo shows were looked after by the artists themselves, even when exhibitions were held in prominent locations within Valletta. This can be seen as a form of professionalization and arguably a change of the status of the contemporary artist in Malta. A distinctive feature of the contemporary art scene at the end of the 1990s is that the prominent artists discussed here ranged across generations. The eldest artist is Caesar Attard born in 1947 and the youngest is Austin Camilleri, born twenty-five years later, in 1972. This suggests that one of the prominent factors that effected the cross-generational shift was the increasing mobility of artists, access to art through the internet and opportunities to study abroad irrespective of age.

**Chapter 3**  
**New Audiences: Maltese Contemporary Art in National and International Exhibitions in 1999**

In just a couple of years, from 1994 to 1998, Maltese artists had become more aware of contemporary art developments abroad. Despite local limitations, contemporary Maltese artists sought to build further bridges between the internationalisation of art and local audiences. This included significant Maltese artists' collaborations. Alongside this, curators in Malta also sought to make contemporary art more accessible to the general public. In hindsight, 1999 was a significant year with four major national events and exhibitions of contemporary art in Malta and the participation of Malta in the Venice Biennale. Local events included the collective contemporary exhibition entitled *Re-Interpreting Preti*, curated by the curators of the National Museum of Fine Arts that opened in January 1999; Austin Camilleri and Pierre Portelli's *A Happening*, held in Malta and on the sister island, Gozo in March; *ism*, an interactive exhibition by Portelli in May which involved audiences at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta; and Austin Camilleri's *Stones*, a site-specific installation on the islands of Malta and Gozo in October 1999. The apex of this year, or rather of the decade, was Malta's participation at the Venice Biennale for the first time as an independent nation in the summer of 1999. Seen in the context of a small island with strong religious values and little contemporary art infrastructure, these achievements were difficult to realise for all involved. Taking into account the circumstances surrounding their inception, this chapter analyses these key exhibitions and events and evaluates their role in contributing to changes in the understanding and positioning of Maltese contemporary art practice both locally and internationally, for both artists and audiences.

### 3.1 The Viewer and the Artist: *ism*, *A Happening*, and *Stones*

Contemporary artists direct engagement with Maltese audiences was first pioneered in the mid-1970s by Caesar Attard's live performances as discussed in chapter one, but it was not until the late 1990s that such strategies were employed again.<sup>255</sup> This might be considered rather late when comparing such artistic events with international fora, nonetheless it was a crucial development locally. Building upon the experimental practices of local artists that showed a keen interest in the involvement of local people and small communities in 1998 — notably (as discussed in the previous chapter) Ruth Bianco's *Anima Mundi* that involved a group of male prisoners in the creation of a series of mobile installations within the courtyard of a prison, and *Breadworks* by Pierre Portelli who was assisted by local bakers to create his intriguing works — in 1999, Portelli took audience engagement further. It is interesting to note that the most important art book of the late 1990s was *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), authored by the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who argued that art was no longer a collection of objects but “a state of encounter... The work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum.”<sup>256</sup> It is important to note that while Portelli was not aware of Bourriaud's publication until much later, the artist's engagement with audience is indicative of his awareness of the wider international shift in art developments that Malta was beginning to embrace.<sup>257</sup>

In May 1999, Portelli presented an exhibition entitled *ism* that directly involved the audience as participants at the Contemporary Hall of the National Museum of Fine Arts. The

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<sup>255</sup> Between 1975 and 1978 Caesar Attard pioneered four live participatory projects. In 1975, “Search for Your Self” at the Upper Barracca Gardens in Valletta. In 1977, “Human Pantographers”, inside the language laboratory of De La Salle College, Cottonera, and “Open-ended Meta-dimensional Field” and “Artist as Model” as part of the *Maltese Contemporary Art Exhibition* in the Libyan-Arab Cultural Centre, Valletta. His last live participatory project was in 1978, “The identity Card”, at the Argotti Gardens, in Floriana, Malta. Attard interview with the author on 16 October 2013.

<sup>256</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (France: Les Presses Du Reel, 1998), p.22.

<sup>257</sup> Portelli specified that he read Bourriaud's book later in 2002 when translated into English. Portelli interview with the author, June 18 2018.

title might indicate that the work was going to be related to the popularly known art ‘isms’ of modernism but, in fact, Portelli challenged the visual art formats of modernism. For this solo exhibition Portelli placed a number of blank surfaces of different materials including metal and fabric alongside different tools which were to be used by the viewer to interact with the exhibited work. The audience was invited to take the available tools next to or hanging beside each blank surface and to thereby create something new. To do so the visitor had to physically interact with the work by piercing or cutting the surface. As such the viewers’ participation was crucial for the success of this art exhibition.



**Fig. 37** Filming on CCTV of *ism* exhibition opening night, Contemporary Hall, National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, 1999. (Image provided by Pierre Portelli)

On the opening night the artist installed a CCTV camera to record the audience’s actions [Figure 37]. The documentation of the interaction was pre-planned and was intended to become the basis for a future independent artwork. This is confirmed by the essay by the philosopher Kenneth Wain in the exhibition leaflet where Wain comments as follows:

Then Portelli will capture them in the camera which lies outside the space of spaces, in another space creating even a broader context for the whole event

which again will be taken up and appropriated to produce something different, some new provocation.<sup>258</sup>

The artist subsequently confirmed in interview that he was planning to create another art work by using the recording but by 2019 he has not as yet had the opportunity to do so.<sup>259</sup>

Significantly, Wain's use of the word 'provocation' in this context is further elaborated on with regard to the shifting role of the artist and the audience. Wain describes this event as having a "democratic ring", arguing that:

maybe we are witnessing the death of the artist! The artist as aristocrat of art [...] If one regards it as provocation, its success lies not in its conformity to art canons or norms, but in the willingness of viewers to be provoked!<sup>260</sup>

"The willingness of the viewer to be provoked" is important because of the changing role of the audience. In his essay, Wain is foreseeing that the success of contemporary art can be possible only when viewers encounter and engage with the work, in this case literally.

Wain's reference to "the space of a space" as cited above, also recognises that as soon as the camera was used to record particular actions for artistic purposes, the captured material turns into another artwork within a different dimension which lies outside the gallery space where the opening is taking place. This was a common characteristic of postmodernism when refitting art outside of its original context. Interestingly, Wain sees Portelli's work as part of what he refers to as 'postmodernism' and he explicitly relates this to Malta being part of international developments:

...the younger artists have caught wind of "postmodernism" and it is now everywhere in the air, the new "in" thing that may, finally, turn Maltese art around completely to bring it into line with what is occurring elsewhere, namely the announcement of the death of "modern art".<sup>261</sup>

As a philosopher very much involved in the local visual art scene, Wain was well aware of changes happening in the arts in the last decades of the twentieth century. His observations

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<sup>258</sup> *Pierre Portelli: ism*, edited by Kenneth Wain (Valletta, Malta: Contemporary Hall, National Museum of Fine Arts, May 13 - June 1, 1999), unpaginated exhibition catalogue.

<sup>259</sup> Pierre Potelli interview with the author on 24 April 2013.

<sup>260</sup> Wain, *Pierre Portelli: ism*. Unpaginated exhibition catalogue.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*



also suggest that young artists practicing at the time were conscious of such developments happening away from the islands and that “finally” art in Malta would be in line with what was happening on an international scale.

This exhibition or performance was a once-in-a-lifetime experience on the Maltese shores. The film shows that from clean plain rectangular surfaces, the evening ended with a number of colourful destructed works produced by the visitors who heartily enjoyed this action of destruction of ‘art’ on the premises of the National Museum of Fine Arts [Figure 33].<sup>262</sup> Those who visited the space after the opening could interact with the work but it was a completely different experience since all the works had already been torn and destroyed.

However, for the artist the interactive process opened up new meanings:

*ism* engages the process of change... meaning built in process... the empowered viewer, discarding passivity, interacts with the work... Each intervention changes the physical state of the work, thus permitting new meaning structure to emerge as valid as the pristine one.<sup>263</sup>

Portelli argues that intervention was important since it changed the physical state of the work which led to other connotations. Arguably, these connotations included the opportunity to change the state and value of the work of art according to the different actions of the viewers.

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<sup>262</sup> The film is in the artist’s private collection. Portelli frequently screens the film during his art lectures at the University of Malta.

<sup>263</sup> “Pierre Portelli Profile,” *ISSUU Online Catalogue*, accessed December 4, 2013. [http://issuu.com/pierreportelli/docs/pierre\\_portelli](http://issuu.com/pierreportelli/docs/pierre_portelli).



**Fig. 38 Pierre Portelli, *Untitled*, 1998, mixed media 120 x 120 cm. *ism*, National Museum of Fine Arts, 1999. Valletta, Malta. (Photo provided by Pierre Portelli)**

Prior to this intervention, Portelli had also collaborated with Austin Camilleri on a project in March 1999 which they entitled *A Happening*. Held in Malta and on the sister island of Gozo, this performance at the Biagio Steps in Valletta and in Sentinella at Cittadella, Gozo was a key collaboration that led to future important collaborations between Maltese artists. [Figure 39].<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> The first performance was held on Thursday March 4, 1999, in Valletta; the second on Friday March 5, 1999, at Cittadella, Gozo. Both spaces, Biagio Steps and Sentinella Hall, were administered by the local government.



**Fig. 39** *A Happening* Exhibition Poster, 1999. (Photo provided by Pierre Portelli)

The context of the performance is a pessimistic one that reflected the then contemporary circumstances of violent and dark events taking place internationally, including the Gulf War, the Bosnian War, and the Rwandan Genocide.<sup>265</sup> The artists worked with situations, conditions, textures, and notions which reflected their state of mind [Figure 35]. In the selected spaces, a group of dancers presented a dreadful dream following a prepared choreography synchronised with the loud, irritating, and repetitive sound of an electrocardiogram.<sup>266</sup> This sound soon turned flat, like a broken record, to represent the death of a subject and the dancers immediately stopped and switched to a slow movement. The defeated sentiment reflecting current war situations was translated through such motion, whose purpose was to engage the viewers while the two artists stood apart at the side of the rooms. This performance took place in both spaces in a room with no chairs, while dancers moved around the viewers and the artists who were standing behind a thick transparent

<sup>265</sup> Adrian Bartolo, "Pain, Death, Art", *A Happening: A Collaboration between Pierre Portelli and Austin Camilleri* (Malta: September 1999), exhibition booklet.

<sup>266</sup> The dancers were part of the Body Art Group, as cited in the exhibition poster. Portelli Private Archive.

plastic curtain on both sides of the room. The key components of this set up were two large cow heads placed like icons and which probably represented Pain and Death.<sup>267</sup> According to Adrian Bartolo, who wrote the exhibition brochure essay:

This happening thus becomes a transformation. It transformed pain into death into art through a heightened emotional experience working on the human psyche. The external stimuli (particularly noise) intensify the spectators' inner sensitivity for an understanding of one's true self.<sup>268</sup>



**Fig. 40 Pierre Portelli and Austin Camilleri, *A Happening: A Collaboration between Pierre Portelli and Austin Camilleri*, 1999, Biagio Steps, Valletta, Malta. (Photo provided by Pierre Portelli)**

The artists for this particular piece moved beyond their comfort zone and decided to involve dancers and include sounds. The latter, according to Bartolo, played an important role to intensify the emotion of the present viewers.

*A Happening* was documented on film and it is interesting to see the visitors' reactions and emotions when seeing what was happening in front of them within the same space.<sup>269</sup> The organisation of the space and the lack of formal seating encouraged visitors to walk around the space to understand what was happening while looking for a location or a standpoint where they could experience *A Happening*. This was new to local art exhibition

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<sup>267</sup> Bartolo, "Pain, Death, Art." Unpaginated exhibition booklet.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> The film is within the artists' personal collection and it was only used for documentation purposes and not as an exhibit.

visitors since no other similar performance was held previously in Malta. It was a one-off example of a multidisciplinary art project with participatory aspects engaging with contemporary international events and dealing with social themes such as war, pain, and death. In this case, one can argue that the artists were looking beyond the local socio-political context of Malta and engaging with international events that affected the Maltese as part of a wider transnational community.

Camilleri subsequently produced *Stones*, the last participatory event of 1999 to involve the public. This exhibition, held between October 1 and November 7, can be considered one of the largest and most adventurous contemporary art projects by an individual artist in Malta up to this date. At the age of twenty-seven, Camilleri envisioned an exhibition that would encompass the two main islands of the archipelago, Malta and Gozo, by placing six huge stones in open public spaces on four points of the compass around Malta.<sup>270</sup>



**Fig. 41 Austin Camilleri, *Stones*, 1999, Maltese Stone, Valletta City Gate, Valletta, Malta. (Photo provided by Austin Camilleri)**

Camilleri's exhibition encapsulated numerous ideas, including geo-political considerations.<sup>271</sup> However, one of its main accomplishments was to intervene in public

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<sup>270</sup> The stones were located at Xwejini, Gozo, in the southwest of Malta and north of Gozo; Delimara, in the southeast of Malta; Dingli Cliffs in the southwest of Malta; and City Gate Valletta, in the northeast of Malta.

<sup>271</sup> At a very early stage of his career Camilleri consciously questioned bounded territories of national structures. The four compass directions or polarities might be indicative of something bigger, pointing to a wider

spaces and to imply that any space can become a museum where people can appreciate art. He achieved this by strategically placing stones around the Islands, including one in the location of the capital city [Figure 41]. For Camilleri, the space around the stones would immediately turn into a museum space where people could stop and dialogue with the works around them. Raphael Vella, the author of the essay featured in Camilleri's catalogue, compared this action to Joseph Kosuth's notion "that 'a work of art is a tautology' and that art is not defined morphologically." Vella continues to write that "yet [Camilleri's] gesture also implies that any museological space is tautological (because the 'spaces' of Malta and Gozo were intended to be seen as a museum by the artist)."<sup>272</sup> In his essay, Vella implies many things, including the use of art and art objects as a standalone; in this case, the stones work in every location. Vella offers an interpretation or a description of a museum which can have different implications. In this case the most important factor is the concept and the artwork which can be experienced without the architectural infrastructure of a museum and its accompanying codes of practice of viewing.

Camilleri's 'stones' were striking not only for their size but also for their colour, since these were all gilded in gold leaf. The artist chose stones of different sizes from different sites in Gozo and retained their original shape. According to Camilleri, the original nature of the stones dematerialised when they were removed from their sites and were gilded. Vella compared this gesture to the Duchampian concept of ready-mades; the stones were changed into artworks when the artist decided to gild them. Camilleri employed professional gilders

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geography that questions the ideas of the local/international, contextual/global, centre/periphery and 'Western/non-Western, particularly as he included the two main islands and positioned some of the *Stones* in the sea.

<sup>272</sup> Raphael Vella, "Stones in Stones in Stones," *Stones* (Malta: October-November 1999), exhibition catalogue. The author uses the term 'tautology' first to describe Camilleri's work and then to describe museological spaces. In the case of the works by Camilleri, the author might be referring to the repetitive stone shapes. However, the colour, size, and location make them unique. When describing the museological space as tautological, this has different implications by referring to the many locations, both in Malta and Gozo, that the artist showed his work.

who covered the stones with 24,000 sheaves of gold leaf, a material usually associated with Christian icons.<sup>273</sup>

When asked by the local art critic Victor Paul Borg why he was doing this and what he intended to achieve, the artist replied:

Don't ask me that. I don't know why I am doing this when I am not going to make five cents out of it. But as an artist I am concerned with putting an idea in form, and if the idea doesn't make it into form, doesn't translate into works, then I'll be frustrated.<sup>274</sup>

Apart from moving away from the idea of the self-contained gallery space, Camilleri wanted to directly engage with the people around Malta and Gozo by presenting the transformed *Stones*. The artist was interested in how the public would react when facing or coming in contact with the stones, apart from the related concept, process, and final action. This is also noted by Vella who writes:

As participants in a tantalizing ritual, the public is offered “unfinalized” matter at the same instant when this very matter is removed from sight, when stone becomes gold and gold becomes light. Is a stone only a stone? Not always; after Camilleri's intervention, it enters a different dimension, at least temporarily.<sup>275</sup>

Camilleri was acclaimed for this project by art aficionados in Malta but was heavily criticised by the public. In fact, it was probably the first time in Malta that someone wrote a letter to the *Times of Malta* criticising a contemporary artwork and impolitely asking the artist to remove the work.<sup>276</sup> A. Pisani Bonavia, the author of the letter, did not appreciate that the artist positioned a number of large stones at the entrance of Valletta, the capital city of Malta.

Camilleri as a young artist was exploring new ways of making and exhibiting art, especially in circumstances where little infrastructure was yet available locally and the project was largely self-funded. His art project was definitely a visible public gesture, or

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<sup>273</sup> The project was largely funded by the artist and private patrons who regularly supported the artist. Austin Camilleri Interview with the author on April 27, 2013.

<sup>274</sup> Victor Paul Borg, “Museum Malta,” *Weekender*, October 2, 1999.

<sup>275</sup> Vella, “Stones in Stones in Stones.” Unpaginated exhibition catalogue.

<sup>276</sup> A. Pisani Bonavia, “City Gate Stones,” *Times of Malta*, October 25, 1999. Bonavia's argument centered on the stones placed in Valletta.

“provocation” to use Portelli’s term, to those who had the power to change the cultural environment in Malta. *Stones* was also a deconstruction of traditional exhibition space and an opportunity to engage non-art gallery audiences.

If these three interventions can be seen to directly engage audiences with contemporary art through varying artist-led curatorial strategies, they can also be seen to be prefigured by an extraordinary exhibition at the beginning of 1999 that introduced a new context for contemporary art within the museum sector.

### **3.2 Contemporary Sensitivity on a National Scale: *Re-Interpreting Preti* at the National Museum of Malta, 1999**

In January 1999, the curators of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valetta presented *Re-Interpreting Preti*, which can be considered the first museum exhibition on a national scale where works by local contemporary artists were exhibited in public spaces and the public had the opportunity to engage with contemporary art practice alongside past art. The exhibition formed part of the events commemorating the 300th anniversary of the death of the Italian Baroque artist Mattia Preti (1613-1699) and the curators explored the idea of inviting Maltese contemporary artists to re-interpret Preti’s work.

Seventeen Maltese artists participated in the exhibition which lasted for one month from January 2 to February 2, 1999. The three venues were the National Museum of Fine Arts, St John’s Co-Cathedral, and St James Cavalier in Valletta. It seems that the artists took the theme and the locations as a challenge and responded with some provocative work, “a few of which have already raised eyebrows in local art circles.”<sup>277</sup> It is important to note that this was the first time that a contemporary art piece was exhibited at St John’s Co-Cathedral, which is a conventional catholic church and is described as a gem of Baroque art and

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<sup>277</sup> “Re-interpreting Preti,” *The Malta Independent*, January 24, 1999.



architecture [Figure 42].<sup>278</sup> It was also the first time that a contemporary art exhibition of such a large scale took place at the National Museum of Fine Arts. Only St James Cavalier had hosted contemporary annual summer collective art exhibitions in previous years but the museum exhibition was the first time that artists used its spaces for a site-specific installation.<sup>279</sup>



**Fig. 42 Pierre Portelli, *What was is... This is not a reflection*, 1999, mirror, 240 x 201 cm, St John Co-Cathedral, Valletta, Malta. (Image provided by Pierre Portelli)**

*Re-interpreting Preti* was perceived by many as too unconventional in approach. A prominent local art reviewer, Emanuel Fiorentino, indicated his scepticism when writing about the exhibition in *The Sunday Times of Malta*. He notes that “[t]his is an exhibition that is a liberation from the strictures of conventional aestheticism,” but he then proceeds to write that “there must be some kind of limit to which the orthodox approaches could treat the topic.” In his conclusion, Fiorentino writes:

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<sup>278</sup> To date, this is the only time that a contemporary art piece has been exhibited in the central nave of the cathedral. The work was *What was is... This is not a reflection*, by Pierre Portelli.

<sup>279</sup> Norbert Francis Attard exhibited within St James Cavalier. His site installation was called *Larger than Life* and part of it was exhibited at the Venice Biennale of 1999.

The question remains: how are we going to interpret these interpretations? If the artist had their chances, do we as spectators? In a sense, this collective effort wades in disorientated disappointment for the viewer.<sup>280</sup>

Fiorentino continues to note that:

the problem with the several exhibits is not so much the contemporary trend to go out of one's way to look different or even sensational to the extreme. It is more that, given the parameters set out by the organisational team, any connection, however tenuous, fails to come out in anything approaching comprehension.<sup>281</sup>

As this sole review of the exhibition indicates, even though contemporary art had already manifested itself on the islands, the media and the general public were not ready for such an initiative to come from a national museum. The criticism was heightened, especially when compared to the other collective exhibitions discussed above, precisely because the exhibition was organised by the National Museum. Generally, members of the public and especially those involved in the visual arts looked up to the museum and its curators, and this new artistic statement launched by the museum was a blow to many. On the one hand, it was the National Museum curators' duty to show the people 'fine' arts which reflected contemporary developments. On the other hand, little appears to have been done by the museum to prepare the public for the exhibition. For example, the museum could easily have supported the exhibition with interviews on local media and through public talks but no such activities took place.

Given that this was the first contemporary exhibition organised by the National Museum, more information could have been included on site, including extended captions or information panels. Instead, a substantial catalogue was available with an introduction by Dominic Cutajar, an essay by Adrian Bartolo on contemporary art, and another by Theresa Vella on Mattia Preti, together with images and captions of the work exhibited. The reception

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<sup>280</sup> Emmanuel Fiorentino, "Some Wayward Ways of Reinterpreting," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, January 17, 1999.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid*, p. 24.

of the exhibition was almost non-existent with only one reference in the press to the catalogue and two reviews in a local newspaper.<sup>282</sup>

In the catalogue introduction, the museum curator Dominic Cutajar wrote: “the Museum of Fine Arts has always intended to present an event in which a substantial group of our contemporary artists would be asked to contemplate this Preti experience.”<sup>283</sup> He proceeded to mention that such an exhibition was so successful that they managed to have exhibits not only within the museum premises but also at the Co Cathedral of St John, where some of the best of Mattia Preti’s work is available, and at St James Cavalier. Extremely positive about this experience, Cutajar concluded that:

the current Preti commemorations have provided a crucial moment of serious reflection on those aspects of Malta’s art springing from our past that are still of vital relevance to our contemporary culture.<sup>284</sup>

The catalogue essay by the museum curator and art historian Theresa Vella reviewed Mattia Preti’s achievements as an artist. This was followed by an essay by museum curator and art historian Adrian Bartolo with the convoluted and inaccessible title of “Art to Art/Art against Art: the Artist Meets the Historian as a Postmodern Qualification in the Art of the Nineties.” Here, Bartolo dealt with how postmodern scholars and artists of the decade questioned the history of passing time, which created an invitation to re-create and reinterpret issues such as truth and fiction. This extensive critical essay reflects Bartolo’s awareness of contemporary global art developments, particularly in his mention of the re-interpretation of the works of the old masters by British artists, the Chapman Brothers and Damien Hirst. The essay was positively received by artists and young researchers who were interested in the subject but

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<sup>282</sup> Fiona Galea Debono, “‘Re-Interpreting Preti’ exhibition at Fine Arts Museum,” *Times of Malta*, January 8, 1999.

<sup>283</sup> *Re-interpreting Preti: Contemporary work by Maltese Artists*, Theresa M. Vella and Adrian Bartolo, introduced by Dominic Cutajar (Valletta, Malta: National Museum of Fine Arts, January - February 2, 1999), exhibition catalogue.

<sup>284</sup> Vella and Bartolo, *Re-interpreting Preti: Contemporary work by Maltese Artists*. p. 1.

was largely incomprehensible for a wider public.<sup>285</sup> No comparison was made between Maltese contemporary art and international developments, and no detailed comment or argument was offered about the contemporary work presented in the exhibition. Further, although the catalogue illustrated all the works on show, only basic details were included in the captions.

The exhibition consisted of installations by Pierre Portelli, Norbert Francis Attard, Vince Briffa, and Austin Camilleri; paintings by Caesar Attard, Isabelle Borg, Madeleine Gera, and Anthony Spagnol; mixed media works by Anthony Calleja, Gabriel Caruana, Marco Cremona, Savio Deguara, Charles Gatt, Joseph L. Mallia, and Raphael Vella; and the photographic work of Pierre Portelli, Tom Scicluna, and Darrin Zammit Lupi. [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue - Pages 14 & 15 Catalogue No. 20]. This collective exhibition involved veteran artist and teacher Mallia (b. 1937), who worked both in painting and mixed media; radical experimental artist Caruana, whose three-dimensional works are mostly ceramic; as well as younger painters such as Spagnol (b. 1960) and Gera (b. 1960), and a number of artists from different generations who decided to turn to installation art. This included Attard, Briffa, Portelli, and Camilleri.

The above-mentioned seventeen artists all took this opportunity to create new stimulating work related to the exhibition theme of Preti. With their responses, some of the artists also tried to challenge the viewer by presenting thought-provoking works across all media. Nonetheless, the installation and the site-specific art works were the ones regarded as unconventional in approach.<sup>286</sup> An example of an unusual two-dimensional work was that by Mallia, *Extrapolating Preti's Dreams of Doom* (1998). Here, the artist combined a number of

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<sup>285</sup> While interviewing artists and asking about this particular exhibition, I was informed that Bartolo's essay was well received. This was also confirmed by Dominic Cutajar who was the Curator of the National Museum at the time. Peers and artists of a younger generation were fond of Bartolo's writing.

<sup>286</sup> Fiorentino, "Some Wayward Ways of Reinterpreting." *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 17 January, 1999. Reviews by Fiorentino suggest the newness of installation in Malta was a major factor in his discomfit with the exhibition. Fiorentino passed away in 2008.

symbols related to Preti's artworks and unconventional lifestyle and represented these on a metal and wooden-looking structure. The composition has a surreal feel due to the accentuated details and vivid palette [Figure 43].



**Fig. 43 Joseph L. Mallia, *Extrapolating Preti's Dreams of Doom*, 1998, acrylic and oil on canvas, 47 x 76 cm, National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, Malta. (Photo provided by Joseph Paul Cassar)**

Another thought-provoking work was Vince Briffa's installation of *Tabernacle for Voyeurs* (1998-1999). The artist invited the viewer to kneel on a *prie dieu* and gaze into a box that had crude images of the human body appropriated from images of Preti's *Doubting Thomas* [Figure 44]. Briffa reinterpreted the iconographic status of the human body inspired by the inquisitive analogue of Thomas when doubting Christ's flesh wounds.



**Fig. 44 Vince Briffa, *Tabernacle for Voyeurs*, 1999, wood and photography, 125 x 54 cm, National Museum of Fine Arts. Valletta, Malta. (Photo provided by Vince Briffa)**

The concept behind this exhibition — which was to create a dialogue between the works of Preti, a widely recognised Baroque artist, and contemporary Maltese artists—was an intriguing one. This was the first attempt to showcase contemporary Maltese art as a response to its artistic legacy through a Baroque artist. This was also the first time a multi-site exhibition was initiated by the most significant art institution of the time in Malta, the National Museum of Fine Arts. If this initiative can be seen as part of contemporary artists' engagement with the world around them—in this case, the power of Malta's Baroque heritage—and an attempt to bring local and international contemporary art together, it also reflected a lack of awareness of building audiences for contemporary art.<sup>287</sup> More interpretative aids were required to enable a wider audience to understand what the exhibition proposed, especially in the absence of an education department within the museum.

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<sup>287</sup> The number of visitors admitted to the Fine Arts Museum in 1998 was c36,000 in total according to the Museum's Annual Report, 1999, p. 211. There is no record of audience attendance at *Re-interpreting Preti* as temporary exhibitions within public buildings were free of charge and visitor numbers were not monitored.

However, it is significant that museum curators also saw a vital need to showcase contemporary Maltese art through new curatorial practices that located contemporary work within the history of past art in Malta and sought to create a dialogue for new audiences. In this sense, the aspirations of museum curators and artist curators could be seen as aligned in a joint endeavour to showcase and promote contemporary art in Malta with the general public.

### **3.3 The 48<sup>th</sup> Edition of the Venice Biennale**

The most controversial exhibition of the 1990s was when a group of Maltese artists represented the country at the 48th edition of the Venice Biennale in 1999. Here, for the first time, the Ministry of Education and Culture together with the curators of the Fine Arts Museum (which at the time was part of the Museum Department) decided to participate in such an internationally renowned event. Since this was the first event of its kind after Malta's independence in 1964, there was a lot of anticipation and excitement; this is also one of the many reasons why such an event is deemed extremely important in the history of contemporary art in Malta.<sup>288</sup> Unfortunately, owing to a number of negative occurrences following the event, this was the first time that the Venice Biennale featured a Maltese Pavilion and it was not to be repeated again until 2017.

The Biennale was the brainchild of Adrian Bartolo, who at the time was assistant curator to Dominic Cutajar at the Fine Arts Museum South Street, Valletta, and author of the above-mentioned essay in the *Re-Interpreting Preti* catalogue. Bartolo's ardent enthusiasm for contemporary art was evident to Cutajar, who did his best to convince the government at the time to commit to promoting Malta and Maltese artists on an international scale by having a pavilion at the most celebrated biennial of the art world.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Although Malta gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1964, the British monarch Queen Elizabeth II remained Queen of Malta until the country became a Republic in 1974.

<sup>289</sup> Unfortunately, no one in Malta had experience of such a major international event involving substantial money and resources. By 1999, Malta had experienced its third election in a decade and had no financial support from other countries, unlike the present day situation where Malta is part of the European Union.

The Minister of Education and Culture, Dr Louis Galea, and the government of the day accepted the proposal and a committee was set up. The committee had to have a good knowledge of current art trends and methods abroad as well as an understanding of what the curator of this international exhibition required.<sup>290</sup> This was a new adventure for the local artistic community and tough decisions had to be made. The committee chiefly consisted of Fr. Peter Serracino Inglott—a key figure in recent Maltese history whose influence was evident in different walks of life, including the arts in general—who acted as chairman of the committee; the two curators at the Fine Arts Museum, Cutajar and Bartolo; and Kenneth Wain, the philosopher, educator, author, and art organiser.<sup>291</sup>

Even though the group was chaired by Fr. Serracino Inglott, most of the research and logistics were done by Bartolo. The committee met only a few times.<sup>292</sup> After the Committee was briefed about the project, members carried out some research on the last Venice Biennale, and long discussions about the local art scene followed. Subsequently, the committee created a shortlist of individuals who could be the most appropriate candidates.<sup>293</sup> It seems that the main criterion was that the work had to follow the then current method of practice that was popular at international art exhibitions, namely installation art.<sup>294</sup>

After contacting the artists by phone, at least three members from the committee met the artists at their studios or homes. According to the selected artists—Norbert Francis Attard, Raymond Pitre (b.1940), and Vince Briffa—it was clear that their work should show

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<sup>290</sup> In 1999 and 2001, Harald Szeemann directed two editions in a row, the forty-eighth and forty-ninth editions, bringing in a larger representation of artists from Asia and Eastern Europe and of younger artists than usual. He also expanded the exhibition into several newly restored spaces of the Arsenale. For more information, see the forty-eighth and forty-ninth editions of the Venice Biennale Catalogues.

<sup>291</sup> No Committee documents have been located. According to Kenneth Wain (interviewed on May 8, 2014) no written document was ever produced and everything was communicated verbally. The archives of the National Museum of Fine Arts have no reference to such documents.

<sup>292</sup> Kenneth Wain Interview with the author on May 8, 2014; Dominic Cutajar Interview with the author on September 26, 2015.

<sup>293</sup> Information initially gathered from the three selected artists and later confirmed by one of the committee members.

<sup>294</sup> Dominic Cutajar, “Malta’s participation in the Biennale di Venezia and the selection process,” *The Malta Independent*, July 21, 1999.



engagement with new artistic developments in Europe and North America, and that it was an opportunity to exhibit the works of Maltese artists living in Malta on international grounds. Not all of the artists knew who Adrian Bartolo was since he had not long been assigned with the duties of assistant curator. However, the presence of the other committee members was definitely a reflection of how important this project was.<sup>295</sup>

The process was rapid due to a number of circumstances. According to Dominic Cutajar, the National Museum of Fine Arts became aware that Malta could participate in March 1999, following the new arrangements in which the organisers of the Biennale permitted smaller nations to have their own pavilion. This new condition was immediately communicated to the ministry for consideration even though there were two main difficulties, among many others. Firstly, there was no specific government budget vote allocated to cover the necessary costs. Secondly, the timeframe was extremely short.<sup>296</sup> Selected artists had to be communicated to the Venice Biennale organisers by April 9 which meant that the selection committee had only two weeks to process and announce the nominated artists.<sup>297</sup> Nonetheless, the minister decided that Malta should participate as part of the millennium celebrations.<sup>298</sup>

The committee produced a shortlist of ten to twelve artists and the final process was swift.<sup>299</sup> Naturally artists who had neither been contacted nor shortlisted were disappointed and wanted matters to be clarified. Those who were most dissatisfied with the outcome of the

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<sup>295</sup> Norbert Francis Attard and Raymond Pitre both claimed that they met Bartolo for the first time on this occasion. Attard Interview with the author on April 6, 2013; Pitre Interviewed with the author on March 30, 2013.

<sup>296</sup> The budget allocated was Lm20,000 - 30,000. In 2019, this is equivalent to c €50,000 - 70,000 or c £45,000 - 62,000.

<sup>297</sup> Cutajar, "Malta's participation in the Biennale di Venezia and the selection process." *The Malta Independent*, July 21, 1999.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> During interviews, Kenneth Wain and the artists confirmed that ten to twelve artists had been shortlisted. Wain interview with the author, 2014; Vince Briffa interview with the author on April 3, 2013; Attard and Pitre Interviews as above, footnote 42.

selection were among the most popular artists of this decade, including the painters Luciano Micallef (b. 1954) and Esprit Barthelet (1919-1999) who voiced their concerns publicly.<sup>300</sup>

Cutajar made it clear that the Venice Biennale selection committee had to choose works which would accord with the perceived postmodern character of the Biennale.<sup>301</sup> This position led to a set of criteria which limited the choice of the art projects. According to Wain, some artists were not shortlisted because they were practising abstract painting which was popular on the Maltese Islands but had fallen out of favour in the dominant cosmopolitan art centres where the emphasis was on the ability to communicate contemporary issues.<sup>302</sup> This was popularly transmitted through works generally called ‘installations’ where various media—including performance, sound and other activities—were fused together. This way of interpreting visual arts within the wider scope of international scenarios was the norm but in Malta this was relatively new. For this reason it was difficult to accept locally that work presented on an international level had to work hand in hand with what was popularly identified as installation art.

Apart from this tendency to resist change, one has to keep in mind that by this time Malta had undergone its third election of that decade, as previously mentioned. Citizens and politicians were under pressure to commit to fresh duties and admit to ongoing difficulties. Together with the difficult psychological situation that the main political parties were experiencing, limited budgets were hypothetically an issue that had an impact on the Biennale. The Biennale also caused several misunderstandings and disapprovals among the various artistic circles.<sup>303</sup> Planning for the project was at its peak when a small number of

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<sup>300</sup> Luciano Micallef, “Malta and the Venice Biennale,” *The Sunday Times of Malta*, June 13, 1999. Micallef asks a number of questions of the selection committee; Mario Cassar, “Luciano Micallef: Ilsiens minflokk pinzell,” *Il-Mument*, November 21, 1999. A section of this article is dedicated to Micallef’s views on the selection process of the Maltese Biennale Pavilion; “House Salutes Esprit Barthelet,” *Times of Malta*, July 6, 1999. The central part of the article notes that “[t]he late painter was somewhat disturbed with the way Maltese artists were treated when it came to making the selection for the participation of the Venice Biennale.”

<sup>301</sup> Cutajar. “Malta’s participation in the Biennale di Venezia and the selection process.”

<sup>302</sup> Kenneth Wain made it clear that artists still practising abstract art were automatically dismissed. Wain interview with the author, 2014.

<sup>303</sup> “Mediaeval Selection Process,” *Times of Malta*, July 14, 1999.

artists participated in a television programme to express their discontent.<sup>304</sup> A letter from the opposition party was sent to all Maltese artists in which it stated that the situation was not acceptable and all the necessary support would be given to the artists that had complained.<sup>305</sup>

This state of affairs was extremely uncomfortable for the three selected artists. Moreover, the person who fully believed in this project, Adrian Bartolo, was unexpectedly diagnosed with cancer. Throughout the process, he was neither mentally nor physically strong enough to assist the artists and to continue the project, and half way through the exhibition, on August 16, he passed away.<sup>306</sup> Nonetheless, he wrote an article in *The Sunday Times of Malta* in July 1999, where he explained the procedures and invited the general public to visit the pavilion.<sup>307</sup> He also wrote the section on the Maltese Pavilion for the exhibition catalogue.<sup>308</sup>

When Bartolo died the job to complete the project was given to Dennis Vella who had returned to work at the museum after two years of absence.<sup>309</sup> Vella was appointed one of the curators of the museum and the project leader of this exhibition in the midst of all the chaos. This was an extremely uncomfortable situation for Vella who had to assume all responsibility and solve problems that continued to increase. Not being involved from the beginning made the situation much worse for him.<sup>310</sup> Contacts with the administration office at the Venice Biennale were established by Bartolo and little was known about them by the participating

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<sup>304</sup> Non-selected and selected artists were invited on a local television station. The discussion turned against the three selected artists. The exhibition committee members did not attend. No exact data is available on the broadcast but the three artists—Briffa, Attard, and Pitre—mention this incident in their respective interviews.

<sup>305</sup> Unfortunately, no record of this letter is evident to date. The information was provided by some of the artists in interview.

<sup>306</sup> Dominic Cutajar, who supported Bartolo and the project, consequently became responsible. As curator of the Fine Arts Museum he received an enquiry on a number of allegations related to the selection process from the Maltese Court of Justice. A letter was drafted by his lawyer. This enquiry was also published on a local newspaper. See Tanya Sciberras Camilleri LL.D., “Malta fil-Biennale ta’ Venezia,” *Il-Mument*, December 5, 1999.

<sup>307</sup> Adrian Bartolo, “Destination, departure: The Venice Biennale,” *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 11, 1999.

<sup>308</sup> Harald Szeemann, *La Biennale di Venezia: 48a Esposizione internazionale d'arte : Dapertutto = Aperto over all* (Venice, Italy: Marsilio, 1999), p.110.

<sup>309</sup> Dennis Vella passed away in 2009 so no interview took place in relation to this event.

<sup>310</sup> Author’s interview with Briffa as above.

artists or by Vella himself.<sup>311</sup> Communication was difficult; phone calls were expensive and email correspondence was just beginning. According to the artists, at their first post-selection meeting they were informed that everything had been settled on their behalf in Venice. The pavilion and any necessary works were to be sorted out by the Biennale maintenance team and they would visit the space to start installing their works by the agreed date.<sup>312</sup> Upon their arrival in May 1999, the space was still unfinished and was much smaller than they had expected. According to both Briffa and Attard, the space was sufficient for one piece but they still displayed two large installations with monitors, sound, and two metal structures.<sup>313</sup>

The curators at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Malta were informed, but since the opening was due shortly and the only communication about the space had been made by Bartolo, Vella and the artists did whatever was possible. However, it quickly became apparent that the budget allocated for this project was inadequate for such a large-scale event. This created more tension between Vella and the artists. Encountering all sorts of difficulties, the artists nonetheless managed to install their works, while the short abstract written by Bartolo together with images of the exhibited artwork were published in the Biennale catalogue. On the first days of the opening, which included the inauguration, the participating artists realised that little had been spent on the opening ceremony, promotional material, and refreshments. Adding to this situation, no politician, member of the ministry, or representative from the Museum of Fine Arts turned up for the opening. The artists felt that they had been forgotten, especially after the conflictual circumstances they had endured.<sup>314</sup>

This situation was a clear indication that the Maltese government was not prepared for the complex co-ordination that the Venice Biennale required at a national level, together with

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<sup>311</sup> Dominic Cutajar interview with the author on 26 September 2015 and Briffa interview with the author.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid; Author's interview with Attard and Pitre as above.

<sup>313</sup> Briffa and Attard interview with the author.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid; Pitre interview with the author.

the administrative and financial commitment involved. Malta lacked the infrastructure to fully support the desire to promote contemporary Maltese art in a wider global context.

The works presented at the Venice Biennale consisted of a video installation entitled *Hermes* (1999) by Briffa, a large installation with video and motorised pendulum entitled *Larger than Life II* (1999) by Attard, and two metal structures bearing the title of *Guerriero I* and *Guerriero II* (1993-1999) by Pitre.

The primary concern in Briffa's *Hermes* is biological time and its effects on human beings. The title, which bears reference to the Olympian god in Greek mythology, is an indication of his interest in the transition of crossing boundaries. The ability of Hermes as a god was to operate in the three worlds: the underworld, the surface of the earth, and heaven, apart from being close to humankind. The association with Hermes's qualities is about layers of meaning. The strongest connotation, when placing Briffa within his Maltese Roman Catholic roots, is the connection of the work with the biblical narration from the Book of Genesis. This is evident in the images repeatedly shown on the screen of closeups of identifiable individuals, visible from the chest upwards, that lie on a ground covered with soil [Figure 45]. The connotation of the bond that exists between the ground and humanity is found in one of the most popular books of the Bible, in Genesis 3:19: "By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat until you return to the ground from which you were made. For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return." Briffa reinterprets this imperative section from the Old Testament using a new medium which can reach a larger audience, including a local one that can relate to this religious context. To highlight this biblical reference, two panels covered with soil were placed on both sides of the screen that framed the images like a triptych form.

Briffa, who at the time was often identified as an audio-visual artist, utilised the video medium to evoke sensations that are usually only read or heard with the use of the word. The subjects of the visuals are men, women, and a child that act like aural ghosts, all of whom

disappear and reappear in a background where soil becomes the symbol of humankind's nemesis: created from the soil to which one is eventually destined to return. Responding to the flexibility of the video medium, Briffa included sound to offer different opportunities for the audience to become part of the work and better understand the piece. Breathing sounds, for example, were included to assure the audience that the internal organs were functioning. This is a confirmation of life winning over death. Even though the video is the main component, there is no narration or plot, no beginning or end;<sup>315</sup> the tape continues repeating the same scenes and sounds.<sup>316</sup> Deliberately, there is no direction or progress, and so birth and death come to overlap one another.

When placing such work within the Maltese context, ambiguity might have been felt due to the medium used by the artist. Painting and sculpture were still the most commonly accepted form of visual art by both the cultural institutions located in Malta and the general public. Video artwork presented problems of display, was less appealing to collectors, and is indeed still difficult to comprehend in Malta. It was indicative of these difficulties that it was only in 2010 that *Hermes* was purchased by the government to form part of the national collection.



**Fig. 45 Vince Briffa, *Hermes*, 1999, video art projection, Malta's Pavilion, 48th Biennale di Venezia. Venice, Italy. (Photo provided by Vince Briffa)**

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<sup>315</sup> For an alternative interpretation see Bill Viola, "Video Black: The Mortality of the Image," in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, edited by Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York, USA: Aperture Foundation Inc., 1990), p. 482.

<sup>316</sup> Raphael Vella, "An Endoscopy of a Relic," *Relic* (Valletta, Malta: National Museum of Fine Arts, 1999), exhibition catalogue.

As with Briffa's work, time is one of the main themes in Norbert Francis Attard's work *Larger than Life II*. This was initially exhibited by the artist in January of the same year in *Reinterpreting Preti*, held in the former fortress of St. James Cavalier. Using images from the works of the Baroque artist, Attard composed a short-edited video. Instead of showing this video on a white screen, a commonplace television set was purposely used to place the images within a standard rectangular shape, similar to popular painterly work found on the Maltese Islands. The television set was placed on a pendulum swing.

Bartolo remarked in the Biennale Catalogue that Attard was making use of the concept known as 'simultaneous times':

Modernism was obsessed with the present, whereas post modernism presented a doctrine of a lack of contemporary time. Norbert Attard's installation is engagingly concerned with what the academia refers to as the concept of 'simultaneous times'. On a swinging pendulum sits a monitor which televises a past installation put up by the artist. In itself the subject matter of the installation piece being documented was inspired by the work of Mattia Preti (1613-99).<sup>317</sup>

While the television set swings like a pendulum, another large image is projected at the back. This becomes a distorted spiral-like interpretation of the works shown on the television screen [Figure 46]. Here the traditional religious composition made out of saintly figures changes to something that is difficult to perceive. On the dark backdrop that surrounds the pendulum and the projection at the back, two other images are projected, one on either side. The images are a representation of angels, which were also inspired by the work of Mattia Preti. Two main sources are used to light up the space; a white light in the direction of the television set is suspended high up and seems to be part of the pendulum while red candles are placed on the floor.

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<sup>317</sup> Szeemann, *La Biennale di Venezia: 48a Esposizione internazionale d'arte : Dapertutto = Aperto over all*, 1999, p. 110.



**Fig. 46 Norbert Francis Attard, *Larger than Life II*, 1999, 4m-high motorized pendulum, monitor, video projector, two VHS players, Malta's Pavilion, 48th Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy. (Courtesy of the Venice Biennale Archives)**

The installation was a contemporary reinterpretation of the popular cycle of works by Mattia Preti, found in St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta, a building whose architecture details and paintings leave a huge impact on visitors. The impact of seventeenth-century art in Malta acted as a source of inspiration for this contemporary artist in the 1990s. The period when this work was produced was of great significance within the local and national context, since the 1990s was the decade when Maltese artists began to reflect a more contemporary mentality which was rarely found before. Directly and indirectly, the people and the artists on the Islands had always been influenced by Baroque aesthetics. With this work, within the context of the international Biennale, Attard established a link with the Maltese and regional contemporary mentality.

Both works discussed above have an obvious religious link and it is interesting to note that in *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* by James Elkins, published in 2004, the author argues the improbability of religiously inspired works in contemporary art. The author discusses this matter within an international western art context and points out that only anti-religious contemporary art images end up being published in art journals. He supports his argument by noting that religion is also absent in texts related to modernism and



postmodernism. Significantly, Elkins visited Malta to give two public talks in May 2006.<sup>318</sup>

In 2008, at the Biola Art Symposium, held at the School of Art Institute, Chicago, Elkins referred to his visit to Malta and included some examples of contemporary Maltese artworks in his presentation, although he did not discuss the works in detail.<sup>319</sup> The key point here is that the contemporary art works of Briffa and Attard respond to their specific social context, a context that may not be readily known or understood in the wider arena of contemporary art practice, and this produces perhaps inevitable tensions and misunderstandings surrounding Malta's contributions to contemporary art.

By contrast, Raymond Pitre's structures are completely different. By the late 1960s, the artist was already using ready-made material to create structures although these were never exhibited publicly in Malta. The Biennale structures were made from steel remnants from the Second World War and clearly carried the marks of soldiers' bullets. The perforated rusted steel sheets changed their original character when the artist decided to encapsulate them in a frame made from resin and metal that looks like the upper body of a human figure. These humanlike metal figures were placed upright with the help of a simple base within the dark space (necessary for the other audio-visual installation). These structures, which now look like an abstracted form of a human being, are entitled *Guerriero I* and *Guerriero II* (the Italian word *guerriero* meaning 'warrior') [Figure 47]. The artist might have produced two monuments to commemorate the atrocity of the Second World War, and given the Italian titles, these might be a monument to Italian soldiers sent to fight in an unknown land. Sounds of bullets were also incorporated into the work.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> "Renowned American Historian in Malta," *The Sunday Times of Malta*, May 30, 2006. Professor James Elkins delivered a lecture entitled "On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art" at 7.00 pm on May 2, 2006 at St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity in Valletta while another lecture was held at the University of Malta during the day entitled "Why Art Cannot Be Taught".

<sup>319</sup> James Elkins, "On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art," online video, *Youtube*, accessed May 10, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U88POHX1Jo4>

<sup>320</sup> The works by Pitre reflect a postmodern philosophy even though these are not an installation. *Guerriero I* and *Guerriero II* contradicts what was usually exhibited in Malta and referred to as modern before this date. Here Pitre is using personal and historic references related to Maltese history to present a political work which reflects past and recent wars affecting Malta, the Mediterranean and himself as an artist.



**Fig. 47 Raymond Pitre, *Guerriero I*, 1991-1999, metal, 180 x 180 cm. (Photo provided by Raymond Pitre)**

From the perspective of the artist, the opportunity to present such a work at the Venice Biennale highlighted significant issues about the rupture or disjuncture between regional and international understandings of contemporary art. Pitre, the oldest of the three artists, had suffered the unkindness of a local Maltese mentality towards his assemblages and installations.<sup>321</sup> With limited cultural experience of international developments, the general public, as well as representatives of Malta's cultural institutions, were conservative in their taste. In Malta, Pitre's longstanding artistic career had been built on his numerous presidential and political portraits, including those of a number of prime ministers. Public protocols have to be followed for such portraits and he wanted to please his patrons, Pitre restricted these artworks to conservative representations. His 'other' body of work was rarely shown in Malta and, even today, Pitre claims that he has to keep most of his works hidden in his studio.<sup>322</sup> Strikingly, the two steel structures that would have been aesthetically unacceptable in Malta, since no 'beautiful' characteristic is apparent, were placed in the centre of the Pavilion. This is visible in the pictures taken by the Venice Biennale organisers [Figure 48].

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<sup>321</sup> Pitre interview with the author.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.



**Fig. 48 Raymond Pitre, *Guerriero I and Guerriero II*, 1999, 48th Biennale di Venezia. Venice, Italy. (Courtesy of the Venice Biennale Archives)**

This Janus effect was later commented upon by Elkins in the previously mentioned 2008 symposium, where he stated that the Maltese contemporary artist has to have two different personas: the contemporary artist that works in relation to ongoing developments in the visual arts, and another persona that has to work within a conservative religious scenario. In Pitre's case, he had to work to please heads of state so as to safeguard patronship. This conflict between the local and the international is a dominant theme that recurs throughout the history of modern art in Malta from at least the 1960s and is important for the history of contemporary art from the 1990s onwards.

As indicated above, the artists had little support from the Maltese government in relation to marketing. In fact, no launch or reception was held in Venice owing to the organisational chaos and no press release was issued in Malta. A few weeks after the opening, a poorly attended press conference was held at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Malta to explain the matter in relation to the organisational issues rather than to promote the exhibition.<sup>323</sup> In July 1999, a number of articles in various local newspapers dedicated a full page to the exhibition. Here, no review or analysis was done on the works. Rather, the

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<sup>323</sup> Raphael Vella, "The importance of being Post-Modern," *The Malta Independent*, July 09, 1999.

journalists gave a description of the Venice Biennale, and the Maltese artists and their works received only a cursory mention.<sup>324</sup> An exception was Josanne Cassar of *The Malta Independent* who met the artists and discussed the works. In her interview with the three artists, apart from discussing the concept behind the artworks, she dealt with the different facets of the project. In her article she quotes Norbert Francis Attard saying that the Venice Biennale “is an event in which countries are participating and not individual artists. Artists are representing their country, so it’s up to the country to take part. It does not depend on the government of the country to take the initiative.”<sup>325</sup> Another comment by Vince Briffa explained part of the selection process and the nature of the Venice Biennale in general:

The committee had a specific brief. They were looking for a certain type of art which is post-modernist and very much today’s work. The nature of the Biennale is that you can be a very good artist and not have work which fits into its philosophy or direction.<sup>326</sup>

The most detailed and critical article was by Raphael Vella in *The Malta Independent* which laid bare the whole scenario of the exhibition. Vella highlighted a number of matters including how the committee and Minister for Culture presented their argument when confronted with negative criticism. Their argument was that postmodern art was preferred because it was seen to conform to the general philosophy of the Italian Biennale. Vella, in opposition, argued that artists should not reinvent themselves to play the part of foreigners, nor should they exert effort to become homogenous with other countries.<sup>327</sup> Vella also recognised the tension in globalization when the local and the global meet since it creates uniformity and erases cultural identities.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Adrian Stivala, “Malta lura il-Biennale ta’ Venezia wara 41 sena,” *Il-Hadd Magazine*, July 11, 1999; “Three Maltese Artists exhibit at the Biennale,” *Times of Malta*, July 16, 1999.

<sup>325</sup> Josanne Cassar, “Transcending Time and Space,” *The Malta Independent*, July 9, 1999.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>327</sup> Vella, “The importance of being Post-Modern.”

<sup>328</sup> Much later in “The Global Art World” conference held in 2006 organised by ZKM, Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg argued that global art is a contemporary art development. See Andrea Buddensieg, ‘Editorial’, in Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, (eds.) *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, (Karlsruhe: ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe and Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009).

Vella strengthened his argument by placing this in the context of the fact that art in Malta and Maltese identity followed that of southern Europe.<sup>329</sup> According to Vella, Maltese contemporary art occupies a different position from that of artists in India, the Maori in New Zealand or Latinos in the United States, since for these artists identity is a much more contested concept. Instead, Vella described Maltese identity as a thing in motion feeding on nostalgic images from the past but also a more complex flux of ideas and desires. Malta, even though it has been a republic since 1964, was still close to the colonisers which had ruled the islands. The attachment to the British Colony and the Order of St John, for example, is visible in the use of imagery associated to the British Crown or the Grandmasters' ruling, mainly the image of the crown and the eight-pointed cross respectively. From a contemporary art perspective, Vella is the first to make this argument about Malta and contemporary artists' identity,<sup>330</sup> putting forward the concept of hybridity by discussing both local and global conditions which interact to form Malta's identity.<sup>331</sup>

The three participants in the Venice Biennale are still considered to be among the most influential Maltese artists in Malta. In their retrospective assessments of this event, both Vince Briffa and Norbert Francis Attard admit that this was a significant experience for them as artists and as Maltese citizens, but at the same time they felt it had been a missed opportunity for Malta and its artistic community.<sup>332</sup> In effect, the staging of a Maltese Pavilion in 1999 backfired. Also, when interviewed by the author in 2013, the artists' perception was that Malta was not ready or prepared to go through the organisational and

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

<sup>330</sup> One must remember that for Malta this type of argument in 1999 was in an embryonic state even though Malta and its postcolonial history have long been socially and politically important. Vella might not have been aware of the ongoing theoretical developments including important papers by Homi Bhabha, "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences" (1995) and Nestor Garcia Canclini, "Culturas híbridas: estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad" (1989), only translated into English in 2005.

<sup>331</sup> The idea of interaction between globalisation and past traditional customs works in line with Nestor García Canclini argument. See Nestor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, (Minnesota, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

<sup>332</sup> Briffa, Attard; and Pitre interview with the author as cited above.

financial ordeal of formally exhibiting at the Venice Biennale. Within two years, the climate changed and Malta's re-participation at the Venice Biennale was announced in 2015.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

By 1999, several Maltese artists and the museum curators were aware of contemporary art developments abroad. This is clear through the types of art produced, including art beyond the gallery, site-specific work, and installation work, and the language that artists, curators and certain critics were using. From my analysis, the most evident aspect is that artists and curators sought to build bridges between the internationalisation of art and local audiences through a number of attempts to engage audiences and increase opportunities for encounters with contemporary art.

Museum curators tried to engage with audiences by using popular themes, which included religious art, in combination with the 300<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the death of Mattia Preti, a Baroque artist whose work is popular among local Roman Catholic communities. This theme inspired a number of local artists working in different genres to create and present strong statements, some of which were perceived as too unconventional for local audiences. Curators also actively sought to engage with multiple potential publics by selecting three venues for the exhibition, including St John's Co Cathedral, a space popular with both locals and foreigners. Nonetheless—and probably due to the newness of the project, and the lack of promotion and tools for interpretation—the presented works were not well received by the public and the art aficionados, including art reviewers.

A similar response emerged later in the same year when Malta participated for the first time as an independent nation at the Venice Biennale. In spite of these negative criticism, the difficulties the selected artists had to face, and the overall dispiriting impact on contemporary art practice in Malta, having a national pavilion for the first time was highly significant for artists and the art sector in Malta who longed for such an opportunity and

hoped that this would be achieved again, as I discuss later in chapter seven. The Biennale was also important because it set international standards in contemporary art practice, at least among the few aware of what was happening abroad, and it brought to the foreground the question of what was contemporary Maltese art in a global context. As discussed, Raphael Vella recognised the dual dangers of Maltese artists reinventing themselves to play the part of foreigners or of producing homogenous works that lose their local distinctiveness. For Vella, the recognition of the hybridity of contemporary Maltese art was a way of avoiding these two extremes by recognising simultaneously both local and global conditions and producing what Irit Rogoff would call “a host of new regional imaginations.”<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Rogoff, Irit, “Geo-Cultures. Circuits of Arts and Globalizations”, *Open Magazine* No.16/2009, p. 115.

## Chapter 4

### New Spaces for Contemporary Art and Cultural Debate at the Turn of the Millennium

This chapter provides a detailed overview of what was happening in the visual arts and culture scene in Malta at the turn of the millennium when several major cultural reforms were initiated. In the first part of the chapter, I examine the processes Malta underwent to become part of the European Union and detail how Malta and its economy radically changed between 1999 and 2003 with the privatisation of public entities, and analyse how these changes specifically affected the cultural sector.

A major stimulus to change was the two-week convention organised in 1999 entitled ‘Malta and the Arts – Perspectives for the New Millennium’. The significant outcomes of this convention will be discussed, including the creation of the Centre for Creativity which is central to this chapter. This new space aimed to fill in several lacunae in the creative sector and one of the objectives of this chapter is to analyse the role of the space and how it assisted in the growth of contemporary art in Malta. To do so, I focus on a sixteen-year period of the Centre’s activities from its inception in 2000 to 2015. This includes consideration of a selected number of exhibitions that I argue were crucial to the development of contemporary art in Malta, particularly from a curatorial perspective.

In the final part of the chapter I focus on selected artists’ initiatives in reaction to what they perceived as the continuing lack of infrastructure and physical space for contemporary art at the turn of the century. These include Gozo Contemporary, the first artist in residence programme in Malta, as well as START, the first and only contemporary art group active in Malta in the twenty-first century that introduced new measures such as the use of alternative spaces for exhibitions and they repositioned the role of the curator while exhibiting contemporary works.



## 4.1 Cultural Reforms

The turn of the millennium was a time of high political and economic expectations in Malta as the country was preparing to become a member state of the European Union. According to the government of the time, it was the best way forward to grow in line with other countries, a scenario unknown to the majority of the Maltese population. With this on the agenda, the government introduced a five-year process of privatisation of all public entities that was to take place between 1999 and 2003.<sup>334</sup> The process affected the cultural sector in various ways, especially when the government introduced new parastatal organisations, including Heritage Malta and the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts, discussed later in this chapter.

This major initiative to privatise public institutions was to dramatically change the overall national mentality which can be classified as a paternal state system.<sup>335</sup> The paternalistic state system had long been experienced by the Maltese population. The Knights of St John (1530-1798) introduced a system of government which provided Maltese inhabitants with ‘free health provision, subsidised housing, education, employment and state provision of staple foods at subsidised prices.’<sup>336</sup> This same paternalistic system was continued by the British who colonised Malta between 1800 and 1964, chiefly for strategic purposes. As a result, upon independence, Malta inherited a system which had for centuries moulded the relationship between the state and the population.

Following Malta’s independence from the British, especially after 1977, the Malta Labour Party government’s new economic policies further entrenched the paternalistic

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<sup>334</sup> White Paper “Privatisation: A Strategy for the Future”, November 1999. In this White Paper, the government made public its commitment to sell and transfer all public entities to private hands. The programme of privatisation included major industrial activities, enterprises in the manufacturing sector, and government services. The government had also set up the ‘privatisation unit’, consisting of local businesspersons, academics, and civil servants.

<sup>335</sup> A paternal state system means governing people in a fatherly manner, especially by providing for their needs without giving them rights or responsibilities. See Godfrey Pirota, “Public Enterprise Implications of Malta’s Entry into the European Union,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, 01 December 2005, Vol.27(2), pp. 201-220

<sup>336</sup> Joseph M. Pirota, *L-Istorja Kostituzzjonali u l-Isfond Storiku* (Malta: Pubblikazzjonijiet Indipendenza, 2005) p. 201.

system by extending it to the economy, which had up till then been untouched by the state.<sup>337</sup> This resulted in a highly regulated economy which was mainly “driven through the public sector”.<sup>338</sup> Towards the end of the 1980s, the new Nationalist Party government abandoned some of these economic policies but retained others. It slowly initiated a process that would gradually lead to the opening up of markets.<sup>339</sup> This change in economic policy would define the 1990s in Malta. This new approach was determined by both the political ideology of the Nationalist Party and by the required reforms demanded by the European Union. It involved not just a major restructuring of the economy and the public sector, but a major shift in how Maltese society related to the state. The paternalistic state system that had long been the mainstay was finally broken when the Maltese government adopted most of the market economy reforms which culminated in Malta’s accession to the EU in 2004.

A series of measures in the cultural sector, undertaken by the Government of Malta between 1998 and 2003, instigated a radical review in the field. The Maltese government decided to create new structures to activate a holistic and inclusive approach to culture. A spin-off action of this was a two-week national convention which took place in September 1999, focusing on the need to have a proper cultural policy and ideal infrastructure in place.<sup>340</sup> It was at this time that the government drew up plans for a policy of decentralisation, recognising the need to create cultural levels of management which are distanced from central governance. Intensive debates during this convention related to the aims and functions of a new Creativity Centre situated in Valletta, planned in 1999 and with a scheduled opening in 2000. Inaugurated in 2000, the Centre for Creativity which was developed within St James Cavalier in Valletta, was the first major project of the government’s five-year process reform.

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<sup>337</sup> Ibid. Pirota, *L-Istorja Kostituzzjonali u l-Isfond storiku*, p. 202.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid; see also Maurice Mullard and Godfrey Pirota, *The politics of Public Expenditure in Malta*, Vol. 46:1 (Offprint: Commonwealth & Comparative Politics, 2008).

<sup>339</sup> Ibid. Pirota, p.138.

<sup>340</sup> *Malta and the Arts: Perspectives for the New Millennium*, September 1-15, 1999. Malta.

Its remit was to democratise cultural events and provide opportunities for bilateral and multilateral projects.

In 2001, the Ministry of Education, through its newly established Policy Unit, published Malta's first national cultural policy. This was drafted after months of consultation with several different bodies, artists, intellectuals and academics.<sup>341</sup> Considering Malta's highly polarised two-party political system, it can be said that the cultural policy received broad consensus, managing to transcend national divisions by stressing the consensual aspect of Malta's Euro-Mediterranean identity.

The next step was the establishment of organisations that would put into effect the central government's policies as promised in the national policy document. In November 2001, a new Act of Parliament established Heritage Malta, a national agency intended to provide protection for the numerous archaeological and historical sites in Malta and Gozo. The second purpose of this agency was to re-invent ways in which Malta's heritage could be enhanced through transnational initiatives in research methods and programmes that would engender cultural tourism.

The next parliamentary bill of April 2002 introduced legislation for the setting up of the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts (MCCA). The mandate of this new body replaced the activities of the former Department of Culture within the Ministry of Education. Besides increasing the accessibility of the arts to the public, motivating local councils' cultural agendas and dealing with non-government organisations, the MCCA has the obligation to create transnational educational schemes as well as to devise and implement strategies for promoting Maltese identity overseas.

In addition, the government organised a series of public debates to promote culture as a potentially strong economic catalyst. In 2003, the ministry responsible for local culture

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<sup>341</sup> The preparations for this policy were led by Mario Azzopardi. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the first attempts to draft a cultural policy date back to 1993 when the Permanent Secretary responsible for Culture asked Vicki Ann Cremona to start drafting a cultural policy. See Malta *National Cultural Policy* (2011).

introduced intensive training in cultural management to counter the challenges of institutions that lacked personnel with adequate skills. The sixty-hour course was delivered by lecturers from the Communications Institute of Perugia in collaboration with the Policy Unit at the Ministry for the Adult Learning Section within the Education Division. This course was held at the Centre for Creativity.

These radical changes had a significant impact on the development of contemporary art in Malta. As discussed below, two distinctive but interlinked results were the establishment of the Centre for Creativity and a series of artist-led initiatives that sought new sites for contemporary art beyond the institution.

#### **4.2 The Centre for Creativity, St James Cavalier (Spazju Kreattiv)**

One of the landmarks of contemporary Maltese culture was definitely the formation of the Centre for Creativity, initially established to resolve a number of lacunae within the cultural sector at the time. The opening of the centre was such an imperative action for the nation that a two-week national convention, dedicated to understanding the role of the space and its contribution to the way forward in terms of cultural empowerment was held in September 1999, before the centre formally opened on December 31, 1999.

Convened between September 1 to 15 of 1999, the conference entitled ‘Malta and the Arts: Perspectives for the New Millennium’, was held at the Foundation for International Studies in Valletta. Leading figures in culture, business, and education were invited to chair or hold discussions regarding various matters. Organised by the Ministry of Education under

Minister Dr Louis Galea,<sup>342</sup> it was led by Father Peter Serracino Inglott<sup>343</sup> and the artist and international art promoter Richard Demarco.<sup>344</sup>

The subjects chosen for discussion offered a perfect summary of how the nation then understood the role of culture in Malta, focusing mainly on its ancient history, geographical location, and spiritual values. Questions of understanding and investing in contemporary art were a secondary focus. Some of the topics discussed were ‘Looking at the Arts in the Millennium’; ‘Collaboration of Contemporary Artists in Bringing out the Significance of the Ancient Heritage’; ‘Malta as an International Culture Hub’; ‘Collaboration with the Private Sector’; ‘The Role of Art in Education and Cultural Diplomacy’; and ‘Honey Pump Economics and Spiritual Values.’

The last day of the conference was dedicated to intensive discussions related to the aims and functions of the Centre of Creativity. An extended complete mission statement for the Centre of Creativity was made available in the proceedings of the conference.<sup>345</sup>

Participants in the forum proposed ways to link aesthetic creativity with a popular scheme for critical and active citizenship.

The huge responsibility placed on this one centre was also visible in the mission statement that was published for the first time publicly in *The Sunday Times of Malta* on June 18, 2000, six months after the centre had opened. The creativity centre was to act in the following manner:

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<sup>342</sup> Dr Louis Galea (b. 1948) is a Maltese politician who served in the government of Malta as Minister of Education from 1998 to 2008, and was Speaker of the House of Representatives of Malta from 2008 to 2010. Galea was Malta’s representative on the European Court of Auditors from 2010 to 2016.

<sup>343</sup> Fr Peter Serracino Inglott (1936-2012) was Rector of the University of Malta (1987–1988, 1991–1996) and emeritus professor of philosophy at the same university. A Catholic priest, Serracino Inglott was ordained in Milan by Cardinal Montini, later Pope Paul VI. He was an advisor to the former Prime Minister of Malta, Eddie Fenech Adami (1987–1996, 1998–2004) and was one of three Maltese representatives at the Convention on the Future of Europe.

<sup>344</sup> Richard Demarco CBE (b.1930 in Edinburgh), a Scottish artist and promoter of the visual and performing arts.

<sup>345</sup> Priscilla Camilleri and Patricia Gatt, eds., *Malta and the Arts: Perspectives for the New Millennium* (Malta: Foundation for International Studies, 2001).

- Serve as a catalyst for all forms of expression by providing a space and extending experiences to reach all people and involve them in interactive participation;
- Establish itself as a centre for cultural exchange with other countries, thereby cultivating a sense of cultural identity based on local dimensions and international diversity in light of Malta's development of cultural tourism;
- Foster aesthetic and cultural awareness among the younger generation;
- Offer an ongoing dialogue between the various artistic disciplines in such a way as to conduct and encourage research and documentation related to the arts and popular creativity;
- Contribute to the country's economic and social development and prosperity by promoting artistic creativity as an alternative means of entertainment, self-actualisation, and empowerment.<sup>346</sup>

The mission statement intentions showed a determination to change things—and it did. By the end of the noughties, the newly designed space and its central location in Valletta became a meeting place for all those who wanted to form part of the local cultural landscape whose input was soon visible in the active arts programme mostly run by local practitioners. Key partners such as the British Council, the Virginia Centre for the Creative Arts, and European Cultural Centres were imperative to establish the centre as a cultural exchange centre. In order to establish further aesthetic and cultural awareness among young people, the foundation invested in a strong education programme with a well-planned schedule for schools and afterschool hours activities which were led by enthusiastic animateurs.

An interim board for the centre was set up in May 2000 whose responsibility was to prepare a strong calendar of events that was sensitive to the needs of the population and tourists alike. September 22 of the same year was earmarked as the start of the new cultural season's activities even though the premises were officially inaugurated on December 31,

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<sup>346</sup> Anon, "Mission Statement for St James Cavalier", *The Sunday Times of Malta* 18 June, 2000.

1999. For the first time in Malta, a space was going to host large-scale visual art exhibitions, theatre performances, films, educational programmes, and musical concerts at the same time. In view of this, the St James Centre for Creativity was purposely equipped with large gallery spaces, a cinema hall, a music room, a round theatre, and educational tools to assist amateurs and teachers accordingly.

In an interview which featured in *The Sunday Times of Malta* in July 2000, Chris Grech, chairman of St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity's interim board of management, emphasised that the Centre for Creativity was not a museum where people went to look at the exhibits and walk out.<sup>347</sup> The space incorporated a cinema, theatre, music room, exhibits all around, a restaurant, retail outlets, a coffee shop, and bar. Grech maintained that the board members of the foundation wanted "to create a venue where we will generate a strong interest in the arts and culture, but one where people can organise conferences or have talks on literature—activities that can be enjoyed by people of all ages and social status for a number of hours."<sup>348</sup> Apart from preparing the calendar of events, the board also worked on establishing a foundation to enable the Centre for Creativity to be as self-sufficient as possible. The board of management set up a number of sub-committees to handle the various artistic disciplines while it looked for exciting proposals and encouraged ideas and proposals from sources of creative talent in Malta.<sup>349</sup>

There were various indications that the space was going to become a cultural hub on the island. The first sign of this came in the opening week between December 31, 1999 and the first week of January 2000. In these six days, over fifty thousand people visited the space. Its later reopening in September 2000 once again attracted thousands of visitors.<sup>350</sup> In a *Times of Malta* article dated September 25, 2000, it was reported that between eight and ten

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<sup>347</sup> Prior to this date, no museums in Malta had an education department, cafeteria, or a resource centre to organise ongoing programmes and encourage visitors.

<sup>348</sup> Malcolm J. Naudi, "A flagship at Valletta Entrance", *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 9, 2000.

<sup>349</sup> Anon, "Mission Statement for St James Cavalier", *The Sunday Times of Malta*, June 18, 2000.

<sup>350</sup> Natalino Fenech, "50,000 visit St James Cavalier", *Times of Malta*, January 7, 2000.

thousand people had visited the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity over the first weekend.<sup>351</sup>

Contemporary visual art was given a great deal of importance, especially when compared to recent events, as discussed in chapter three. This was evident in the spaces dedicated to visual art exhibitions and the fact that a board member responsible for the visual arts programme established an artist-in-residence programme and a full calendar of exhibitions reflecting the shift in visual art practice.<sup>352</sup> The first two exhibitions planned for the centre were *Art in Malta Today* and the British Council touring exhibition *A Changed World* (both discussed below). These promised to fulfil the Centre's mandate "to establish itself as a centre for cultural exchange with other countries, thus cultivating a sense of cultural identity based on local dimensions and international diversity, especially in the light of Malta's commitment to cultural tourism."<sup>353</sup>

Unfortunately, after such a fantastic opening, the centre faced its first financial problems [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue – Pages 19 & 20 Catalogue No. 26]. As per the government budget document for the year 2001, the creativity centre was allocated 30,000 Maltese lira (equivalent to 73,000 euro). The chairman, Chris Grech, had made it clear that this amount would definitely not cover its running costs for 2001, estimated to be as high as 250,000 Maltese lira (equivalent to 530,000 euro). In view of this, in December 2000, Grech announced that the St James Cavalier management would appeal for help from the Education Minister Dr Louis Galea and the Environment Minister Dr Francis Zammit Dimech for the running of the centre. Grech was optimistic that help would be forthcoming, especially since both ministers had shown a commitment to the centre. However, he also stated that there

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<sup>351</sup> Herman Grech, "Thousands visit Centre for Creativity", *Times of Malta*, September 25, 2000.

<sup>352</sup> Joseph Paul Cassar was a board member, a scholar in art history and criticism at the University of Malta. With a MFA from Charles Sturt University, New South Wales, Australia and a MA from Columbia Pacific University, San Rafael, California, he had also studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti Pietro Vannucci in Perugia, Italy (1980-1982) under Bruno Orfei, Romeo Mancini, and Bruno Munari. Today, Cassar is an Associate Professor at the University of Maryland University College Adelphi, USA.

<sup>353</sup> Policy Unit, "Il-Politika Kulturali f' Malta: Dokument Għad-Diskussjoni" (Malta: Policy Unit, 2001) 149, 5.ii. [English trans., "Cultural Policy in Malta: a Discussion Document"]



might not be enough synergies between the various ministries and that, “when the Finance Ministry is caught up in other problems, it may become insensitive to the needs of culture – and the subsequent repercussions.”<sup>354</sup>

Analysing the financial estimates that the government had allocated to other cultural institutions or events for 2001, certain discrepancies can be observed which lead to a better understanding of the desperate situation of the contemporary art scene at this time. For example, the government had issued the carnival organisation, the Malta Song Festival, and the Eurovision Song Contest the sum of 60,000 Maltese lira each. The National Orchestra was going to receive 200,000 Maltese lira while the National Festivities Committee was granted 30,000 Maltese lira. In effect, annual events of a short duration such as the Carnival and the Malta Song for Europe were receiving double the amount assigned to an institution that had to run for a whole year. Ideally, the Centre for Creativity needed to be at least in line with the National Orchestra, even though the latter was not responsible for any building upkeep.<sup>355</sup>

The conclusion that can be drawn from this funding discrepancy is that the government did not recognise the importance of associating contemporary art with the country’s culture and identity. In most European countries art and culture were at the top of government agendas (especially in view of Malta’s EU membership application). The refurbishment of the historic cavalier had cost around four million Maltese lira (equivalent to ten million euro), and the space was slowly growing into a hub of the arts and entertainment. Grech urged the authorities to give more attention to such a historic building which had required great efforts in order to convert to international standards.

Nonetheless, the centre for creativity, despite all of these obstacles, continued to function and it left positive results on Malta’s contemporary visual art scene. In order to fully

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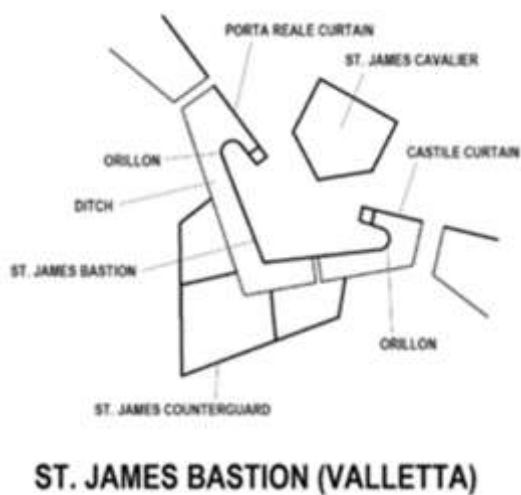
<sup>354</sup> Herman Grech, “Budget Problems for Creativity Centre”, *Times of Malta*, December 6, 2000.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*

understand this impact it is necessary to first understand the fabric of the building and how it developed in phases, followed by a discussion of selected exhibitions that left an impact on contemporary art practices. This analysis is important given that this space served for a long time as a reference point for local visual artists.

### **The Impact of the Centre for Creativity on Malta's Contemporary Visual Art Scene**

The Centre for Creativity was set up within St James Cavalier, a construction that was originally designed during the times of the Order of St John as a war machine where attention was given to the external walls and not to its interiors [Figure 49]. In the nineteenth century, the British saw the potential of the large interiors of this building and the cavalier became a social hub for military personnel as a sort of official military café. It was also used as a space for storing and circulating water in Valletta. At the outbreak of the Second World War, the building had to revert back to its military defensive functions. Following Malta's independence, the cavalier had a number of functions, but mainly served as the government printing press.



**Fig. 49 St James Cavalier bastions plan and façade facing Castille Square, Valletta (Courtesy of Spazju Kreattiv)**

St James Cavalier was earmarked by the local government as the new centre for creativity in the 1990s. In 1995, Professor Richard England was commissioned to design the interior spaces which would host various cultural activities that could vary from theatre and music performances to cinema and visual art exhibitions.<sup>356</sup> The cavalier's large and flexible spaces, together with its central position in Valletta, immediately turned it into a safe haven for artists, actors, musicians, theatre and art groups. It also became a popular location for holding visual art exhibitions, together with the Museum of Fine Arts Museum and the New Gallery situated at the Archaeology Museum, both of which are situated in Valletta [Figure 50].



**Fig. 50 St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity/Spazju Kreattiv galleries, Valletta. (Courtesy of Spazju Kreattiv.)**

Chris Gatt, manager of St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, observed that the Cavalier was already receiving “positive, strong vibrations” from local and foreign artists to the extent that the London newspaper *The Independent* described it as “the most off-beat arts centre in Europe” soon after its re-opening in September 2000.<sup>357</sup> This was exemplified in the

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<sup>356</sup> Richard England (b. 1937) is an architect, writer, artist, and academic. Now a Visiting Professor at the University of Malta, he was Dean of the Faculty of Architecture between 1987 and 1989. He is also an Hon. Fellow at the University of Bath in the UK. England has lectured and worked in the capacity of architectural consultant to governmental and private institutions in the following countries: the USA, UK, Yugoslavia, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Italy, Argentina, Poland, Bulgaria, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Malta.

<sup>357</sup> Herman Grech, “Spectacle Inaugurates St James Cavalier”, *Times of Malta*, September 23, 2000.

first fifteen years of the creativity centre's existence as its various spaces gave many the opportunity to try and experiment with new things.

When analysing the different visual art projects held within the centre, based on extensive archival research, it is clear that this was a creative and exciting journey for both the centre's administrators and artists.<sup>358</sup> Taking into consideration how the space developed and what was achieved, my analysis shows a vibrant pattern with three distinctive phases. The first four years following the grand opening, that is between 2001 and 2005, were mainly dedicated to more traditional types of visual arts expression. During this period, painting and sculpture were the most popular forms exhibited at the premises. A more experimental approach followed from 2006 to 2009, after Malta became part of the EU, with exhibitions becoming an important means to question the local artistic environment in comparison with what was happening in Europe.<sup>359</sup> The third and last phase from 2010 to 2015, is marked by curated exhibitions that followed European standards and engaged with ongoing changes due to globalisation.

To highlight the journey of this remarkable space from 2001 to 2015, I have selected examples of exhibitions from each of the three phrases that had a direct impact on the local scene as reflected in the media, the general public visiting the exhibitions, and their effect on the artists, including the ongoing and increasing interest in contemporary visual art practised abroad.

### **Key Exhibitions at the Centre for Creativity**

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<sup>358</sup> As part of this research, the author spent time in the centre's archive, which as of 2015 was still not organised. For this research, I catalogued all the exhibitions together with the accompanying material, including posters, invites, and catalogues. This research directly inspired one of the many ongoing projects currently organised at the centre, including the exhibition *Past! Present. Future?* The first project was held between December 11, 2015 and January 31, 2016.

<sup>359</sup> This shift was possible after Malta became a member of the EU and more artists had the possibility to exhibit in different places around Europe together with other contemporary artists.

The first two exhibitions that overlapped with each other were *Art in Malta Today*, curated by Joseph Paul Cassar, and *A Changed World*, which was organised by the British High Commission. The former was one of the main events that had been organised to launch the Centre for Creativity [Figure 51]. The space was reopened to the public — after its closure for administrative and logistic reasons — on September 22, 2000, and this exhibition was held for two months.<sup>360</sup>



**Fig. 51** *Art in Malta Today* exhibition opening, September 22, 2000, St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity. (Image provided by Joseph Paul Cassar)

The space at St James Cavalier was transformed for the opening exhibition of *Art in Malta Today* is exhibition. This is significant for the shift of contemporary art practice because it was the first time in Malta that exhibition organisers invested significant efforts in exhibition display. All the spaces were designed specifically for the artworks. Sixty artists participated and it was clear that the curator wanted to enhance the artistic quality of all the works presented in an equal manner. Stylistically, the work varied from video art, sound art

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<sup>360</sup> Ariadne Massa, “Final Countdown for Arts Centre opening”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, September 3, 2000.

and installation to paintings and sculpture. Cassar, the curator, commented on this diversity in a *Times of Malta* article dated October 4, 2000.<sup>361</sup>

The exhibition brings out clearly the concurrent sharp, contrasting elements. On one side there is an active group of artists, young and old, who continue to work in the painting medium, exploring ever more the narrative form of expression. At the same time, others have abandoned subject matter and have verged into abstraction, making use of a variety of media and other forms of experimentation. There is also a strong interest and development in the language of sculpture and ceramics, photography and computer-related art, video and interactive installation works.<sup>362</sup>

Although there was such a variety of works, the space managed to capture a particular harmony and maintain a balance. Certain areas were enclosed while others were left open to enable viewers to experience the artworks on show.<sup>363</sup> On the opening night, and during the following weeks, hundreds of people and schoolchildren visited the place and encountered the exhibits on show.

On October 7, a few days after the launch of the space, another important exhibition was inaugurated, entitled *A Changed World* [Figure 52]. The contemporary British sculptors featured in this exhibition were Anish Kapoor, Eduardo Paolozzi, Damien Hirst, and Rachel Whiteread. The exhibition was organised by the British High Commission and served as a launch event for the three-week celebrations commemorating the two hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the British in Malta. This touring exhibition had previously travelled to Pakistan, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Cyprus.<sup>364</sup> The exhibition was important not only because of the exhibited works by key British sculptors, but also because it enabled a dialogue between Maltese and international artists to take place. The works of these key

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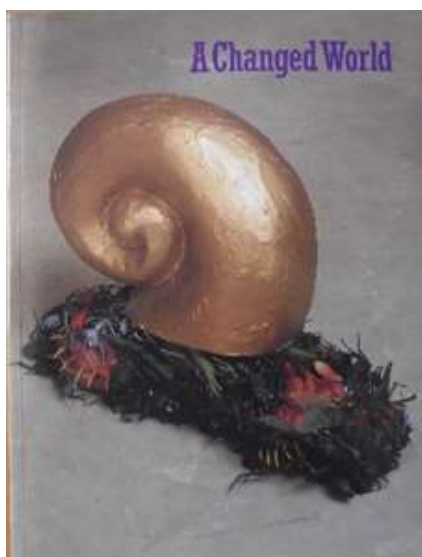
<sup>361</sup> Joseph Paul Cassar studies focused on art practice, art history and criticism (see footnote number 20). He had no formal curatorial training.

<sup>362</sup> Joseph Cassar, "Art in Malta Today", *Times of Malta*, October 4, 2000.

<sup>363</sup> A workbook for children was designed and launched for this exhibition, created by Joseph Paul Cassar. This was the first time that an educational tool was pioneered in a Maltese exhibition to encourage students and teachers to interact with the exhibits.

<sup>364</sup> <http://visualarts.britishcouncil.org/exhibitions/exhibition/a-changed-world-1997/year/2000/status/past/page/5> (accessed November 26, 2014)

British artists and the artworks of the Maltese artists which formed part of *Art in Malta Today* were placed side by side [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue – Page 25 Catalogue No. 28].



**Fig. 52** *A Changed World* exhibition catalogue cover, October 3, 2000 till January 1, 2001, St James Cavalier, Centre for Creativity.

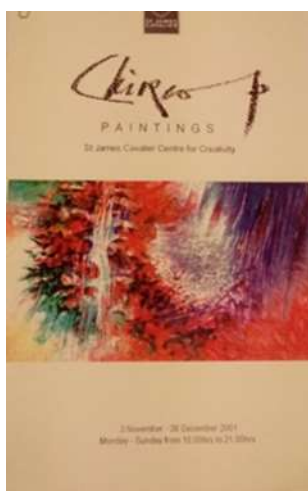
The British Council also organised a guided public tour by one of the participating British artists, Edward Allington, who was invited to Malta for this occasion. Allington delivered a lecture to art history students on the Art Unit at the University of Malta.<sup>365</sup>

Following these two exhibitions where contemporary pieces by local and British artists were exhibited side by side, the visual arts programme at the creativity centre embraced the key idea of exhibiting contemporary art production in Malta. By this time, the local visual arts scene was built on two binaries: exhibitions by established late modernist artists which were extremely popular among local exhibition organisers and institutions; and contemporary works by a younger generation that still followed in the footsteps of the former group, producing works inspired by a broadly modernist approach. The large-scale exhibitions held were mainly ones that presented established artists of the previous three decades, whose work and development were highly praised by the different generations'

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<sup>365</sup> "First Important International Exhibition at St James", *Times of Malta*, October 27, 2000.

attendees. This type of exhibitions were important at that particular time to bridge late modernist work to contemporary practice, and also served as an opportunity to exhibit selected number of works in one place by key practising artists, since prior to this occasion no other large venue was available. Among the most acclaimed events of this early phase of the centre were the solo exhibitions of Alfred Chircop, Gabriel Caruana, and Isabelle Borg [Figure 53].



**Fig. 53 Alfred Chircop (2001) exhibition poster**  
**November 3 till December 26, 2001**  
**St James Cavalier, Centre for Creativity**  
**(Courtesy of Spazju Kreattiv).**



**SOL (2001) Isabelle Borg exhibition poster**  
**June 6 till July 8, 2001**  
**St James Cavalier, Centre for Creativity**  
**(Courtesy of Spazju Kreattiv).**

By the turn of the century, both Alfred Chircop and Gabriel Caruana were leading figures in the Maltese art scene who pioneered their artistic genre. A thirty-six-page publication was created for the Alfred Chircop exhibition, which was a first in Chircop's long career, with articles by Emmanuel Fiorentino and Joseph Paul Cassar.<sup>366</sup> Gabriel Caruana's exhibition reflected his artistic commitment to experimentation;<sup>367</sup> and was also accompanied by a publication showing Caruana's current and ongoing work. Significantly, the exhibition was inaugurated by Alviero Morretti, the president and founder of the Contemporary Ceramic

<sup>366</sup> *Chircop Paintings*, St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, Valletta, November 3 to December 26, 2001.

<sup>367</sup> Joseph Paul Cassar, "Gabriel Caruana at St James Cavalier," *Times of Malta*, June 30, 2001.



Foundation and the Fondazione Alviere Morretti.<sup>368</sup> Isabelle Borg, as a leading female artist, was by this time at the height of her career.<sup>369</sup> She participated in a number of exhibitions but seeing her works in one place as central as St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity was a rare occasion.<sup>370</sup>

This new centre was a jewel for the artistic community in view of its newness and its large, white, flexible spaces. Notably, the centre employed staff to work specifically on exhibition layout and display which was previously unknown of in Malta. As a result, it became the ‘in’ place to hold exhibitions rather than a space to explore innovative and creative discourse as originally intended. In interview the centre manager Chris Gatt agreed with this assessment. However, he argued that certain exhibitions initiated a professional format and introduced the importance of the curator’s role and of catalogues. This served to make the general public aware of recent artistic developments and new approaches to exhibition making.<sup>371</sup> Gatt added that small projects in line with the centre’s vision were still being organised.<sup>372</sup>

An example of one of these smaller, innovative projects aimed at promoting a greater awareness of the cultures of the Mediterranean can be found in the 2002 programme. An exhibition of photographic works by the British artists Sarah Lucas and Marc Quinn were displayed in the upper galleries [Figure 54].<sup>373</sup> These works were used as inspiration for a literature project led by Inizjamed, a voluntary non-governmental cultural organisation, in collaboration with the British Council.<sup>374</sup> The project consisted of workshop sessions organised by Inizjamed that brought together six Maltese female authors who drew

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<sup>368</sup> Emanuel Fiorentino, “A Sustained Spirit for Ceramics”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, May 27, 2001.

<sup>369</sup> Emanuel Fiorentino, “Between Sol and Landscapes”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 8, 2001.

<sup>370</sup> See: [http://www.isabelleborg.com/0000\\_ExhibitionPages/0000Exhibitions01.html](http://www.isabelleborg.com/0000_ExhibitionPages/0000Exhibitions01.html)

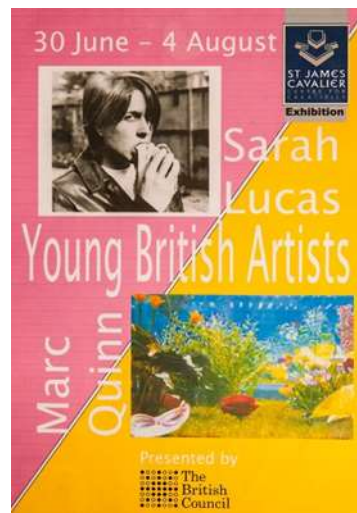
<sup>371</sup> The centre also encouraged young people to work as volunteers on small projects to empower them and develop their skills. The author was one of the young people involved in these projects between 2001 and 2010.

<sup>372</sup> Chris Gatt interview with the author on February 2, 2015.

<sup>373</sup> Emanuel Fiorentino, “Some British Photography!”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, August 18, 2002.

<sup>374</sup> “Writing Workshops for Women”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, May 26, 2002; “Workshops in creative writing for Women”, *Times of Malta*, May 22, 2002; “Writing Workshops for Women”, *Times of Malta*, June 8, 2002. Also see: [http://www.oocities.org/inizjamed/workshops\\_lucas\\_eng.htm](http://www.oocities.org/inizjamed/workshops_lucas_eng.htm) (accessed January 16, 2015).

inspiration from Lucas' work for their writings.<sup>375</sup> Maltese photographer Alexandra Pace was also invited to discuss the photographic aspect of the exhibits, while Lana Turner led a discussion on the ideological implications of Lucas' work. Six of the literary works written during the workshops were read by actress Marcelle Teuma at the opening of the photographic exhibition, held at St James Cavalier on June 28, 2002.<sup>376</sup>



**Fig. 54 Sarah Lucas and Mark Quinn – Young British Artists (2002) exhibition poster, June 30 till September 8, 2002, St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity. (Courtesy of Spazju Kreattiv.)**

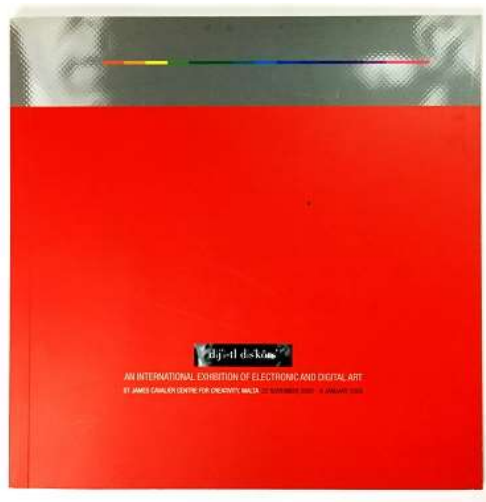
A second new wave of inspiration was discernible in the spaces of St James Cavalier from 2005 to 2009. The first event to exemplify this was *Digital Discourse* – an international collective exhibition of electronic and digital art organised between November 2005 and January 2006 [Figure 55]. This was curated by Vince Briffa as part of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) activities in Malta. A number of artists from various countries—namely Chris Meigh-Andrews (UK), Catherine Richards (Canada), Raqs Media Collective (India), Melita Couta (Cyprus), Daniel von Sturmer (New Zealand), Margaret Tan (Singapore), Minette Vari (South Africa), and Mark Mangion (Malta)—

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<sup>375</sup> Inizjamed is a voluntary non-governmental cultural organisation founded in Malta in 1998 that is committed towards the regeneration of culture and artistic expression in the Maltese Islands and actively promotes a greater awareness of the cultures of the Mediterranean.

<sup>376</sup> “Woman writers at St James Cavalier”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, February 30, 2002.

presented digital and video works.<sup>377</sup> Unfortunately, no detailed press reviews exist even though it formed part of such a big event. Instead, the press only remarked that the exhibition was an example of how visual arts blended with science and that it provided a digital response to that year's EU summit theme of "Networking for Development".<sup>378</sup> The first event in Malta that offered a comprehensive exhibition of this sort attracted some of the most prominent exponents of video, electronic, and new media art.<sup>379</sup> Held in conjunction with this exhibition, *Zero Carbon City* was another exhibition organised by the British Council and curated by Vince Briffa, which regarded carbon emissions and what could be done to reduce them.<sup>380</sup>



**Fig. 55 Detail of the *Digital Discourse* exhibition catalogue front cover, November 20, 2005 till January 6, 2006, St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity.**

This phase of the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity was supplemented by the work of a younger generation of artists who held exhibitions together with contemporary established artists within the space. This was a transitional time when Maltese society and the

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<sup>377</sup> The only available material evidence of the exhibition to date is the poster [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue - Page 34 Catalogue No. 47].

<sup>378</sup> Herman Grech, "St James to host Culture Programme linked to CHOGM", *Times of Malta*, November 12, 2005.

<sup>379</sup> This can be considered as the first digital collective international art exhibition in Malta and the lack of knowledge on the subject might have been the reason why no detailed review was written.

<sup>380</sup> The introduction and increase of digital culture and international aspirations was one of Briffa's main goals. In fact, he has been the Head of Department of Digital Arts at the University of Malta since 2011. Vince Briffa (exhibition curator) interview with the author on May 28, 2015.

art community were going through another period that marked their identity—the process of becoming European. Embarking on a cultural exchange experience or residency period for a few weeks in different European countries was not alien to the local artistic community, but after 2004 this became more accessible. With the introduction of the euro market and new cheap flights, travelling to attend short courses abroad and participating in visual art projects was more economically feasible.

During these years the St James Cavalier space became a centre of innovation and discussion and whatever was new in the context of the Maltese Islands was discussed here. In January 2007, for example, the Valletta Creative Forum (VCF)—a think tank meeting devoted to the discussion of culture—was held at the Centre [Figure 56].<sup>381</sup> The aim of the VCF was to focus on issues challenging contemporary culture in Malta through a series of encounters and working groups which sought to provide concrete proposals and a road map for the future of culture in Malta.<sup>382</sup> The 2007 edition of the forum, which tackled six major issues, included the participation of over three hundred stakeholders from the artistic, political, business and governmental sectors, together with more than twenty European speakers and contributors.<sup>383</sup>



**Fig. 56 Valletta Creative Forum (VCF) Invite. The forum was held between January 27 and June 23, 2007, at the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity.**

<sup>381</sup> “Cultural Think-tank launched”, *The Malta Independent*, January 9, 2007.

<sup>382</sup> “Valletta Creative Forum Focuses on creative industries: Only 0.35% of public expenditure invested in culture”, *The Malta Independent*, May 27, 2007.

<sup>383</sup> *Compendium - Cultural Policies and Trends* (accessed March 15, 2016) <https://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/malta.php?aid=41>.

This forum discussed the new local context, imperative to cultural analysis, by keeping in mind that Malta was experiencing emigration, with young people starting to move to European cities to study or work full-time.<sup>384</sup> It also experienced immigration from all parts of Europe and beyond, including by 2007 hundreds of illegal immigrants from North Africa who landed in Malta. Apart from this huge impact on the Maltese population, other changes in the traditional local mentality were taking shape.

One of the main changes that left a minute but strong, long-lasting effect on the locals was the gradual abolishment of censorship.<sup>385</sup> Strict censorship laws directly affected the arts sector in Malta and were not totally relaxed until 2016.<sup>386</sup> The first hot discussion relating to censorship of the visual arts took place at the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity in 2009. This was led by Raphael Vella after one of his works was censored from being exhibited at the annual Malta Arts Festival. This discussion was held inside the building's cinema and was followed by an exhibition of the censored work.

By 2010, the space was dominated by a form of contemporary visual art that reflected what was happening in Europe, especially in the UK. This was made possible by the move of Malta Contemporary Art (MCA) from its Marsa warehouse building to the upper galleries of St James Cavalier, discussed in the next chapter. Within a few months, important international and local exhibitions were being held within this space under the curation and coordination of the artist-curator Mark Mangion (b.1976). Among the international artists who exhibited here were Spartacus Chetwynd (b. 1973) and Cyprien Gaillard (b. 1980), while

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<sup>384</sup> After World War Two, the average population gain rate in Malta was 7,300 per year, and with already 3,000 persons per square metre, the solution for overpopulation and poverty was seen as emigration. The number of migrants, mainly to Australia, averaged about 5,000 per year between 1946 and 1960. See [https://www.um.edu.mt/europeanstudies/books/CD\\_CSP4/pdf/pcalleja.pdf](https://www.um.edu.mt/europeanstudies/books/CD_CSP4/pdf/pcalleja.pdf) (accessed on February 21, 2016).

<sup>385</sup> Ingram Bondin, "Overdue Censorship Reform," *The Times of Malta*, July 20, 2015.

<sup>386</sup> An anti-censorship bill was approved by the Maltese Parliament in July 2016. Between 2009 and 2011 there was a rise in a number of cases brought by the government against theatre directors, authors, and visual artists. Before these incidents there was a theatre censorship board which had the power to ban plays; a pornography law which did not define what was pornographic material and decriminalised literary and artistic works; an obscene libel law, a law protecting religion from vilification, and the Broadcasting Act which did not liberalise content aired after 9pm. Three out of these five were regarded as criminal offences and carried prison sentences. See Ingram Bondin, 2015.

other collective international exhibitions were curated by Margit Neuhold, Kris Van Dessel, Roberto Daolio, and Alessandro Castiglioni.<sup>387</sup> More traditional exhibitions were simultaneously being held in other spaces at St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity.<sup>388</sup>

By 2011, the upper galleries at the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity were no longer used by the MCA, but as a result of its influence this section of the premises continued to showcase contemporary artworks. In the following years exhibitions were held by established and upcoming contemporary artists, including Vince Briffa, Caesar Attard, Adrian Abela, and Ritty Tacsum.<sup>389</sup> Important collaborations and collective exhibitions, both private and local government supported, were also held on these same premises, including a collective exhibition curated by the artist Austin Camilleri as part of the Malta Arts Festival of 2012 (discussed in chapter 6). A solo exhibition by Steve Mc Curry entitled *Odyssey* (2012) was also presented within this space [Figure 57].<sup>390</sup>

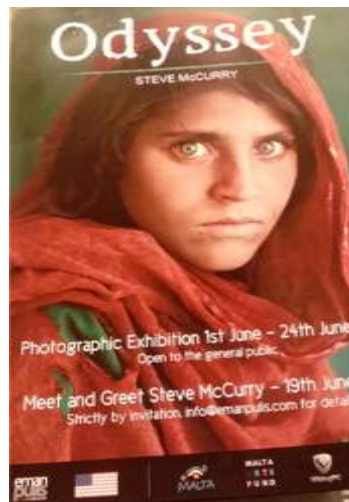
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<sup>387</sup> All exhibitions held at the MCA are documented on <http://maltacontemporaryart.com/past-exhibitions.html> which was accessed a number of times between 2013 and 2018. Interviews were also conducted with local artists and with Mark Mangion.

<sup>388</sup> While MCA was occupying the upper galleries of St James Cavalier centre for Creativity, other exhibitions were taking place in the main galleries at the same space. These included Mark England's *Mostly Churches* paintings exhibition (March 27 to April 4, 2010) and Philip Chircop's *No.27* (May 15 to June 27, 2010) in which he presented abstract paintings.

<sup>389</sup> For more information on the exhibition see: "Terrain Vague – video – photography – painting", *The Malta Independent*, April 24, 2011 (accessed May 11, 2012). <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2011-04-24/local-news/Terrain-vague-%E2%80%93-video---photography---painting-291112> (article on Vince Briffa exhibition); Theodore Reljic, "We need light! | Caesar Attard", *MaltaToday*, December 27, 2012 (accessed May 15, 2013) <https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/arts/art/23586/we-need-light-caesar-attard-20121227#.Wv51Hu6FOM8> (Interview with Caesar Attar); Marie Claire Finger "Conversation with Adrian", *The Insider*, April 23, 2012 (accessed June 21, 2014) <http://theinsiter.org/articles/60565/conversations-with-adrian/> (interview with Adrian Abela); "Ritty Tacsum: Visually Stunning Photography", *The Malta Independent*, November 13, 2011 (accessed March 6, 2013) <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2011-11-13/local-news/Ritty-Tacsum:-Visually-Stunning-photography-301551> (interview with Ritty Tacsum).

<sup>390</sup> *Odyssey* was organised by Eman Pulis with the support of the American Embassy in Malta. In conjunction with this exhibition, a discussion session and a book signing with the McCurry was held on June 19, 2012.



**Fig. 57 *Odyssey Steve McCurry* exhibition poster, June 1 till June 24, 2012, at the St James Centre for Creativity. (Courtesy of Spazju Kreattiv.)**

The above-mentioned exhibitions reflect the impact of Malta forming part of a much larger network, that of the European Union. Artists were no longer discouraged in showing digital art work as in the case of *Terrain Vague* by Briffa or political statements such as in *Hardcore*, *Bills* and *Humanoids* by Attard, Abela and Tacsum respectively. These type of exhibitions were possible only because the creative centre acted as a safe haven for the artists. Nonetheless, professional curatorship of contemporary art exhibitions was still in its early stages.

A number of other important and ongoing projects were launched at the centre. Among these were *Divergent Thinkers*, an annual collective exhibition of young upcoming artists displaying innovative works and trends launched in 2012.<sup>391</sup> Another imperative festival held at the centre for creativity was VIVA – the Valletta International Visual Arts Festival.<sup>392</sup> Undoubtedly, the Cavalier became a place where innovation, the presentation of established works of art, and important collaborations were happening. Most significantly,

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<sup>391</sup> See “Aġenzija Żagħżagħ calls for Divergent Thinkers”, *The Malta Independent on Sunday*, 19 February 2012.

<sup>392</sup> See “Valletta International Visual Arts Festival (VIVA) inaugurated” *The Malta Independent*, 30 August 2014.

within this space we have seen the cultivation of professionalism towards contemporary exhibition curatorship in the first years of the millennium.

#### **4.3 Artists' Initiatives at the Turn of the Millennium: Gozo Contemporary and the START Art Group**

Before the turn of the millennium, visual artworks could only be found at the Fine Arts Museum, an old building erected in the late eighteenth century under the Order of St John, which by 1974 started housing the National Art Collection. Apart from the permanent collection, which mainly consisted of artworks dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, the museum also hosted a number of small contemporary exhibitions in the *loggia*, which surrounded the small courtyard of the museum. The temporary exhibits were usually paintings and sculptures following modernist trends created by both local and international artists. Another room on the same premises, known among local artists as the Contemporary Hall, also hosted small exhibitions by young artists.<sup>393</sup> However, the first exhibitions within this space that reflected contemporary values appeared in 1999 after the museum curators organised *Re-Interpreting Preti*, as previously discussed in chapter three. After this exhibition, a number of contemporary installations and works were hosted in this space; however, these were still one-off events.

This very small room with uneven walls and a decorated nineteenth century ceiling was the only space where the contemporary spirit could be exhibited. Apart from this gallery within the museum, there was no other public space except for the Centre for Creativity, opened in 2000. Yet the up-and-coming artists who were looking towards the development of contemporary art abroad realised that the new centre was not going to function fully as a contemporary art museum/gallery, even though gallery spaces were available for

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<sup>393</sup> Officially entitled Contemporary Hall in 1994 together with the Loggia.



contemporary art exhibitions.<sup>394</sup> In view of this situation, and the lack of private gallery spaces specialising in contemporary art, the artists decided that alternative spaces had to be sought. This act reflects the artists' desire to be like their overseas peers who were working and exhibiting in museums and galleries dedicated to contemporary art practice. It also shows that the artists were aware that the local social, economic, and political climate was not ready yet for this type of infrastructure even though the first step of creating a creative art centre was achieved.

The most influential artist-led initiatives at the turn of the century were the exhibitions organised by a group of artists who called themselves START. The art group, which formed in 2002, decided to present their work in alternative places to work and develop their contemporary practice while trying to reach new audiences. Another important example of an artist's initiative at the turn of the century was when Norbert Francis Attard decided to use part of his private property in Gozo to provide residency to overseas and local artists. This was a first in Malta.

### **Gozo Contemporary**

The important transition that took place in the late nineties made local artists aware of new developments in contemporary art. This was all new to them and as such difficult to understand. In view of this important shift there were older artists in their mid-forties who decided, of their own accord, to study for a master's degree and continue to doctorate level in art practice away from the islands. These included artists such as Vince Briffa, Ruth Bianco, and Raphael Vella.

A contemporary artist who developed his contemporary values by living in Malta was Norbert Francis Attard. Unlike other Maltese artists, Attard decided to move to Malta's sister

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<sup>394</sup> Rozanne Zammit, "Artists Transform Old Bordello", *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 14, 2002. The journalist spoke to the artists involved in this project including Raphael Vella, who noted that, "Not even St James Cavalier is aimed at contemporary artists."

island of Gozo for a number of reasons, one of these being the possibility to invest in a larger property to set up his studio. During the summer of 2000 he decided to turn his studio into a residence for artists. Free accommodation in a fully equipped self-catering apartment for a maximum of two weeks was provided on the studio premises, together with use of the studio space. All existing facilities such as tools, machinery, and a library were made available during the artists' stay.

The Gozo Contemporary, as Attard's studio-space-turned-residency was named, introduced a new concept on the Maltese Islands. Rather than serving as a gallery in the conventional sense, this space offered artists the opportunity to work and produce art [Figure 58]. It provided time and space away from the artists' usual environment. This also served as an opportunity to explore one's practice within another community, meeting new people, using new materials, and experiencing life in a new location. The Gozo Contemporary residency launched two distinct programmes, the Creative Residencies programme and the Artists' Video programme, both directed by Attard. The former aimed for the professional development of contemporary local and foreign artists, providing time, space, and facilities for experimentation and the production of artworks and the development of ideas in visual art, video, and interactive media. The second programme entailed no formal activities and artists were at liberty to organise their time, although Attard encouraged them to work on collaborative projects and interdisciplinary activities. At the end of their residency, artists were expected to show their work to an invited public.<sup>395</sup>

The first artists to participate in the self-directed Creative Residency programme were Marta Vilette Kot and Dave Anthony Burke who were in Gozo during the first week of July 2000.<sup>396</sup> Over forty artists participated in this residency up until 2010, including the three

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<sup>395</sup> See <http://norbertattard.com/en/gozo-contemporary> (accessed June 12, 2016).

<sup>396</sup> Kot is an artist who studied in Italy, France, and Poland and is currently a doctoral candidate at Columbia University; she produced an installation titled "All the Cocks Crow". Burke is a Jamaican-born artist who studied at New York University and in Italy, and now lives and works in New York.

Maltese artists—Mark Mangion, Joe Smith, and Patrick Fenech. Through Gozo Contemporary Attard managed to start something that was completely new to the local sector at the same time inviting artists from all over the world to work in Malta and Gozo, an environment that had not yet been explored from a contemporary perspective. As an artist and director of the space, this also benefited Attard’s understanding and ‘application’ of contemporary art practice.



**Fig. 58 Gozo Contemporary - Section of working space with participants, 2008.  
(Photo provided by Norbert Francis Attard.)**

### **START: The New Contemporary Art Group**

Throughout Malta’s modern art history, artists often felt the need to meet, discuss, and create pressure groups to present their ideals.<sup>397</sup> In 2002, a group of contemporary Maltese artists gave birth to START, a pressure group very much in the spirit of previous pressure groups except for the fact that the context and circumstances were different. The group was initiated “in order to champion the use of new media, alternative spaces, and contemporary theoretical grounds for their work”.<sup>398</sup> In the introduction to the group’s publication on their project of

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<sup>397</sup> The last recorded group in existence was Ġgajta, which was active in the mid-1980s. For further information see Katya Borg, “Abstract Painting in Malta in the 1980s: Its Character and Developments within an International Context” (MA Dissertation, University of Malta, 2006).

<sup>398</sup> Raphael, Vella, ed., *Cross-currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta* (Malta: Allied Publishers, 2008). p. 22.

collective installations entitled *Borders*, exhibited at Pinto Stores in Valletta in February 2003, Raphael Vella claimed that “we were dissatisfied with existing conditions for artists in Malta... we also agreed that we would never stand a chance of changing things unless we formed a lobby.”<sup>399</sup> This was the beginning of START which, as Vella remarks, was not a “movement” but was united by a “mission” and produced its own “manifesto”.<sup>400</sup>

The three-page manifesto clearly articulated their political mission. Describing themselves as a ‘visual-arts group involved in cultural activism’, the manifesto offers insights into the frustrations the group felt with the conditions for contemporary artists in Malta and identified key actions. Significantly, the manifesto described the Maltese contemporary artist engaged in “cutting-edge” art as a “homeless animal”, not valued by “outsiders” (“administrators, public institutions, the government, private companies and the press”), and without a voice in decision-making. To overcome this situation, the manifesto proposed four key areas of action under the headers of: Education; Open Village of Arts; Exhibition Spaces and Funding; and Quality.

The manifesto mentioned the lack of a proper aesthetic education structure and the absence of an art academy. It highlighted the fact that in Malta there was no university degree in fine art or a university art gallery. The manifesto focused on the lack of adequate exhibition spaces for contemporary art but also mentioned the cultural policy of that time in which an Open Village of Arts was recommended. In the manifesto the group also suggested that such a space could be of benefit both for local and international artists with a well-planned international exchange programme. They also emphasised the need of funding to acquire contemporary art and support exhibitions. In the last section of the manifesto they cited rigour and professional standards in artists’ work and exhibitions.

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<sup>399</sup> *Borders* Exhibition Catalogue, Pinto Wharf, Valletta, February 6 - March 2, 2003, p. 4.

<sup>400</sup> See Appendix for *START Manifesto*.

The manifesto, apart from declaring their intentions, motives, and views, also set out the requirements which were a necessity to develop the visual contemporary art landscape in Malta. The document was a reality check which argued that no structure, both educationally and infrastructurally, was available to grow a contemporary cultural identity. The conditions then had led the artists to exhibit in alternative places in which they could seek inspiration and exploit the spaces to present their distinctiveness as contemporary Maltese artists. This dearth of a contemporary art infrastructure prompted the START group to experiment with new ways of displaying their art and to initiate a dedicated search for alternative spaces. The group's importance lies therefore not only in the creation of contemporary art — mainly installation art — but also in the artists' engagement with spaces beyond the gallery or museum setting. As discussed below, START exhibitions were largely held in places of historical significance, offering contemporary interpretations of a specific location.

### **START: Exhibitions**

The first collective exhibition of the group that would later be self-named as START, entitled *Über*, was held in 2002. This exhibition was the brainchild of Mark Mangion who, fresh from his contemporary art studies overseas, wished to experience contemporary art practice in his homeland.<sup>401</sup> This objective succeeded since *Über* was the catalyst for all of the START events that followed. Contemporary art for Malta at this point was definitely a high aspiration since no infrastructure had as yet been developed nor was the popular conservative conception of art receptive to it.

For this exhibition Mangion managed to bring together a number of artists—some young, some outside the art scene, and, more unexpectedly, the more established artists—to exhibit their work in an unusual venue. The exhibition location was the large space beneath

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<sup>401</sup> Mark Mangion (b. 1976) studied painting at the Parsons School of Design, New York (1998-2001) and sculpture at the Royal College of Art, London (2003-2005).

Portomaso Tower in St Julian's, north of Valetta [Figure 59].<sup>402</sup> This construction site, which today houses a supermarket, looked more like a building site and less like an art gallery then, with its rough concrete pillars and unpaved floor.<sup>403</sup> This was the transfigured space where the participating artists chose to exhibit what they believed reflected contemporary representation in these challenging circumstances [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue – Pages 28 Catalogue No. 40].



**Fig. 59 *Über* (2002) collective exhibition, February 1 till 14, 2002, Portomaso, St Julian's, Malta. (This photo was kindly given to me by Norbert Francis Attard.)**

The title given to this collective exhibition comes from the German word for 'over', 'above' or 'across'. It alludes to *Übermensch*, the term coined by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche to describe a higher state to which humans might aspire. Mangion, as the curator, purposively picked a variety of Maltese artists with different artistic backgrounds and a wide spectrum of experience. The fourteen artists were Norbert Francis Attard, Chris Bianchi, Ruth Bianco, Vince Briffa, Kurt Buttigieg, Pierre Camille, Austin Camilleri, Adrian Fenech, Madeleine Gera, Victor Grima, Margerita Megally, Pierre Portelli, Raphael Vella, and Mangion himself. Among the selected artists were the established artists Attard, Bianco, Briffa, Camilleri, Portelli, Vella, and Mangion who, after this exhibition, formed START. For

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<sup>402</sup> St Julian's is located on the Maltese coast, north of Valletta. It is around 7.5 km from Valletta, 20 minutes away by car. From the 1990s St Julian's became the most densely populated tourist area in Malta, famous for its nightlife including restaurants, clubs, and hotels.

<sup>403</sup> Anna Briffa, "Living on the Edge", *Times of Malta (The Weekender)*, January 26, 2002.

this particular exhibition, site-specific or experimental significant pieces were presented. Here we have the first example of an artist curator in Malta. The concept of the artist curator, which stretches back to at least the mid-nineteenth century in Europe, became particularly visible in artist-led exhibitions in New York in the 1960s, held mainly in temporary places such as warehouses or soon-to-be demolished buildings.<sup>404</sup> This same trend was seen in London in the nineties when artists curators took advantage of cheap empty spaces after the collapse of the stock exchange in 1987. The most popularly known artists' initiative was *Freeze*, an exhibition organised by a group of young artists led by art student Damien Hirst in London.<sup>405</sup>

Mangion, apart from organising one of the first contemporary exhibitions, also set a trend which at the time was an imperative move for the sector due to the nonexistence of exhibition curators. Mangion, together with his artist colleagues, understood the need of a curator that in this case completely understood the current artistic situation.

*Cityspaces* was the second collective exhibition of the group [Figure 60].<sup>406</sup> For *Cityspaces*, contemporary artists were brought together to transform an old house in Old Mint Street in Valletta. The curator was Raphael Vella who, like Mark Mangion in *Über*, also participated as a practising artist. This exhibition, taking place just five months after *Über*, formed part of the YMCA Valletta Festival.<sup>407</sup> One of its many aims was to try to regenerate well-known as well as unknown spaces in Valletta. The site-specific installations were inaugurated during the last week of July and a publication covering the event was

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<sup>404</sup> Elena Filipovic, (2014) "When Exhibitions Become Form: On the History of the Artist as Curator," in *The Artist as Curator*, Mousse Magazine, Issue 41 (Milan, Italy: Mousse Publishing, 2014); and Elena Filipovic, (ed.) *The Artist as Curator: An Anthology*, (Milan, Italy: Mousse Publishing, 2017).

<sup>405</sup> See Norman Rosenthal. *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*. (UK: Thames and Hudson, 1998).

<sup>406</sup> Richard Car, "StArt Artists in Malta", *Studio International*, October 28, 2002 (accessed February 10, 2015) <http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/start-artists-in-malta>. Car interviewed Raphael Vella; the review, shows a strong interest in the space of the empty building which once acted as a brothel. Car describes a number of the exhibited works on the brothel theme, including Mangion's *Kama Sutra* and Patrick Fenech's *Martyrdom* of an ex-Model, and works related to the impact of Roman Catholicism in Malta.

<sup>407</sup> Rozanne Zammit, "Artists Transform Old Bordello", *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 14, 2002.

launched.<sup>408</sup> Unusually, visitors were invited to visit the artists-in-residence at stipulated times to see their work-in-progress and talk to the artists. This was a rare opportunity for the public to understand and appreciate the different processes involved in the making of art. Public talks by many of the artists involved were also organised throughout the month.



**Fig. 60** *Cityspaces* exhibition poster, July 1 till August 4, 2002, 78 Old Mint street, Valletta. (Author's Collection)

The concept for the site-specific installation focused on the element of emptiness found in the selected house and its reputed former history as a brothel. The cutting-edge interpretations and interactions these artists were able to employ firmly put them at the forefront of contemporary Maltese art. The inconvenient situation of not having a contemporary art space made artists more inventive and they looked for alternative spaces to exhibit in. For site-specific art projects, the role of the artist also often changes and in the introduction of the catalogue, Raphael Vella describes the team of artists as topoanalysts, an architect, and archaeologists, who have to listen to voices and read the walls of the rooms.<sup>409</sup> Vella questions if the house selected is really empty. He continues by arguing that if this is the case, how can an artist interpret emptiness?

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<sup>408</sup> *Cityspaces*, Exhibition Catalogue, Malta, 2002.

<sup>409</sup> Richard Car, "StArt Artists in Malta", *Studio International*, October 28, 2002 (accessed February 10, 2015) <http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/start-artists-in-malta>



The ten rooms within the house became palimpsests where memories had to be rewritten, and where the artists combined the past, present, and future of Valletta. By exhibiting in an alternative space that is neither a gallery nor a museum within Valletta, the capital city, the artist is giving a new identity to the space since the art presented is integrated with the history and materiality of the rooms. The artists involved in this project were inspired by the building's history as a brothel. Some of the artists, including Mangion and Fenech, used disturbing images of nude or semi-nude models, while others, like Vella and Portelli, used Roman Catholic religious objects, such as books and candle wax to question different aspects of the prior usage of the building. Further on, the intimate scenario of a house was changed due to the public dimension of visual arts. Nonetheless, the poetic aspect of the artistic element was open to interpretations—interpretations that introduced the viewer to time, site, and identity. For *Cityspaces*, the seven artists who had participated in *Über*—Attard, Bianco, Briffa, Camilleri, Portelli, Vella and Mangion—were joined by Gabriel Caruana, Raymond Pitre, Anton Grech, Charles Gatt and Patrick Fenech who all have different artistic practices [Figure 56].



**Fig. 61 *START Artist (Few Artists) 2002*, from left to right: Austin Camilleri, Anton Grech, Pierre Portelli, Ray Pitre, David Darmanin (YMCA coordinator), Raphael Vella, Charles (City) Gatt, Norbert Francis Attard. (Courtesy of Allied Newspapers.)**

START held another unique artistic event in an exceptional alternative space in Floriana. Pinto Stores, situated in the Grand Harbour area of Valletta, has historical associations with the Knights of St John, the British Empire and, naturally, the shipping trade

within the harbour. The exhibition, entitled ‘Borders’, remained open to the public until the 2nd of March 2003, one week before the referendum on EU accession was held in Malta.

The title “Borders” carries several layers of meaning. Firstly, the site itself is next to the sea terminal, where thousands of tourists disembark every year. Secondly, the proximity of the event to the referendum implied that some of the artists had reacted to the then current political situation in Malta—one that involved a decision about future borders. Lastly, all the artists associated with START were trying to break accepted artistic conventions in Malta and to introduce new ways of interacting with a space. In this last sense, the artists were seen as transgressing artistic borders. For instance, the site was in a process of change as it was being architecturally restored to be transformed into a commercial area for tourists. In view of this the START artists had to install their works inside a building that was in a state of flux. This situation, which entailed several difficulties, was also perceived by all participating artists as a challenge.

The UK-based artist Richard Davies was invited to co-curate the exhibition together with Raphael Vella.<sup>410</sup> Davies and Vella recognised the uniqueness of the timing of the event as Malta was on the threshold of EU accession and gearing up for a decisive referendum. The proposed exhibition concepts were diversity, globalisation, and the mobility of the art world. The participating artists realised that they were engaging in two roles: those of a contemporary Maltese artist and a contemporary global artist. This dual positioning was materialised in the Pinto Stores, a site crucial to the history of Malta and the Mediterranean. The artists involved perceived this event as a bold opportunity to change perceptions and break down entrenched borders that would allow a more innovative contemporary art idiom

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<sup>410</sup> Richard Davies is former Director of Fine Art at the University of the Creative Arts at Canterbury, a Visiting Professor in Fine Art at Remnin University, Beijing, and artist whose work is in public collections including Tate Gallery and Royal Academy of Arts, London, The Museum of the City of New York, and Satagaya Museum, Tokyo.

to become accessible to the Maltese public [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue - Page 30 Catalogue No. 42].

As such, the *Borders* project was not about setting up borders of space, time or definition, but about dismantling them. The artists involved in this project were Norbert Francis Attard, Ruth Bianco, Vince Briffa, Austin Camilleri, Savio Deguara, Patrick Fenech, Charles Gatt, Anton Grech, Mark Mangion, Pierre Portelli, and Raphael Vella [Figure 62]. Savio Deguara was a newcomer to the group who also participated in the Blitz exhibition in 2005, discussed below.<sup>411</sup>



**Fig. 62 *Borders* catalogue cover, February 6 till March 2 2003, Pinto Wharfs, Floriana. (Author's Collection)**

An eighty-page book reproducing photos taken of the *Borders* project is the only surviving document that reflects the different style, approaches, and media used by the participating artists.<sup>412</sup> Indeed, this exhibition was a celebration of difference and diversity in its non-subscription to a single style or philosophy.<sup>413</sup> In this exhibition, the visitor had the opportunity to experience the combination of video art and site-specific installation pieces mainly by Vince Briffa, Pierre Portelli, Norbert Francis Attard, and Mark Mangion together

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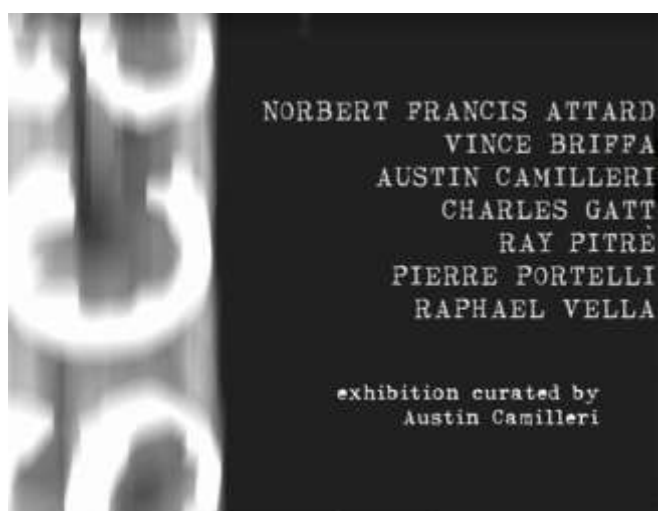
<sup>411</sup> No reviews exist for this exhibition. The only related article is the review of the exhibition catalogue by Kenneth Wain, "Starting at the Borders", *The Sunday Times of Malta*, August 10, 2003.

<sup>412</sup> *Borders*, Exhibition Catalogue, 6 February- 2 March, Pinto Wharfs, Valletta, Malta 2003.

<sup>413</sup> To help publicise *Borders*, most of the artists in the exhibition were featured in the popular television programme award for Malta Song for Europe during the first week of February 2001.

with conceptual installations created in a variety of media by Ruth Bianco, Austin Camilleri, Charles Gatt, Savio Deguara, and Raphael Vella to transmit the idea behind the Borders project.

The next exhibition organised by START was held in Gozo, Malta's sister island. The exhibition was entitled *Escape* and the premises chosen by the artist and curator Austin Camilleri were the old prisons of Ċittadella in Victoria, the capital city of Gozo in the centre of the island [Figure 63]. Camilleri's concept for this exhibition was to "create an osmosis between the artworks and the memory-laden cells at the old prisons in the Ċittadella, presenting an artist in society/society in art dyad."<sup>414</sup> Camilleri wanted to have a dialogue between artists and generations of prisoners who left their mark in these very cells. Suffering and boredom are evident in the graffiti on the walls which combine with the artists' works reflecting frustration, memory, absence, and seclusion. [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue – Pages 31 Catalogue No. 43].



**Fig. 63 Detail from *Escape* poster, May 23 to June 21 2003, old prisons, the Ċittadella, Victoria, Gozo. (Author's Collection)**

The participating artists included two veterans, Raymond Pitre, who presented one of his sculptural metal works entitled *Swivelling with Aura* (1989-99), and Charles Gatt, who exhibited a jukebox entitled *Collective Guilt Collective Punishment* (2003), while Norbert

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<sup>414</sup> *Escape*, Exhibition unpaginated catalogue, 23 May – 26 June, Citadella, Gozo, 2003.

Francis Attard exhibited *The Zealot* (2002) a digital print showing himself as the Messiah, and Vince Briffa was represented with a silent video with shots of a deceased cancer victim's home entitled *Immigrant* (2002). Raphael Vella exhibited one of his works from the *BOOKS* series *Oubliette* (2003) showing burnt diaries that were part of his PhD.<sup>415</sup> Another START artist represented in this exhibition was Pierre Portelli who used marble slabs to create a reminiscence of a tomb cover reminding viewers of the absence of so many anonymous people entitled *Blank* (2002). Austin Camilleri meanwhile exhibited *Th3ee* (2001-3), vinamold representations of babies' heads whose growth has been stopped short by the strangely shaped glass vessels that contain them.

In 2005, the highly thought-provoking exhibition entitled *Blitz* was held by START and curated once again by Raphael Vella [Figure 64]. As with *Cityspaces* and *Escape*, *Blitz* was about site-specific interventions in a dialogue with an intriguing hidden space: a labyrinthine World War II shelter in Birgu which by 2005 still formed part of the Malta at War Museum. Unlike old Valletta residential spaces, visits to such shelters were uncommon. In fact, it was at this time that numerous war shelters were becoming accessible to the general public. The challenges provoked by the artists' work were an invitation to the viewer to explore the labyrinth, immerse themselves in its murkiness and its memories, and seek out the art therein. [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue – Pages 33 Catalogue No. 46].



**Fig. 64 *Blitz* sign, April 2 till June 1, 2005, Couvre Porte, Wartime Shelter, Birgu. (Author's Collection)**

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<sup>415</sup> Raphael Vella, "The Unpresentable: Artistic Biblioclasm and the Sublime" (PhD thesis, University of the Arts, 2006)

As part of the sixty-year anniversary commemorating the end of World War II, the artists invited the audience to reflect on wartime hardships, the history of the Maltese nation, the misery of war, and its new forms. As in their previous projects, the artists fed on the layers of history encapsulated in this chosen site so that the spaces did not remain simple backdrops but become integrated into the works. The architectural features therefore became an essential part of the art installation in these site-specific works. Through appropriation of the site, the artists once again succeeded in creating a dialectics of art and site, harmony and contrast, sadness and humour, and safety and discomfort. The installations were inspired by memories of the artists' grandparents and by the nation's history.

As Raphael Vella explains:

*Blitz* is a contemporary art exhibition drawing on the history of Malta during World War II. The layers of history in the labyrinthine spaces at Couvre Porte do not simply provide a backdrop for art, but become an extension of the artists' works, a marriage of imagery, limestone, architectural space and wartime memories.<sup>416</sup>

It is interesting to note that this exhibition had a well-attended opening night. The visitors were excited when they saw how contemporary art was being combined with heritage.<sup>417</sup> It was indeed an interesting outcome where visitors could appreciate the fusion of the past with the present. The large number of visitors followed one another around the shelters. The contemporary installation within the space, in conjunction with the crowd's presence, gave one an idea of what it might have been like during wartime to share such a confined space with so many others seeking refuge during the regular air raids.

The project that followed, the *Artifecture Art Project*, curated by Briffa, extended the idea of an alternative space into a totally different dimension to those of the other contemporary art projects [Figure 65]. No gallery or 'alternative' space was required as in previous START exhibitions. Instead, the space negotiated was through the printed medium

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<sup>416</sup> "Blitz at Couvre Porte Wartime Shelter", *The Sunday Times of Malta*, April 3, 2005.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

with a local newspaper as the platform. From January until April 2007 readers of the *MaltaToday on Sunday* paper would come across a large image of a local popular landmark that covered the whole page. Closer inspection of the image would reveal unusual alterations. Several images of animated penguins, sharks, and controversial text or illustrations were deliberately added and edited, while others had unconventional compositions [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue - Pages 36 Catalogue No. 49]. Through the popular press readers were being challenged since no further information was given—only the title of the works, the place where the photo had been taken, and the project title were included as captions. This scant and possibly ambiguous information tended to cause frustration among readers, who ended up feeling curious to know and learn more about the image in question, especially if this appeared familiar but not quite.<sup>418</sup>



**Fig. 65 *Happy People* by Vince Briffa, *MaltaToday on Sunday*, January 2007. (Image provided by Vince Briffa.)**

The last collective START exhibition, *eight: eighteen*, discussed in chapter six, was curated by Mangion in 2008 at the ‘white cube’ space of Malta Contemporary Art, in Marsa [Figure 61]. As curator of the first group exhibition linked to START, it was fitting that he should both conclude the group’s collective activity and simultaneously establish for the first time a space where local contemporary artists could display their work.

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<sup>418</sup> Vince Briffa interview with the author on May 28, 2015.

In the space of six years, START artists were considered among the leading figures of contemporary art practice in Malta. They were extremely influential in Malta both as an art group and individuals, and their work and exhibitions are recognised as central to the growth of the local contemporary art culture by their contemporaries and number of researchers.<sup>419</sup> As individuals they also continued to teach at University level and to curate exhibitions that included overseas and local artists.<sup>420</sup> START were distinctive in their willingness to mentor and collaborate with up-and-coming artists. The initial ingredient of confidence was made visibly tangible in the new space and the exhibition. *eight: eighteen* turned out to be an immense achievement, both conceptually and stylistically [Figure 66].<sup>421</sup> It represented the diversity of Maltese contemporary art. For example, Austin Camilleri, with two large flat works entitled *Kelma Bejn Tnejn* (Word Between Two/Private Conversation), paired up the iconic Mona Lisa with the then Minister for Gozo Giovanna Debono. Added significance to the work is that the figures were the product of a Chinese printing house. Emanuel Bonnici presented *Choca(t)holic*, a small mobile food stall offering many dark-chocolate Baby Jesuses which were meant to be consumed by the visitors. These are only two examples from the several works on show [See Volume 2: Thesis Catalogue - Pages 42 to 45 Catalogue No. 56].

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<sup>419</sup> See Romina Delia, "Life is a Play and the Museum is its Stage: Contemporary Immersive Performance in the Baroque Palace" (PhD. thesis, University of Leicester, 2016); Graham Gurr, "An Investigation into Contemporary Art on the Islands of Malta" (MRes. Thesis, The Robert Gordon University, 2008) and Nicola Petroni, "A Study of Maltese Installation Art" (B.A. (Art) diss., University of Malta, 2012).

<sup>420</sup> Raphael Vella and Vince Briffa are Associate Professors and Head of Departments at the University of Malta. Ruth Bianco, Patrick Fenech, Austin Camilleri lecture at the same university. Mark Mangion curated a number of exhibitions both locally and overseas and later in 2008 launched Malta Contemporary Art, while Norbert Francis Attard continued providing artist residency programmes and in 2018 opened a new contemporary gallery in Valletta.

<sup>421</sup> Lisa Gwen Baldacchino, "Boost for a run-down area", *Times of Malta (The Weekender)*, December 27, 2008.





**Fig. 66** *eight: eighteen*, START Exhibition, MCA – Malta Contemporary Art, Marsa, 2008. (Image provided by Mark Mangion.)

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

At the turn of the millennium, Malta was preparing to become a member state of the European Union and as part of this process, between 1999 and 2003, the Maltese government instigated a radical review of the cultural field that led to the decentralisation of cultural management, the creation of the Centre for Creativity—developed within St James Cavalier to democratise cultural events and provide opportunities for bilateral and multilateral projects—the establishment of Heritage Malta in 2001, and the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts (MCCA) in 2002. This is the first analysis of the Centre’s activities and, as I have shown, although the Centre for Creativity did not focus exclusively on the contemporary, its first two exhibitions, *Art in Malta Today* and *A Changed World*, demonstrated a commitment to both international artistic exchange and to foregrounding the work of contemporary Maltese artists. These dual aspects were to continue to shape the activities of the centre throughout the first decade of the millennium. The temporary relocation of Malta Contemporary Art (MCA) from its Marsa warehouse building to the upper galleries of the St James Cavalier in 2010 added further impetus to the showcasing of contemporary artworks by Maltese and international artists, and the space remained an important site for contemporary art after the MCA’s departure in 2011.

Nonetheless, Malta still lacked a designated contemporary art space and spaces of exchange. Notably, it was artists as individuals or groups that intervened to create these spaces through developing alternative models of residencies through Attard's Gozo Contemporary and of expanding the sites of display of contemporary art beyond the limited existing institutional spaces. As I have argued, these initiatives were imperative to the development of a new contemporary ecosystem. The individuals who formed START self-curated their exhibitions in alternative spaces away from Valletta, the capital city, which had hitherto been the centre of culture. This new outlook strengthened the theme of expansion by moving beyond previous borders. Significantly, the group also sought to interconnect the local and global through international collaborations that promoted the professionalization of artists-curator, as further discussed in Chapter Six.

START created a legacy of artist-led initiatives which in subsequent years voiced artists' opinions, especially with respect to government policies. Until the turn of the century, there was no interface between government policy makers and contemporary visual art groups. It was only during the Valletta Contemporary Art Forum of 2007 that contemporary artists were involved in decision-making.

With the opening of the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, the launch of the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts, after the introduction of the cultural act of 2002, a number of initiatives organised by artists made dialogue on innovation and contemporary art statements more possible. This manifested in 2007 with the launch of the Valletta Creative Forum at the St James Cavalier, Centre for Creativity in collaboration with the British Council, St James Cavalier, the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts, and the Tourism and Culture Ministry. This six-month national forum brought together artists, policy-makers, institutions, politicians, business entrepreneurs and professionals from Malta and abroad to stimulate a debate over current cultural issues.

It is important to note the British connections that are evident throughout the chapter in the number of exhibitions organised or supported by the British Council at the St James Cavalier Centre and in the START co-curated exhibition where one of the two curators was the British artist, educator, and curator Richard Davies. In hindsight, the changes analysed and discussed in this chapter may be seen as vital preparatory work both by artists and institutions for the significant changes that were to happen in the following years when Malta became part of the European Union. Here, as discussed in the next chapter, a stronger European influence becomes evident in the organised exhibitions and collaborations which reflect the new dynamic of the global environment of an ex-British colony as part of the European Union.

## Chapter 5

### The European Union and its Impact on Malta's Art World

This chapter focuses on Malta's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004 and examines the local political and artistic scenario immediately before and after this important date, in order to evaluate its impact on contemporary Maltese art and exhibition making. EU membership had been a political matter for a long time in Malta: in 1990, the country first applied to become a member; the application was later withdrawn and renewed again in 1996 and 1998 respectively. It was only in 2004 that Malta, together with nine other countries, joined the union. The unification with other countries meant the endorsement of a number of treaties, including the Treaty of Lisbon, a treaty which regulated and promoted the rich cultural diversity of Europe. Apart from this treaty, in 2000, the EU launched a programme called Culture 2000 to promote and fund cultural diversity activities, and in 2003 Malta signed an agreement to fully participate in this programme.<sup>422</sup>

A key focus of this chapter is on artist mobility and networking which were regarded as essential for Malta's new positioning in Europe. This was clearly outlined in the government report, *The Cultural Scene in Malta, 2004-5*, which provided the basis for far reaching cultural reforms in Malta.<sup>423</sup> This chapter also analyses several exhibitions that reflected a new national outlook towards contemporary art practice and identifies the processes through which artists were selected to participate in EU exhibitions. It further identifies how new opportunities of studying and exhibiting with other European artists shaped Maltese artistic practices in the first few years after unification and the significance of

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<sup>422</sup> Launched in 2000, the Culture 2000 programme ran until 2006, with a budget of €236.4 million dedicated to promoting a common cultural area, characterised by its cultural diversity and shared cultural heritage. See [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/previous-programmes/culture-2000\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/previous-programmes/culture-2000_en) ; [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/previous-programmes\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/previous-programmes_en). (accessed January 10, 2017).

<sup>423</sup> Mario Azzopardi, "The Cultural Scene in Malta 2004-2005: An Interim Report," Ministry of Education, Malta 2005.

the first publication on contemporary art in Malta, *Cross Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta*, 2008.

### **5.1 EU Membership: A New Identity for the Maltese Artist**

The possibility of Malta becoming part of the European Union (EU) was hotly debated between the two main political parties. On the one hand, the Malta Labour Party (MLP) was against membership and promoted the idea of a partnership with the Union while remaining outside it; the Nationalist Party (PN) on the other hand was in favour of full membership. Nonetheless, the EU still had to accept Malta's application as a full member and the Treaty of Accession had to be negotiated and then signed.

Malta formally applied for membership in July 1990, but initial progress was slow. The main reason was that some member states did not see any benefits in having Malta as part of the EU. This was especially so as, coincidentally, Cyprus had applied for EU membership just before Malta. The EU member states, perhaps inevitably, perceived correlations between the two applications and exercised caution. In view of these and other political uncertainties, Malta missed its opportunity in the 1995 enlargement of the EU.<sup>424</sup>

After the PN's electoral defeat in 1996, the new ruling party, the MLP, froze Malta's EU membership application. Nevertheless, with the premature collapse of the new MLP government in 1998, the PN renewed its electoral mandate and restarted negotiating accession conditions. The Helsinki European Council of 1999 invited Malta and five other candidate countries—Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Slovakia—to open negotiations in February 2000. Strong diplomatic action at all political levels was taken to convince European leaders that Malta was serious about membership.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> Patrick Tabone, "Malta's EU Story: How Ten Year of EU Membership have changed the Country", (Malta: The Today Public Policy Institute, 2014) (accessed May 20, 2015.)

[https://www.um.edu.mt/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/223769/TPPI\\_Malta\\_EU.pdf](https://www.um.edu.mt/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/223769/TPPI_Malta_EU.pdf).

<sup>425</sup> See [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/hell\\_en.htm](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/hell_en.htm). (accessed January 10, 2017).

In the meantime, Eurobarometer surveys taken at the time revealed Malta as a country with an uncertain attitude towards the Union. The fears of the general public identified in these surveys during the negotiations phase mirrored the debates in the country; these included “loss of power”, “transferred jobs”, “accession is expensive”, “problems for farmers”, and an “increase in organised crime”.<sup>426</sup> The experience of the negotiations themselves, however, seems to have had a favourable effect on public perceptions towards the EU and accession. This was possible because the Malta-EU Steering and Action Committee (MEUSAC) ensured a level of civil society participation in the process.<sup>427</sup>

In a referendum held on March 8, 2003, which saw a turnout of 91%, the majority of the Maltese population voted in favour of joining the European Union. Of the nine referenda that took place in the acceding countries, Malta’s referendum featured both the highest turnout and the tightest result, with 53.6% in favour and 46.4% against. Together with Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, Malta became a part of the European Union in the following year, 2004.<sup>428</sup> By 2005, both political parties endorsed the European Union Constitutional Treaty by a unanimous vote in parliament. Malta’s membership enhanced the island’s possibilities to participate actively in the EU’s cultural programmes.

### **European Union, Malta, and Culture**

The EU has several fields that act upon the cultural supplements of member states and these mainly exist in the form of cultural policies. The cultural sector is also affected by the provisions of the treaties which do not explicitly pertain to culture, but which comprise

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<sup>426</sup> Patrick Tabone, “Malta’s EU Story: How Ten Year of EU Membership have changed the Country”, (Malta: The Today Public Policy Institute, 2014) 20 (accessed May 20, 2015.)

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

<sup>428</sup> Alexander B. Murphy, “The May 2004 Enlargement of the European Union: View from Two years out,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 2006, 47:6, 635–646 (accessed December 5, 2015).  
<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.496.4528&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

specific articles and actions related to the cultural field.<sup>429</sup> For example, the Treaty of Lisbon places great importance on culture. This international agreement which amends the two previous treaties which form the constitutional basis of the EU,<sup>430</sup> was signed by the EU Member States on December 13, 2007 and came into force on December 1, 2009.<sup>431</sup>

The Treaty of Lisbon binds the EU to consider the rich cultural diversity of Europe. Although it is not authorised to harmonise legal and administrative regulations of the member states in the cultural sector, it has had the effect of standardising EU policy formats across those areas in which it has become involved. The design, focus, and implementation of European cultural policies varies across countries. Some have a centralised, ministry-supervised structure; others are decentralised. In some countries, public intervention plays the ‘sovereign’ role in culture; others employ a combination of public and private interventions.<sup>432</sup> After years of independence, Malta had to abide with policies and European regulation which included investing in resources to develop and integrate culture in local communities, and this was something new for Malta. These new measures were followed by the publication of the first National Cultural Policy in Malta, which will be discussed in chapter six.

The financial assistance which the EU made available under its social and regional policies (amounting to at least 500 million euro per year) means that Europe is a highly significant player in terms of cultural development.<sup>433</sup> Since 2000, drawing on earlier

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<sup>429</sup> European Parliament at your Service (accessed December 20, 2015).

[http://www.euoparl.europa.eu/atyourservice/en/displayFtu.html?ftuId=FTU\\_5.13.1.html](http://www.euoparl.europa.eu/atyourservice/en/displayFtu.html?ftuId=FTU_5.13.1.html).

<sup>430</sup> The Treaty of Lisbon combined the Maastricht Treaty (1993) and the Treaty of Rome (1957).

<sup>431</sup> The Lisbon Treaty amends the Maastricht Treaty (1993), known in updated form as the Treaty on European Union (2007) or TEU. The Maastricht Treaty was not just about making culture a fully fledged aspect of European action; it also made it incumbent on the EU to take cultural matters into account across all its policies. This treaty had a specific article dedicated to culture. Article 128 of Title IX Culture urges the Community to bring to the fore ‘the common cultural heritage...of the European peoples.’ *Treaty on European Union* (accessed December 20, 2015). [https://europa.eu/european-union/sites/europaeu/files/docs/body/treaty\\_on\\_european\\_union\\_en.pdf](https://europa.eu/european-union/sites/europaeu/files/docs/body/treaty_on_european_union_en.pdf).

<sup>432</sup> European Parliament - Policy Department Structural and Cohesion Policies, “Financing the Arts and Culture in European Union (accessed December 20, 2015). [http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/files/134/en/Financing\\_the\\_Arts\\_and\\_Culture\\_in\\_the\\_EU.pdf](http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/files/134/en/Financing_the_Arts_and_Culture_in_the_EU.pdf).

<sup>433</sup> European Commission, *A Community of Cultures: The European Union and the Arts*, 2002 (accessed December 20, 2015). <http://www.programculture.cz/res/data/002/000251.pdf>.

pioneering programmes on heritage, translation and artistic cooperation, the EU has had its first framework programme devoted entirely to cultural matters: Culture 2000, the cornerstone of the EU's cultural activity.<sup>434</sup>

By 2004, following radical measures in the cultural sector that were implemented in Malta between 1998 and 2003, major changes occurred in the Maltese cultural sector, as discussed in chapter four. With reference to the report *The Cultural Scene in Malta 2004-2005: An Interim Report*, written by Mario Azzopardi and submitted to the Interarts Foundation (Spain), new actions were launched by public authorities.<sup>435</sup> The report refers to February 2003 when the Maltese government and the European Commission signed an agreement for Malta to participate fully in the EU programme known as Culture 2000. The agreement allowed for Culture 2000 participation to be funded equally by Malta and the EU, but established that this would be completely financed by the Union once Malta attained full membership.<sup>436</sup> This was an important opportunity for Malta to mobilise its artists and cultural animators, and to enable it to participate in inter-cultural dialogue, initiatives for social integration, and socio-economic development.

The report also included training schemes in cultural and artistic management, as well as artist mobility. Mobility was regarded as essential for Malta; besides making an active contribution to Euro-Mediterranean realities, it would prevent an insular mentality and strengthen values against racism and xenophobia. The National Youth Policy Document for Malta (2003) encourages the state to continue supporting the mobility of young adults through various international programmes such as transnational exchanges and programmes organised by local councils and European youth centres.

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<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

<sup>435</sup> Mario Azzopardi (b.1944) is a poet, theatre director, and local art journalist. He was involved in a number of important cultural projects and publications including the draft of the Cultural Policy published in 2001 as discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>436</sup> The programme would offer new opportunities for musicians, actors, painters, sculptors, and writers, providing peers from the European mainland in areas such as the performing arts, visual and plastic arts, literature, heritage, and cultural history.



Mobility and exchange were therefore regarded as key to the development of the cultural sector of a small island. This was also highlighted by Malta's Council for Culture and the Arts (MCCA) Chairman Joseph F.X. Zahra in an interview held in February 2003. To the question "What difference will entry into the EU make to the arts in Malta?", Zahra replied that:

It will make a positive difference in two paradoxical ways actually. On the one hand, it will give Maltese artists greater mobility and a larger stage on which to exhibit their talents. On the other hand, it will make us more aware of our own artistic identity. This will give us the opportunity to hone and define our unique Euro-Mediterranean artistic heritage.<sup>437</sup>

The question of Malta's Euro-Mediterranean identity was not a new one given its geographical positioning and historical experience of invasions from both the west and the east.<sup>438</sup> While the Order of St John and the British Empire maintained a continuous cultural reference to the continent of Europe their main economic interest was concentrated on the Mediterranean.<sup>439</sup> In spite of Malta's highly polarised two-party political system, it can be said that with entry to the EU Malta's Euro-Mediterranean identity managed to transcend national divisions, while it encouraged mobility and networking.

## 5.2 Mobility and Networking

Being able to travel and get involved in major projects organised by other European countries offered significant opportunities for the individuals working in the Maltese cultural sector as mobility and networking are key to developing and showcasing contemporary art practices. After 2004, this opportunity was offered to all those interested. Among the many events there were visual art exhibitions organised to celebrate the unification of the ten counties which

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<sup>437</sup> "Banking on the Arts, Show Time", *Times of Malta* (The Times Supplement), February 7, 2003.

<sup>438</sup> See Jon P. Mitchell, *Ambivalent Europeans: Ritual, Memory and the Public Sphere in Malta*, (Abingdon-on-Thames, UK, Routledge:2001).

<sup>439</sup> In the earlier part of the British period, with the opening of trade with the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, Malta's trade and commercial exchanges were again centred in the Mediterranean. While the Order of St John were interested in distributing their policies in the Mediterranean.

joined the EU in 2004. Apart from the activities related to Culture 2000, there were other initiatives organised by individual countries.

However, as I will show, although the new opportunities and art projects proved to be essential for the growth of the local artistic scene into a global culture, contemporary art practitioners also faced difficulties in a national context not yet ready to fully support contemporary art. Becoming part of such an important economic union was not enough to change the island mentality and consequently new policies had to be introduced to frame and assist the artists as discussed in Chapter six.

On May 1, 2004, Malta officially became a member state of the EU. The then Maltese Minister of Tourism and Culture was Francis Zammit Dimech, a regular contributor to *The Sunday Times of Malta*.<sup>440</sup> In one of his articles, entitled “Calling for Culture”, Dimech gave a breakdown of his first meeting with culture ministers from the EU member states.<sup>441</sup> The article stated that the cultural ministers agreed on the significance of the sector, particularly in the context of more pronounced cultural diversity in the EU, the need to foster the mobility of artists, encourage initiatives, and remove obstacles. Another recommendation focused on the mobility of museum collections between the member states.<sup>442</sup>

Among the many EU events held, contemporary visual art exhibitions were organised by different countries. Two of the first in 2004 that included Maltese artists were *Bodyworks*, held in Cyprus, and *Breakthrough*, in the Netherlands. The contemporary artist Vince Briffa represented Malta in *Bodyworks*. He exhibited at the Powerhouse in the heart of Nicosia’s old city, alongside twenty-six other artists from EU member states. Briffa had been selected to

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<sup>440</sup> Dr Francis Zammit Dimech (b. 1954) served Maltese politics as a member of the House of Representatives between 1987 and 2017. He held numerous ministerial responsibilities including communications, infrastructure, foreign affairs, tourism, and the arts. Dimech is currently a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) representing Malta.

<sup>441</sup> Francis Zammit Dimech, “Calling for Culture”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 18, 2004.

<sup>442</sup> The main exhibition was organised by Heritage Malta, the museum’s national agency, in which the museum collection used was the *Monaci in Armi and Wonders from Prehistory: Neolithic and Bronze Age Malta 5200-750 BC*, held in 2004.

participate by the Cypriot Pierides Foundation.<sup>443</sup> The exhibition curators were Yiannis Toumazis and Androula Michael, and a catalogue with the title *Bodyworks-Sports and Contemporary Art* was published. The exhibition opened on 1 May as part of the EU accession celebrations. In view of such a significant occasion—a contemporary Maltese artist exhibiting together with other fellow European artists on the day of the unification—one would imagine that publicity or a review would have featured in Malta, but this was not the case.<sup>444</sup>

Briffa's work consisted of two digital prints and a three-piece video and audio installation shown on monitors, entitled *Spiral* (2004) [Figure 67]. *Spiral* focuses on the then current debate on the post-human condition and questions the way we are trying to redesign our bodies in the constant pursuit of higher physical and mental achievements. It presents an insight into the performance of a sportsman's life cycle, focusing on the relatively short career of a sportsman. The same work also argues for the multi-tasking capabilities of the human brain when compared to its machine counterpart—the computer.



**Fig. 67 *Spiral* (2004) by Vince Briffa. Two digital prints and a three-piece video and audio installation shown on monitors, *Bodyworks* exhibition, Pierides Museum of Contemporary Art, Nicosia, Cyprus, 2004. (Image provided by Vince Briffa).**

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<sup>443</sup> “Artist’s work at Nicosia Exhibition”, *Times of Malta*, August 7, 2004.

<sup>444</sup> The only brief mention of this exhibition was found in the *Times of Malta* (August 7, 2004). No publicity was given to the exhibition. Vince Briffa Interview with the author on May 28 2015.

Ruth Bianco and Austin Camilleri were the two artists selected by a curatorial panel in Holland for *Breakthrough*, an exhibition of works of art originating from the ten new member states of the EU. This took place in the Grote Kerk in The Hague between July and August 2004. The aim of this exhibition was to present the latest developments in the field of art together with the diversity of art in the new member states. Selection for *Breakthrough* was apparently based on ‘artists who have proved they can sail through uncharted waters and who have an influence on contemporary cultural developments in seeking to bring about a breakthrough in contemporary art in their country.’<sup>445</sup> This selection criteria was very significant because it shows that among Maltese contemporary artists, which in this case included Ruth Bianco and Austin Camilleri, there were artists whose work was influential and innovative [See Volume 2: Catalogue – Pages 32 Catalogue No. 45].

Bianco presented *Wall of Prayer* (2001), a variable installation that conceptualises territorial transitions between mechanic and tactile passages on paper and a video called *Double-take* [Figure 63]. Her other two exhibits in *Breakthrough* were special edition artworks entitled *Red Alert* (2003) and *If I Just Turn and Run* (2002).<sup>446</sup> Camilleri’s work consisted of a site-oriented installation of photographic images realised as three enlarged polaroids entitled *Gnadenstuhl* (English for *Seat of Mercy*) (2004), contextualised through a special onsite pre-visit [Figure 68]. In this work, iconographic ritualistic significance is combined with spatial displacement contemplated within the Trinitarian mystery. Across their diverse artistic expressions, both artists worked with different materials, including audio-visual, site-specific considerations, and spatial interrelations.<sup>447</sup>

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<sup>445</sup> ““Breakthrough” Malta represented at The Hague”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 25, 2004.

<sup>446</sup> An edition of these works form part of the Tate, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Royal College in London collection. These were transferred a number of years after this exhibition.

<sup>447</sup> *Breakthrough: Perspectives on art from the ten new EU member states*, July 2 to August 29, 2004, Grote Kerk, The Hague. The catalogue only gives a short summary description of the works.



**Fig. 68: *Wall of Prayer* (2001-2004) by Ruth Bianco, digital prints installation 40 x 30 cm x 80 works and *GNADENSTUHL* (2004) by Austin Camilleri, digital print installation 90 x 60 cm x 3 works. *Breakthrough* exhibition, The Hague, Netherlands, 2004. (Images provided by Ruth Bianco and Austin Camilleri)**

Unfortunately, the two Maltese artists taking part in *Breakthrough* had no support from the Maltese government even though funding was a pre-set condition agreed on by all ten accession countries through their respective authorities, as confirmed in the organisers' initial invitation,<sup>448</sup> and Zammit Dimech's above-mentioned article supporting mobility in July 2004.<sup>449</sup> It seems that the Maltese government did not support this event on the grounds that the funds had already been exhausted.<sup>450</sup> This exhibition had no publicity in the local media except for one article in *The Sunday Times of Malta*.

These unhappy circumstances shed light on the problems related to the varying levels of support for contemporary artists from local governments. On the 'larger stage' of Europe, it became clearly evident that Malta was the least supportive and co-operative country at this important international event. Supporting contemporary art projects was still a very new concept for the Maltese government even though such events were encouraged by the EU treatise. At this time, such backing only came through the personal efforts of Alan Bugeja

<sup>448</sup> *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 25, 2004.

<sup>449</sup> Zammit Dimech, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 18, 2004.

<sup>450</sup> *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 25, 2004.

and the Dutch organising body's decision to extend partial support outside its agreement so that the Maltese artists' expenses could be met.<sup>451</sup> Ironically, however, in the second part of Zammit Dimech's July article "Calling for Culture", the minister had cited the exhibition *The New Ten*, held in Germany, as an example of such government support of artist mobility.<sup>452</sup> Here, the two selected Maltese artists, Trevor Borg (b. 1976) and James Vella Clark (b. 1975) were supported to present abstract and semi-abstract work. The revelation that modernist works were financially supported and promoted by the local government was felt by some contemporary artists who voiced their concerns in the press.<sup>453</sup>

The marginality of experimental forms of contemporary art was reflected in the sporadic and minimal official support received by such artists in Malta, as well as in the lack of a daring, cultural vision that could engage artists intellectually and attempt to render their careers economically viable. If, as Minister Zammit Dimech had claimed, "we persist with measurements that are strictly economical", Maltese artistic experimentation would continue to lack the support that contemporary art received in many other European countries. In this scenario, some Maltese artists typically ended up imitating or repeating artistic forms that were easily marketable and that could therefore be measured in "strictly economic" terms.<sup>454</sup> The possibility of selling works was, and still remains, a great achievement for artists as apart from being a source of financial aid it also affects the artists' production and development. Apart from this, instead of focusing on long-term projects that would empower visual artists as well as creative members of the younger generation, the little funding that existed for the

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<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

<sup>452</sup> Organised by the arts foundation Stiftung für Kunst und Kultur e.V. Bonn, which showcased the works of artists from the new EU states. See Isabelle Vella Gregory, "Young Artists in European Exhibition", *The Sunday Times of Malta*, June 20, 2004.

<sup>453</sup> "Maltese Artist Appeal to Minister", *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 25, 2004.

<sup>454</sup> This statement by the minister pre-empted decisions that were taken by local cultural institutions in the following years. For example, in 2006, an abstract painting by the leading veteran abstract painter Alfred Chircop was chosen to form part of the artistic display at the Berlaymont Palace in Brussels, which at the time served as the European Commission's headquarters. (See "Maltese Art in Brussels", *Times of Malta*, June 15, 2006)

arts was usually directed towards one-off events or festivals that were likely to attract more popular support.<sup>455</sup>

Even though few art exhibitions had financial support from the government soon after Malta became a member of the European Union, Maltese people, including artists, have enjoyed more freedom of movement. This new state of affairs rendered it easier for the Maltese to travel away from the islands and settle elsewhere within the Union. The majority moved for professional reasons, while others decided to strengthen their networks by getting involved in art projects within other European states, with others also deciding to take this opportunity to study and specialise in areas that were not yet available within Maltese educational institutions, including the fine arts. While there were other artists who had succeeded in studying fine arts abroad previously, the openings for educational opportunities were much more limited.<sup>456</sup>

Two documented projects which looked into this phenomenon of studying and exhibiting with other European states were *Relocation*, an exhibition held in Malta and curated by Raphael Vella, and *Little Constellations: Contemporary Art in Geocultural Micro-areas and Small States of Europe*, coordinated by Rita Canarezza and Pier Paolo Coro, with the support of the San Marino foundation. Both projects took place later in 2010, though this phenomenon was initiated in 2004 when Malta joined the European Union.<sup>457</sup> The curators of these two exhibitions brought together several artists with different backgrounds to shed light on the current contemporary art scene developed after the enlargement of the EU.

*Relocation* was held in the summer of 2010 and formed part of the series of exhibitions organised by one of Malta's leading banks —the Bank of Valletta that had

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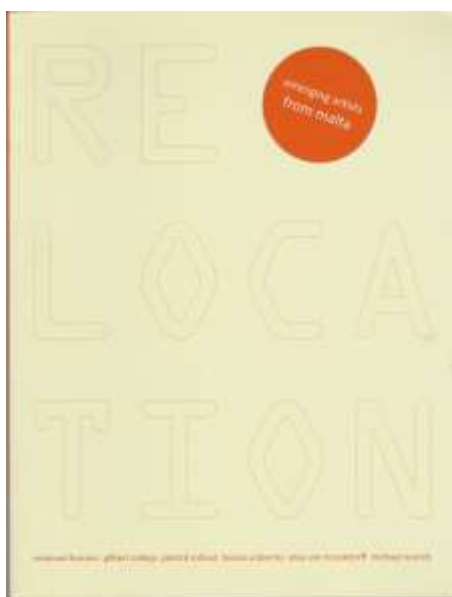
<sup>455</sup> “Maltese Artist Appeal to Minister”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 25, 2004.

<sup>456</sup> No specific study has been found in relation to the movement of individuals involved in the arts. An outline on internal migration can be found on Eurostat's official website through the following link [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migration\\_and\\_migrant\\_population\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics) (accessed January 10, 2018)

<sup>457</sup> Artists participated in other projects on a more individual basis, some of which are listed in the *Little Constellations* catalogue.

supported the local visual art sector since 1999. [Figure 64]. *Relocation* was a one-off project in which the bank featured and supported six promising young Maltese artists. Before this, all of the nineteen solo visual art exhibitions organised by the Bank of Valletta featured retrospective collections of the most renowned artists in Malta.<sup>458</sup>

As the title of the exhibition implies, *Relocation: Emerging Artists from Malta*, asks various questions, mainly about the artist's mobility, rooting it more specifically in the current local context. In the accompanying catalogue, the exhibition curator Raphael Vella explained the necessity for a fine artist or creative to relocate in order to expand their artistic practice. He also delved into the phenomenon of post-independence and how the generation born in the last quarter of the twentieth century were able to free themselves from previous strong—mainly British and Italian—influences that had heavily influenced Malta's fine art production.



**Fig. 69** *Relocation: Emerging Artists from Malta*, catalogue exhibition cover, June 7 till July 16, 2010, Bank of Valletta, Malta. (Author's Collection)

Vella argues that, “For centuries, artists in Malta were either of foreign extraction or sought their artistic training elsewhere generally in Rome”; he continues by saying that even

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<sup>458</sup> *BOV Retrospective Exhibition Catalogues*, Bank of Valletta plc. 1999-2018.



“During British rule in the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century art in Italy remained the main reference point.”<sup>459</sup> In contrast, he sees “the grammar” of contemporary art Maltese art as “largely global in scope” while, informed by its own specific history, “its vocabulary still occasionally exploits Maltese cultural references.”<sup>460</sup> Thus, Vella effectively re-positions Maltese artists as active agents in the contemporary art world.

Included in the exhibition were the “border crossers”—as described by local critics—Emanuel Bonnici (b. 1986), Gilbert Calleja (b. 1978), Patrick Mifsud (b. 1984), Teresa Sciberras (b. 1979), Elisa von Brockdorff (b. 1983), and Michael Xuereb (b. 1984).<sup>461</sup> While all six artists were born and raised in Malta between 1978 and 1986, their diverse backgrounds were evident in the variety of influences in their contemporary works. Four of the six artists pursued their undergraduate or postgraduate studies in the UK, namely Bonnici, von Brockdorff, and Mifsud who studied at the University of Creative Arts in Kent, and Xuereb who graduated from the London College of Communication. Sciberras studied in Florence and Gray’s School of Art in Aberdeen, Scotland, while Calleja studied at the Sorbonne in Paris.

Vella describes the specific differences of this generation as follows:

Having exposed themselves to the intellectually stimulating environment of these different educational institutions and to a rich variety of professionals and creative practices, these artists associate their own work and ideas with international contemporary art and more specifically with its critical dimensions.<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>459</sup> Vella came up with the theoretical conclusion that the “Maltese internalised their colonisers’ artistic idioms to the point that they perceived themselves as a reflection of their masters”, which he describes as “too hasty.” *Relocation*, Exhibition Catalogue, June 7 to July 16, 2010, BOV Santa Venera, Malta, 17.

<sup>460</sup> *Relocation*, Exhibition Catalogue, June 7 to July 16, 2010, BOV Santa Venera, Malta, 20.

<sup>461</sup> Charlene Vella, “Seeking New Perspectives”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 4, 2010.

<sup>462</sup> *Relocation*, Exhibition Catalogue, June 7 to July 16, 2010, BOV Santa Venera, Malta, p. 18.

This generation benefitted from the new opportunities described in chapter two through access to the internet from 1995 and the augmented government scholarships. They were also a generation exposed to the critical art theories prevalent at this time.<sup>463</sup>

The selection of works noted in the catalogue was conceptually connected to a broad understanding of 'relocation'. Some works deal with spatial boundaries, while others were inspired by political conditions and cultural identities. Other works engaged with locations of historical significance together with the implications of commercial artefacts.

Gilbert Calleja, with subtle mixed media works on paper, deals with belonging and identity. With his linear works of a tiny room, probably in Paris where he studied, he might be questioning if the bare items of furniture in his room are sufficient to make a home [Figure 65]. Teresa Sciberras' small drawings entitled *What is a box?*, like Calleja's, deal with the limits of space, walls, boundaries, and territories [Figure 65]. In contrast, Michael Xuereb discarded the idea of space and boundaries and, instead, by appropriating images usually found in cheap daily magazines created designs by combining everyday household objects. Xuereb work may suggest domestic overlaid. [Figure 70].



**Fig. 70** *Interior 1* (2002-3) by Gilbert Calleja mixed media on paper 21 x 14.3 cm; *What is a box no. 2* (2009) by Teresa Sciberras ink and gouache on paper 18 x 25 cm; *Considerable effort when into making the operation successful (2)* (2008) by Michael Xuereb, digitally altered found objects 50 x 41 cm. *Relocation* exhibition, Bank of Valletta, Malta, 2010.  
(Images provided by Gilbert Calleja, Teresa Sciberras and Michael Xuereb.)

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<sup>463</sup> It is feasible when writing on the critical dimension that Vella is referring to the artist's' self-assessment. The young artists, due to their travels, studies, and media access, had greater awareness of art practice and theory outside of Malta.

Elisa von Brockdorff's colourful photographs and installation portray very strong statements such as the insularity of an island by presenting caged cacti [Figure 71]. Emanuel Bonnici, like von Brockdorff, is highly colourful in his approach, which he used to deliver important assertions dealing with colonisation and the effects of the Knights on Malta's identity [Figure 71]. Finally, the most concrete of the group was Patrick Mifsud, who exhibited two pieces of luggage with address tags in Malta and the UK, a cut-out map of Malta with holy images, and a set of limestone bricks [Figure 71]. Here he is trying to answer the question presented in this exhibition: where do artists belong?



**Fig. 71** *relocate, reassess, replace, retain, redefine, repeat* (2010) by Elisa von Brockdorff photography 60 x 60 cm; *Asylum* (2010) by Emanuel Bonnici wood, glass and paint 20 x 55 x 70 cm; *Holyland* (2009) by Patrick Mifsud wood and religious images 200 x 200 x 10 cm. *Relocation* exhibition, Bank of Valletta, Malta, 2010. (Images provided by Elisa von Brockdorff, Emanuel Bonnici, and Patrick Mifsud.)

The works of these three artists focus on Malta seen from abroad. Bonnici and Mifsud's inspirations have qualities which comment on Malta's identity by featuring the red telephone box available in many British Colonies and a map of Malta covered with holy images indicative of the Maltese passion for roman catholic saints. This can be considered as a contemporary perception on how young people perceived Malta when they moved overseas after the country joined the EU.

This exhibition was significant on several different levels. It is noteworthy because it managed to break the conventional idea of exhibition-making of a conservative and respected bank, that is the Bank of Valletta, who had never previously held a contemporary art

exhibition on its premises. Secondly, with the bank's support and funds, a well-written and documented catalogue was produced that reflected current tendencies in contemporary visual arts in Malta, which was a very rare thing at the time. Finally, both the exhibition and the catalogue served as an opportunity to showcase contemporary works of art to a specific niche of people in Malta who had not yet experienced such art or, indeed, did not consider such works as actually fine art. This expanded audience was important because contemporary art exhibitions were attended, more or less, by the same groups of people.

Meanwhile, established contemporary Maltese artists also broadened their network, and cultural organisers—including visual art organisers—came up with new projects involving contemporary artists from the ten new accession countries. One of these projects was *Little Constellations: Contemporary Art in Geocultural Micro-areas and Small States of Europe*, initiated in 2004.

*Little Constellations* began as a research project focusing on contemporary art. The project developed and took shape via a network of artists, curators, and institutional representatives from museums, art centres, and research collectives. Two researchers, Rita Canarezza and Pier Paolo Caro, managed to initiate proposals and develop a platform of knowledge focused on contemporary artistic practice in the small states of Europe within the wider sphere of international artistic debates.<sup>464</sup>

The originality and the importance of *Little Constellation* lay in having, for the first time, brought together several artists and representatives from every small state in Europe, shedding light on a rich contemporary art scene. This network of interaction and exchange added value to the whole project and, at the same time, it was a tool that stimulated the advancement of contemporary art and cultural exploration. The participant countries included

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<sup>464</sup> *Little Constellation* originally developed from a research project carried out between 2004 and 2013 by artists Rita Canarezza and Pier Paolo Caro, with the support of the San Marino Foundation and the participation and contribution of many artists, museum curators, foundations, and centres active in contemporary art. See Rita Canarezza and Pier Paolo Caro, *Little Constellation: Contemporary Art in Geocultural Micro-Areas and Small States of Europe*, (Milan, Italy: Mousse Publication, 2010).

Andorra, Cyprus, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, San Marino, and other significant micro-areas such as Canton Ticino, Ceuta, Gibraltar, and Kaliningrad. *Little Constellation* also helped develop a collective awareness of the potential of local environments, having generated opportunities of intercultural exchange and acting as a catalyst of knowledge and experimentation.

The Maltese artists who participated in this collective project were Austin Camilleri, Dustin Cauchi (b. 1981) based in France, Pierre Portelli, and Mark Mangion, but only the latter three are still listed on the *Little Constellations* website.<sup>465</sup> Portelli and Mangion's works were published in the *Little Constellations* catalogue in 2010.<sup>466</sup> Here, their work was introduced as a collaboration between the two artists through which they explored the idea of the island as an isolated place. This concept was used as a starting point for the development of work that reached out, searching, and trying to understand situations and realities through reflection and observation. Ideas of detachment and a history of crossings and colonisations were transposed to the modern day with issues of migration and integration presenting themselves as starting points for the two artists. Through war, trade and cultural language, the boat and the sea have always played an instrumental part of the history and the future of life in Malta.

Mark Mangion was represented with video stills from his work entitled *The Night Before the Ricky Hatton VS Floyd Mayweather Fight* (2008) and digital prints entitled *Drive by Series* (2005). Pierre Portelli showed *45 Gun 1939 Hate 45 Gun 1940 Love* (2009), which consists of two Second World War cartridges with audio, and *Steam* (2010), an artist's drawing on printed paper. These two artists sought contemporary interpretations of the weighty historical and problematic conditions with the representation of a specific territory

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<sup>465</sup> Little Constellation press release, 2010. "Little Constellation/ a vision of contemporary art in micro geocultural areas and small European state" (accessed July 6, 2015).

<http://www.littleconstellation.org/pdf/pr3.eng.pdf>

<sup>466</sup> Rita Canarezza and Pier Paolo Coro, *Little Constellation: Contemporary Art in Geocultural Micro-Areas and Small States of Europe*, (Milan, Italy: Mousse Publication, 2010).

and its geopolitical definition. Mangion's work focus on African and European immigrants' challenging circumstances when leaving their respective countries and moving to a small country such as Malta, while Portelli use Second World War weapons to evoke how Malta's strategic geopolitical location made it a prime target.<sup>467</sup>

This collective project turned into a travelling exhibition which was inaugurated in March 2010 in Milan at Fabbrica del Vapore.<sup>468</sup> The exhibition travelled to San Marino and Iceland. A number of works concerning the cultural and geographical dimension were selected to create the *Geography of Proximity* exhibition which was shown at the MCA in October 2010 [See Volume 2: Catalogue – Page 64 Catalogue No. 64]. On this occasion, the catalogue *Little Constellation* published by Mousse, was launched [Figure 72].<sup>469</sup>

The exhibition concept, initiated in 2004, of this traveling exhibition introduced a number of artists from small states, including local artists, to global culture where networking and mobility were key to the development of critical forms of contemporary art practice.

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<sup>467</sup> Malta was the most bombed country in the Second World War with more than 14,000 bombs dropped destroying around 30,000 buildings. See National War Museum, Heritage Malta Archive, Fort St. Elmo Valletta, Malta.

<sup>468</sup> *Little Constellation* press release, 2010. "Little Constellation/ a vision of contemporary art in micro geo-cultural areas and small European state" (accessed July 6, 2015).  
<http://www.littleconstellation.org/pdf/pr3.eng.pdf> (The exhibition was publicised on a number of Italian websites including the following; <https://www.careof.org/progetti/2010/little-constellation/>; <http://www.bergamonews.it/2010/01/29/piccoli-stati-grandi-opere-arriva-a-milano-little-constellation/125641/>; <http://www.villacroce.org/mostra/little-constellation-la-terra-vista-dal-mare/>; <https://www.espoarte.net/arte/little-constellation/> and <http://www.varesenews.it/2012/02/da-gallarate-a-genova-little-constellation-in-mostra-a-villa-croce/97631/> accessed March 1, 2015.

<sup>469</sup> See *Little Constellation* press release, 2010. The catalogue was chiefly a well-designed picture book with all the images and details of the works by the participating artists, a list of the institutions supporting the project and list of people who were interviewed. No critical analysis of the project or exhibition were included.



**Fig. 72** *Little Constellation* book published in 2010. Page on the left showing the work by Pierre Portelli. (Author's Collection)

### 5.3 Malta and Globalisation: Back on the Map

*[While] it is undeniably true that contemporary information and communication technologies produce new, exciting networks and artistic strategies and simultaneously help to demolish old, geographical borders, this does not automatically mean that artists occupying the 'peripheries' have now been fast forwarded to a happy land of equal opportunities.<sup>470</sup>*

The nineties witnessed a global phenomenon that modified the economic geography and standard configurations of the international contemporary art system. This phenomenon was possible owing to several factors including advances in technology, freedom of movement, and so on. These changes also affected Malta. As Raphael Vella's above comment from 2008 indicates, it is important to point out that this radical positive change visible in parts of the art world did not necessarily translate to all European regions and peripheries.<sup>471</sup> Even though a number of key authors and theorists had visited Malta in the last decade, including James Elkins, Pam Meecham, and Mieke Bal, little interest was shown in studying the local contemporary art sector. One of the few references to Malta and contemporary practice was

<sup>470</sup> Raphael Vella, ed., *Cross-Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta* (Malta: Allied Publishers, 2008) p. 15.

<sup>471</sup> For example, this was still evident at *Documenta 12* and the 2007 Venice Biennale where half the artworks shown were produced by artists designated as "based in Berlin". See Nikos Papastergiadis and Gerardo Mosquera. "The Geopolitics of Contemporary Art." *Ibraaz Platform 008*. October, 2014. <https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/109> accessed 21.06.2015.

in Elkins' keynote lecture at the Biola Art Symposium in March 2008, when he discussed his book *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (2004).<sup>472</sup>

One significant action to rectify the situation, which showed a desire for greater visibility, was when Raphael Vella, as an editor, asked a number of artists and established local academics to write essays on contemporary art in Malta. The publication, *Cross-Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta* can be considered the first comprehensive study of contemporary art practice in Malta. The book was launched in 2008 at the Maltese Embassy in Paris and was presented at an International Forum on the 'Essay on Art' at the Institut National d'Histoire de L'Art. *Cross-Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta* was the only Maltese publication presented at the forum together with hundreds of new titles about art theory and contemporary art from all over Europe.<sup>473</sup> The publication of this book, together with other actions that occurred in the following years, created the first benchmark of how to critically assess and understand recent developments in contemporary art in Malta.<sup>474</sup>

### **Cross-Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta**

*Cross-Currents* is a collection of essays which present a new theoretical reading of the visual arts in Malta. Published in 2008, its focus is on the development of contemporary art in Malta through specific genres, that of abstract art and figurative representation; the effects of Catholicism on contemporary art, together with an extensive analysis of site specific installation, video art, photography, and architecture. This was and still is the only publication presenting recent contemporary art developments in Malta. To contextualise the

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<sup>472</sup> This lecture is available online. James Elkins, "On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art", Youtube, November 6, 2009 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U88POHX1Jo4> accessed June 29, 2013.

<sup>473</sup> "Looking at Art in New Light Anon", *The Sunday Times of Malta*, December 7, 2008.

<sup>474</sup> In January 2010, *Cross-Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta* was awarded the second prize at the National Book Awards – Research Category.



critical essays, a socio-political and artistic timeline were also included at the back of the book.

Modern and contemporary art publications on Malta are rare to find. Due to the small market, there are only a few who are ready to support and fund such publications. Hence, the possibility of publishing a hardback, full colour book of more than 300 pages was a significant endeavour. This project was Raphael Vella's brainchild and he was both editor and one of the contributing authors. Vella was well established in the local art scene. Apart from being one of the artists who co-founded START—the contemporary art group—during the nineties he was a regular art reviewer on the local newspaper, *The Malta Independent* for nine years; he was also the Art Co-ordinator within the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta.<sup>475</sup>

Interdisciplinary academics and practitioners were invited by Vella to contribute to this innovative publication with writing styles and presentation of material differing according to each author's specialisation. This freedom in style was probably purposely developed by the editor primarily in view of the lack of published material on the subject and because the publication was regarded as an experiment as the first one of its kind in Malta. The book is made up of five essays and the introduction, written by Raphael Vella. The other contributors were Kenneth Wain, a philosophy professor at the University of Malta who was involved in the local cultural scene; Isabelle Borg, an artist and a lecturer at the University of Malta; Paul Clough, an anthropology professor at the University of Malta, John Baldacchino, an associate professor of art and art education at Columbia University's Teachers College in New York, and Peter Brincat, a practising architect, while I researched and compiled the socio-political timeline. This publication served as a documentary increasing the visibility of

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<sup>475</sup> In 2006, Raphael Vella obtained a PhD in Fine Arts from the University of Arts London, UK.

Maltese art and presenting different theoretical frameworks and perspectives which could be used to analyse contemporary art developments in Malta.

The publication opens with Vella's introduction with the title: "An Introduction to Maltese Nomadic Roots: When 'Home' is on the Periphery". Vella refers to the 1990s conceptual shift in Maltese art which moved artists closer to international developments in spite of the limited local infrastructure and the islands' peripheral geographic location. Vella argues that Maltese artists have had to become more nomadic than ever because of these conditions and he cites Bourdieu's suggestion that artists from marginal countries should leave their country of origin to replant their roots elsewhere.<sup>476</sup> In his review of this publication, Jon Mitchel perceives this "nomadic" metaphor signally "a self-confident community – even a movement – keen to put Maltese art on the map."<sup>477</sup>

The first chapter, "On Art, Spirituality, and the Search for the Inner Self: Reflections on Abstract Art in Malta from the 1960s to the 2000s" by Wain reflects on the emergence and development of abstract art in Malta from the sixties onwards. Wain stresses the dominance of abstract art in the late twentieth century and that its emergence coincided with Malta's independence (1964) and reforms in Catholicism issued by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). In this new context of religiosity and post-colonial subjectivity, Wain sees the development of abstract art in Malta as a search to realise a fulfilment of human spirituality.<sup>478</sup> Chapter two, "Society in the Body and the Body of Society: A Social analysis of the Art of the Body in Contemporary Malta", is an interesting collaboration between a practicing artist Isabelle Borg and the anthropologist Paul Clough. They offer a sociological perspective on the Church, the Italianate influence, English colonialism, an elitist education

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<sup>476</sup> See Raphael Vella, "An Introduction to Maltese Nomadic Roots: When Home is on the Periphery" in *Cross-Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta* (Allied Publication, Valletta, Malta:2008). p. 15.

<sup>477</sup> Jon P. Mitchell, "Cross-currents: critical essays on art and culture in Malta edited by Vella, Raphael", *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 18:3, 2010, p. 378.

<sup>478</sup> See Peter Mayo, "Raphael Vella (Ed.), *Crosscurrents. Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta*. Allied Publishers, 2008, Malta, 319 pages," *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 2009, 18:2, pp. 437-440.

system, and contemporary artists preoccupations with issues of gender, sexuality and bodily suffering.

The next two chapters are theoretically heavy, especially the one written by John Baldacchino, entitled “Salvaging what ‘we’ never lost: Art, site and the virtual in the Maltese imaginary”. Baldacchino presents several examples of contemporary work by Maltese artists which are important political statements like Norbert Francis Attard, Vince Briffa, Pierre Portelli and Raphael Vella. Focussing on site specific and new media art, that he generally refers to as installation art, Baldacchino argues that these engage with issues and themes often evident in the more traditional art forms which are highly regarded in Malta. He argues specifically that installation art is out of linear time, and as such replaces representation with a phenomenological immediacy that permits an unsettling of history.<sup>479</sup> Raphael Vella’s contribution, “Farewell to Sacredness: Catholicism in Maltese Contemporary Art”, identifies three prevalent themes in contemporary art practice: liturgical functionalism, spirituality as personal encounter, and an ‘anthropological’ exploration of religion as culture.

Peter Brincat, in his chapter “From Cartesian Genetics to Darwinian Memetics: Postmodern Proposals of Maltese Contemporary Architecture”, highlights architectural projects around the islands which present a new relationship between the past and the present rather than the pursuit of re-modernisation.

This book, with its multidisciplinary approach, provides a setting for Maltese cultural studies as well as stimulating further debate on contemporary art in Malta by asking questions such as ‘What kind of work are Malta’s visual thinkers producing today?’ and ‘What are the social, political, and international factors that have influenced the evolution of their work and ideas? What is important in the context of this thesis is that Vella’s collection of critical essays was the first to seriously engage with contemporary art in Malta and globalisation, and

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<sup>479</sup> See also Mitchell’s review cited above.

to present a cross section of work and offer different approaches to understanding contemporary works from the mid 1960s to 2005? As Jon Mitchell in his review notes, the publication presents the contemporary art scene in Malta as “particularly fertile, the more so given the small scale of this former British Mediterranean colony.”<sup>480</sup>

The publication was followed by the art forum entitled *Cross Currents: Contemporaneity and Maltese Art* at the MCA in Marsa.<sup>481</sup> During this forum, all the contributors presented their essays picking up on issues which appeared in one form or another in each chapter and a passionate public discussion took place.<sup>482</sup> Both the publication and the forum are important landmarks in contemporary Maltese art history as they created a bench mark for researching, documenting and questioning contemporary art practice [See Volume 2: Catalogue – Page 46 Catalogue No. 57].

#### **5.4 Conclusion: Acceptance of ‘Contemporary Art’**

At the turn of the millennium, a distinctive and interesting shift was visible in the Maltese Islands with the new positive response towards the development of contemporary culture and the visual arts. In part, this can be seen as representing a larger decolonialisation project that questions the legacies of a colonial past and its centre periphery model by establishing what Rogoff describes as ‘new relational geographies’ and new forms of criticism that ‘advance a host of new regional imaginations.’<sup>483</sup>

In Malta, as I have argued, the cultural scenario strengthened when the nation became a full member of the European Union in 2004. By being part of the European Union, artists had a number of opportunities to collaborate with other European artists on Europe-wide projects and exhibitions. Working within this setting Maltese artists felt part of something

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<sup>480</sup> Mitchell, “Cross-currents: critical essays on art and culture in Malta edited by Vella, Raphael”.

<sup>481</sup> The MCA Art Forum was held on March 15 2009 at the MCA, Marsa.

<sup>482</sup> The author was present at the forum and was one of the contributors. (Katya Borg, “Socio-political and Artistic Timeline, Artists and Architects: Biographical Data”).

<sup>483</sup> Rogoff, Irit, “Geo-Cultures. Circuits of Arts and Globalizations”, *Open Magazine* No.16/2009, p. 115.

bigger – the ‘larger stage’ that Zahra referred to - where culture and the visual arts had stronger roots. As the above has shown, new collaborations could take place with less bureaucratic barriers, even when government funding was limited. The Maltese cultural sector embraced this new state of affairs with a positive attitude as it positioned the sector within an international context.

One consequence for Malta was that the development of contemporary art was no longer experienced or seen in isolation. It could be compared to what was happening outside Malta as artists were engaging with other artists via European projects. However, in the first years of EU membership, as artists have noted, things were difficult since the traditional mentality on the outlook of contemporary art practice could not be changed overnight. In fact, artists such as Ruth Bianco, Austin Camilleri and Vince Briffa were not fully supported by the local government when they participated in European projects while artists with a more modernist style and technique were involved in such projects with the full support of local institutions. Nonetheless, individual artists managed to create their own networks and started to exhibit in Europe.

Projects reflecting this change in mentality are various and being part of the European Union made it possible for artists to study in Europe while exhibiting and becoming part of the European community. In part, the focus of this chapter has been on identifying Malta’s new identity from that of an island country in the centre of the Mediterranean into one of the many EU nations. This new identity brought several changes to Malta as I have identified. From a visual arts perspective, artists continued to strengthen their alliances and connections with other European artists through mobility. This was a significant new positioning since before this date, as discussed in previous chapters, the first reference point was usually the UK, a result of Malta’s colonial past. Being part of the EU, I argue, also made artists more aware of the importance of documenting the local contemporary art scene which the *Cross-Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta* publication achieved. This book is an

important landmark in presenting the contemporary artistic identity of Malta and represents a new level of critical engagement that was to be important for subsequent events discussed in the next chapter. However, as Vella's quote at the beginning of this chapter highlights, this new critical awareness does not mean that artists in Malta "have now been fast forwarded to a happy land of equal opportunities".<sup>484</sup> One particular material manifestation of this that has come to the fore through my research is that still, in 2019, just over ten years from the date of this publication, little public infrastructure exists to support the systematic recording and study of contemporary art in Malta. This is reflected in the lack of public archives and specialist libraries.

In summary, unification with Europe assisted Malta's visual contemporary art scene in becoming part of an active local culture within a global culture and awareness of this new positioning and the tensions between them, as well as Malta's artistic identity, steadily increased in the first decade of the new millennium.

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<sup>484</sup> Raphael Vella, ed., *Cross-Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta* (Malta: Allied Publishers, 2008) p. 15.

## Chapter 6

### Internationalisation and Professionalisation: New Policies and Initiatives, 2007-2013

#### **6.1 Introduction**

One of the key findings from the previous chapter is that although in principle the Maltese government signed up to financially support culture as part of Malta's European Union accession agreement, the government invested little to enable contemporary Maltese artists to participate in European exhibitions between 2004 and 2006. In this chapter, I focus on the following crucial years between 2007 and 2013 when the Maltese government first officially recognised culture as central to politics now that it was part of the EU, and the obligatory necessity to promote and support modern and contemporary art. Through an analysis of the government's first attempts to understand and improve the local cultural sector – namely, the Valletta Creative Forum held for over 6 months in 2007, the new budgetary measures that followed in 2008 and the resulting publication of the first National Cultural Policy in 2011 – I evaluate their impact on the underpinning infrastructure for contemporary art and the challenges that artists and curators negotiated. By focusing on a series of initiatives generated within this new economic and political climate that include artist-led curatorial projects and the opening of new contemporary art spaces, I argue that these new developments were vital to the increasing internationalisation and professionalisation of the contemporary art sector in Malta.

#### **6.2 Policies: New Possibilities for Contemporary Visual Art**

A key step towards the creation of new policies in line with the EU was achieved in the Maltese government's pre-budget document and the implementation of new budgetary measures for culture in the national budget for 2008. This was the result of the Valletta Creative Forum, which was held at St James Cavalier between January and June 2007. During this six-month period, over 300 stakeholders participated in the discussions; these

included artists, politicians, people working with the government, and twenty European speakers. The six major issues that were covered were the themes of cultural governance in Malta and beyond; arts and health: the wellbeing of Maltese society; arts heritage and tourism; creativity in local communities; show business; sustaining creative industries, and culture identity; endorsing identity; and celebrating diversity.<sup>485</sup>

The pre-budget document of 2008 stated that “cultural development needs to be at the heart of our nation – culture plays a fundamental role in human development, moulding our identity and acting as an indicator of a society's progress and advancement.”<sup>486</sup> By the general election of March 2008, both parties—the Malta Labour Party and the Nationalist Party—were in favour of culture becoming a political priority. In view of this, a working group was appointed to draft Malta’s national cultural policy under the Minister of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport. The Creative Economy Working Group (CEWG) was made up of five members: Davinia Galea as chairman (also the then chair of the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts (MCCA), Toni Attard and Caldon Mercieca as cultural sector experts, and Doriana Bezzina and Dr Jeannine Giglio as finance and economy specialists.<sup>487</sup>

The strategy built by the working group focused on four important ‘pillars.’ These included governance, which led the group to analyse current governance scenarios, establish needs and direction, investigate and compare potential scenarios, and to define the way forward. The second pillar, “Shaping Talent into Professions”, perceived human capital as being central to the creative process, and the strategy, supported by educational developments, sought to ensure the nurturing of a creative workforce in response to the needs of the sector and the growing demand in the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs). The third pillar, ‘Routing Creative Ideas to Market’, prioritised the development of creative

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<sup>485</sup> *Valletta Creative Forum* (2007): Report from the Valletta Creative Forum organised by the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity between January and June 2007, St James Foundation Archive.

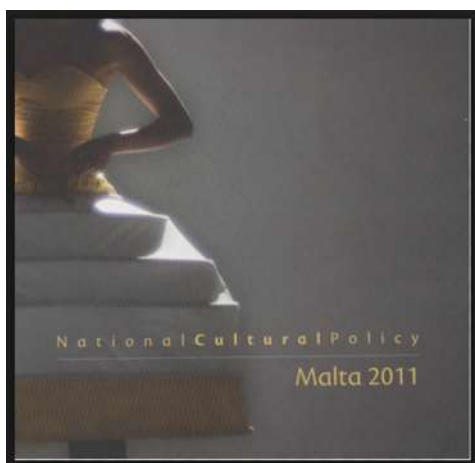
<sup>486</sup> Government of Malta, *National Pre-Budget Document*, 2008 (Ministry for Finance Malta Archive, 2007).

<sup>487</sup> Toni Attard interview with the author on January 28 2016.



clusters and mechanisms for access to finance in order to address barriers hindering creative businesses. The fourth pillar, of particular importance to contemporary art (alongside pillar two) focused on making Malta a hub of creative exchange.<sup>488</sup>

The National Cultural Policy drafted by the CEWG was presented to the Cabinet of Ministers and launched for public consultation in 2010. The final cultural policy document was launched by the Prime Minister in July 2011 [Figure 73].<sup>489</sup>



**Fig. 73 National Cultural Policy Malta 2011 cover. (Author's Collection)**

The National Cultural Policy aimed to improve and introduce new structures including the improvement of cultural governance structures which was only possible by responding to the needs of the industry, by strengthening existing remits and international cultural cooperation and by capitalising on the new global economic developments of the creative industries. New post-secondary educational structures aimed to tackle the critical gaps in the formative process of local arts students by providing educational programmes in the arts and cultural management and diversifying Malta's higher education offering.

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<sup>488</sup> See *Compendium: Cultural Policies and Trends* (accessed July 10, 2015).  
<http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/malta.php?aid=423>.

<sup>489</sup> The creative economy working group acknowledged the importance of three documents referred to in previous chapters: Vicki Ann Cremona's *A Cultural Policy for Malta, Working Document* (1995); *The Policy Unit at the Ministry of Education's Il-Politika Kulturali f' Malta - Cultural Policy in Malta, A Discussion Document* (Malta: Ministry of Education and Culture, 2001); and the published report from the *Valletta Creative Forum* organised by St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity between January and June 2007.

In 2011, therefore, the government set an important milestone for the cultural and creative industries by committing, at a European level, to the strategic development of heritage, the arts, media, and creative business services towards achieving the objectives of the Euro Plus Pact.<sup>490</sup> With Malta's new cultural policy, the main aim of the government strategy was to transform the cultural and creative sector into the most dynamic facet of Malta's socio-economic life in the 21st century, with the first national milestone being that of hosting of the European Capital of Culture in 2018 (discussed in chapter seven).<sup>491</sup>

### **Malta's National Cultural Policy**

The new cultural policy, published in 2011, established new schemes for the arts, including visual art. In this section the policy emphasised two areas of 'intervention' regarding infrastructure and educational facilities as follows:

The provision (through joint government and private sector financing, wherever possible) of adequate infrastructure – workshops, exhibition, public encounter and artist residency spaces. .... The development of adequate educational facilities, at least up to undergraduate level, supported by the necessary material and human resources.<sup>492</sup>

The focus on infrastructure to support contemporary artists is highly significant. Up until this point, no adequate physical infrastructure was allocated for practising artists except for St James Cavalier, which was acting as an alternative gallery space for contemporary art. Similarly, although exhibitions were held at the National Museum of Fine Arts and alternative spaces, support and long-term programming was non-existent. This ad hoc situation led to several isolated projects that were never part of a larger plan that could

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<sup>490</sup> The Euro Plus Pact is part of the European Union's set of four main rules on enhanced EU economic governance, which came into force on 13 December 2011. For further details see <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/euro-plus-pact>. (accessed January 10, 2017).

<sup>491</sup> The European Capital of Culture was embraced by the new government elected in March 2013. The electoral manifesto of the new government, one of the strongest political programmes for culture in recent history, included a chapter on culture, arts and creativity. *Malta Tagħna Lkoll -Manifest Elettorali 2013* (Malta for All - 2013 Electoral Manifesto), 123-129.

<sup>492</sup> Parliamentary Secretariat for Tourism, the Environment and Culture, Malta, *National Cultural Policy, Malta 2011*, 2011, 75.

engage the general public. With regard to residency spaces, this was taking place in a private complex in Gozo (as discussed in chapter four) but little was widely known about this private venture.

Similarly, in 2010 there was still no full-time undergraduate course in the visual arts, even though part-time diploma courses had been available since 1926. Perhaps the nearest thing to a fine arts course was the Art and Design course at the Art Centre in Valletta, initiated in 1983.<sup>493</sup> Nonetheless, the main focus of this centre was industrial design and not fine arts.

The introduction of a full-time visual art course was therefore of immense importance to Malta whose art institutions had a chequered history. Although the full-time teaching of art was introduced with the setting up the School of Drawing in 1802 to teach design, painting, drawing, and architecture, by the second half of the nineteenth century, there was no professional art course available in Malta. The Government School of Art, which opened in 1926, only offered part-time courses. This school was considered by many as the only place to train in the visual arts; however, after Malta's independence its popularity started to decrease.

Short art courses with an academic inclination always existed locally, with some offered by local institutions and others delivered in private studios or homes. In 1983, morning and evening courses in design were launched by the Directorate of Education.<sup>494</sup> A year later these courses were restructured into a school setup which was strongly supported by the Italian government.<sup>495</sup> Nonetheless, this was not oriented as a visual art school. The various prospects to open a new visual art school—such as the International Visual Art (IVA)

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<sup>493</sup> The Art Centre in Valletta launched a part-time course in 1983. See “Art and Design Courses”, *Times of Malta*, September 15, 1983.

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>495</sup> Emanuel Fiorentino, “The Promotion of Good Design”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, October 6, 1985.

institution proposed in 1996—were, for a number of reasons, short-lived and never materialised.

Just prior to the release of Malta's new cultural policy, the first full-time course in visual arts was introduced in 2010 by MCAST and offered at the Institute of Art and Design.<sup>496</sup> The undergraduate course provided students with the possibility to obtain a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Fine Arts.<sup>497</sup> The new institution was partnered with Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft, a German institution based in Munich which offered both students and lecturers a pedagogical framework. In the same year, art scholarships were launched, and by August the first student awardees were announced.<sup>498</sup> Scholarships, together with the introduction of the full-time course, were a real breakthrough for Malta, even though it happened extremely late by comparison with most other countries worldwide.

A need for further study resulted in the launch of the first Master's in Digital Arts in the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences at the University of Malta in July 2011 and a Master's in Fine Arts in 2014.<sup>499</sup> This enabled students to pursue their studies in the visual arts locally. Other students opted to further their studies abroad, especially since by then Malta formed part of the EU and this gave them the freedom to choose where to study.<sup>500</sup>

The new cultural policy also acknowledged what was described in the following manner:

the untenable gap in the exposition of Maltese modern and contemporary art, and considers that focused synergies between the MCCA and Heritage Malta, together with all other relevant stakeholders and artists, should aim towards rectifying this situation.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>496</sup> In 2000, a number of arts, science centres, and technical institutions were put together to form the Malta College for Arts Sciences and Technology. The Art and Design Institute was one of the first institutions formed.

<sup>497</sup> "MCAST launched Courses Prospectus," *Times of Malta*, June 16, 2010.

<sup>498</sup> "Scholarships awarded in arts and design", *Times of Malta*, August 10, 2010.

<sup>499</sup> "Second degree in digital arts", *Times of Malta*, July 20, 2011.

<sup>500</sup> No statistics are traceable. The Malta Arts Scholarship, which supports art students who study abroad, was launched in 2011.

<sup>501</sup> *National Cultural Policy, Malta 2011*, 75.

Prior to the publication of the new cultural policy in 2011, funds to support artists were allocated by the local government and entrusted to the MCCA. One of the earliest funds that had a huge positive impact on the local arts scene was the Malta Arts Fund (MAF), launched in September of 2009. The MAF supports all artistic initiatives from short educational courses to art projects such as exhibitions and performances. This fund attracted a lot of attention, and in fact there were 240 applications submitted over a period of eighteen months between 2010 and 2011.<sup>502</sup> Apart from the MAF there were funds that were specifically intended for the four creative economy sectors—heritage, arts, media and CCIs—which were also introduced in 2011. Subsequently, in 2015, other funds were introduced, and these included the Malta Digital Games Fund, the Creative Industries Platform, Kultura TV, Creative Communities, and the Cultural Export fund.<sup>503</sup>

In 2009, during the presentation of the 2010 budget, for the first time the local government allocated funds for the acquisition of modern and contemporary art. This fund was entrusted to Heritage Malta and since then it has been managed by the curatorial staff of the National Museum of Fine Arts. The fund has been allocated every year to date, and has made it possible for the national collection to obtain a wide variety of recent works by Maltese artists.<sup>504</sup> Museum curators collaborated with a number of professionals in the field—from art historians to art directors, university lecturers, and art institutional employees—to shortlist the best works which the National Collection should acquire. In fact, the list of acquisitions is broad in type, medium, and genre. Among the more established contemporary artists one finds video works by Vince Briffa and Mark Mangion, installation pieces by Pierre Portelli and Raphael Vella, and sculptural works by Austin Camilleri.<sup>505</sup> From the same fund,

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<sup>502</sup> Lisa Gwen Baldacchino, “Funding possibilities in the creative industry on the rise”, *Times of Malta*, March 31, 2011.

<sup>503</sup> Ramona Depares, “Total restructuring for Malta Arts Fund”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, February 22, 2015.

<sup>504</sup> Heritage Malta Annual Reports 2010-2015.

<sup>505</sup> Vince Briffa’s *Hermes* (1999) and Austin Camilleri’s *Kuruna* (2002) were acquired in 2010, while Pierre Portelli’s *Google Christ* (2007) and *Spill* (2002) were acquired in 2011. Raphael Vella’s *Reading Cabinet* (2007), *Unpronounceable Name* (2003) and *Pornolitics* (2009) were acquired in 2012. Mark Mangion’s *The Departure* (2008) and *The Walk* (2011) were acquired in 2015.

a generous amount was also allocated to up-and-coming artists including Adrian Abela, Darren Tanti, and Aaron Bezzina who work in multiple media.<sup>506</sup> The fund provided by the government made it possible for the national art collection to grow, and between 2010 and 2015 fifty-five contemporary artworks were acquired.

### **6.3 Fresh Blood: Fresh Ideas: In Search of New Spaces 2007-12**

The biggest challenge that the new cultural strategy faced was the establishing of an exhibition space for modern and contemporary art. The 2011 cultural strategy ambitiously designated this as a key action point stating:

The Ministry, in collaboration with the MCCA, Heritage Malta and the University of Malta, shall identify a site and shall implement necessary work to open museum space for modern and contemporary art. The possibility of developing this space adjacent to the institutions mentioned above shall be considered in order to maximise on the benefits for the formation of new artists.<sup>507</sup>

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, the need for a contemporary art space was still pressing since no public museum or gallery was dedicated to the promotion of contemporary art. This was evident across the private sector where few private gallery owners attempted to show contemporary experimental visual artworks due primarily to their lack of saleability and the inadequate environments within such galleries.<sup>508</sup> The St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity was the chief site where contemporary exhibitions were held, even though its main aim was to serve as a laboratory for creativity and to host a wide range of events.

Continuing with the impetus of the preceding years with the activities of the artist group START, it is significant that artists largely led the way in attempting to establish new spaces in a new cultural climate from 2007 that recognised the particular need to promote and

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<sup>506</sup> These three young artists represented Malta in the Venice Biennale 2017.

<sup>507</sup> *National Cultural Policy, Malta 2011*, 83.

<sup>508</sup> Among the galleries which showed contemporary art the Artitude Gallery, the So Gallery, and the Lily Agius Gallery were the most significant. The latter promoted a series of contemporary exhibitions by local professional artists including *6:6*, held between May and June 2012.

support modern and contemporary art in the years immediately prior to the 2011 strategy.

Mangion, who helped form START, curated five exhibitions entitled *The Search for a Space*, *Questioning Spaces* in 2007 with the main aim of finding a space that contemporary art could inhabit and grow within it [See Volume 2: Catalogue – Page 37 & 38 Catalogue No. 50].

What was unique about the exhibition series—each with a specific sub-theme—was that they were available for audiences only for a number of days, usually for less than a week. In total, 27 artists participated in this project, 14 of whom were overseas artists from Israel, USA, Canada, Germany, Spain, and the UK. The local artists were START group members and emerging artists. The artworks exhibited ranged from photography, installation works, video, sculpture, drawing, and a limited amount of paintings.<sup>509</sup>

The first exhibition of the overall series of *The Search for a Space*, *Questioning Spaces* was *Fragments from a Studio* [Figure 74]. The exhibition was held from the April 5 to 8, 2007, at Biagio Steps Hall. The space, chosen by Mangion, was a dilapidated fortification built in the sixteenth century with strong, thick walls facing the sea and large rooms where an artillery school was run by the Knights of the Order of St John until the eighteenth century. In recent decades this derelict building was used as an examination centre, but apart from this, it served no specific function and remained empty.<sup>510</sup> The concept of the exhibition was to investigate a number of contemporary fine art processes that usually take place within an intimate space such as the artist's studio. Emphasis was placed on drawing as a way of mapping out and understanding ideas and making them available to audiences.<sup>511</sup> The fifteen local and foreign artists chosen to exhibit were Rupert Ackroyd, George Mario Attard, Ruth Bianco, Vince Briffa, Austin Camilleri, Dustin Cauchi, Peter Maltz, Pierre Portelli, Jaume

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<sup>509</sup> See Debono Fiona Galea, “Desperate need’ for proper contemporary art space”. *Times of Malta*, April 4, 2007 (accessed July 15, 2015). <https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20070404/local/desperate-need-for-proper-contemporary-art-space.21322>

<sup>510</sup> In November 2008, this building was earmarked to become a fortification interpretation centre. See Lisa Gwen Baldacchino, “Biagio Steps Centre to house Fortification Museum”, *Times of Malta*, July 12, 2008.

<sup>511</sup> The idea of exhibiting drawings presented the artist as thinker and emphasized that a drawing could be as important as the final work.

Sabater I Garau, Martina Schmuecker, James Swainson, Michael Whittle, Raphael Vella, Brindalyn Webster, and Mark Mangion.



**Fig. 74** *The Search for a Space, Questioning Spaces was Fragments from a Studio*, held at Biagio Steps Hall, Valletta. [Work by Ruth Bianco - pencil, collage and paper.] (Image provided by Mark Mangion.)

The second exhibition, entitled *Duration*, held between April 19 and 22, 2007, was displayed inside one of the vaults at Pinto Wharfs, more popularly known as the Valletta Waterfront.<sup>512</sup> Abandoned until 2003, this space had been used by the START contemporary art group *Borders* exhibition in 2003. Soon after this exhibition, restoration work began on the area and by 2006 restaurants and shops were open to visitors of the island arriving via the Grand Harbour.

Film, video, and photographic projections were the media purposely chosen for this exhibition, allowing images to gain form [Figure 75]. This was one of the first times in Malta that a collective contemporary exhibition was presented only in digital media.<sup>513</sup> A quasi-virtual environment was created in the space through projections. For this project Mangion selected works related to time and place, a theme reflected within international fora of

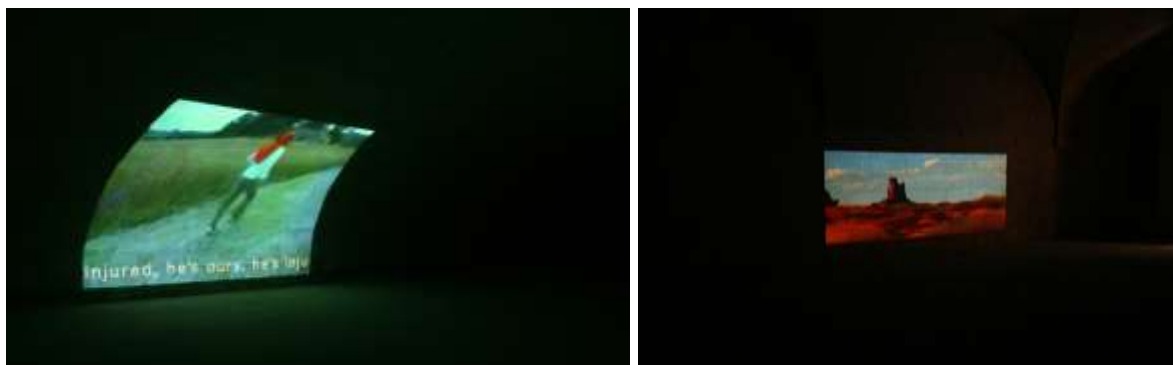
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<sup>512</sup> The Valletta Waterfront, once a run-down dockside area originally built in the eighteenth century, is now renovated and lined with waterside restaurants. See <https://www.vallettawaterfront.com/content.aspx?id=99473> accessed May 22, 2013.

<sup>513</sup> An earlier example of a collective exhibition showing only digital media was *Digital Discourse*, at the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, 2005.



contemporary art practice. The internationalisation of contemporary art was also visible in the choice of artists since the eight local and overseas artists were Ruth Bianco, Ann Kathrin Greiner, Jed Lind, Peter Maltz, Jaume Sabater I Garau, Christian Sant Fournier, Martine Schmuecker, and Mark Mangion.<sup>514</sup> Nonetheless, very little interest was recorded in the media: no review was published and was only a short press release notifying the public about the exhibition and a talk held on site.



**Fig. 75** ‘Two works exhibited as part of *The Search for a Space – Duration* at Pinto Wharfs, Floriana. [works by Jaume Sabater I Garau and Mark Mangion - two video art pieces.] (Image provided by Mark Mangion.)

The following part of the project focused on and bore the title of *Asylum Seeker*, a very salient topic at the time. From 2007, hundreds of illegal immigrants from Africa started crossing the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe.<sup>515</sup> The most affected places in the Mediterranean were Malta and Lampedusa in southern Italy due to their geographic location between Libya and South Europe. Local contemporary artists, namely Pierre Portelli and Mark Mangion, responded to this issue.

The exhibition addressed issues of migration, race, dislocation, and dispossession. The artworks were placed inside the Marsa Open Centre for migrants in Marsa, a town in southeast Malta. Marsa is 5.5 km from Valletta [Figure 76]. This particular exhibition, unlike the others in the series, was project-based, and artists worked in a way that would integrate

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<sup>514</sup> “Art at the Waterfront”, *Times of Malta*, April 20, 2007. (accessed July 17, 2015).

<https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20070420/local/art-at-the-waterfront.19790>

<sup>515</sup> Hassène Kassar Paul Dourgnon, “The big crossing: illegal boat migrants in the Mediterranean,” *European Journal of Public Health*, Volume 24, Issue suppl\_1, August 2014, pp.11–15.

their work within the context of an unstable camp environment. This can be considered the first contemporary art project of this sort in Malta since it also involved the migrants living on the premises. The works—or rather interventions—including photographs of migrants lives and site-specific installations occupied the functional space. For a brief moment the centre questioned itself as a space and in terms of its function. The artists, together with other individuals involved in the visual arts sector spent a number of days on site to speak and to try to understand the migrants' living conditions. The works, however, existed on the periphery as the artworks were on site for only two days (May 5-6) without changing things within the open centre. The artists involved were Ruth Bianco, Anthony Haughey, Christian Sant Fournier, and Mark Mangion.<sup>516</sup>



**Fig. 76 A work from *The Search for a Space – Asylum Seekers Open Centre, Marsa*. [works by Christ Sant Fournier - black and white photographs.] (Image provided by Mark Mangion.)**

The subsequent exhibition developed a seemingly more traditional subject, that of colour. Entitled *Chroma*, this exhibition explored the idea of colour in art today with the participating artists questioning the general framework of object and image [Figure 77]. Indeed, a broad view of how colour is processed in contemporary art was presented through film and video as well as through photography, drawing, painting, and performance. The chosen location for this exhibition was a private flat in Valletta—a very intimate space when

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<sup>516</sup> Anthony Haughey (b. 1963) is an artist and a lecturer at the Dublin Institute of Technology. Christian Sant Fournier (b. 1974), a photojournalist since 1997, has received numerous awards including the Malta Journalism and Press Photography Awards. See <http://anthonyhaughey.com/info/> accessed on May 03, 2016 and Vella, *Cross Currents* (2008), p.302.

compared to those of the earlier three projects. This was a unique experience for visitors as usually art was experienced in large public or unused spaces. The overseas and local artists involved in this part of the project were Rupert Ackroyd, Martin Bonnici, Elisa Von Brockdorff, Tatiana Echeverri Fernandez, Pierre Portelli, Brindalyn Webster, and Michael Whittle. Mark Mangion did not exhibit any of his work in this exhibition. The exhibition took place between the May 17 and 20, 2007.



**Fig. 77 A work from *The Search For a Space, Questioning Spaces – Chroma, Apartment, Valletta*. [work by Rupert Ackroyd – paper.]  
(Image provided by Mark Mangion.)**

The final exhibition from this series, entitled *Forbidden Spectacle*, was held at the National Museum of Fine Art in Valletta.<sup>517</sup> The title was highly appropriate because no contemporary works had ever been displayed in the permanent galleries. The works chosen attempted to engage with the existing works within the museum space. Purposely opposing themes were included in the set of works chosen, among which were comfort and conflict, history and progress, the dark and the luminous, as well as beauty and violence. The

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<sup>517</sup> In 2009, the National Museum of Fine Art was more willing to show contemporary art work within the museum premises. Open discussions at the museum known as *Art and Wine @ South Street* took place on a regular basis. Contemporary artists and local thinkers were invited to share their thought on works within the museum collection. Author was present at the majority of these sessions.

exhibition works included site-specific pieces, performance, film and video, painting, drawing, photography and sculpture, and were scattered round the whole museum [Figure 78]. This was the first time art works had been removed from the Fine Arts Museum's collection in each of the upper floors to be replaced by a contemporary work. According to Mangion, "It is a form of experiment, creating an interesting conflict and contrast and could also serve to bring the public to the Fine Arts Museum."<sup>518</sup>



**Fig. 78 A work from *The Search for a space, Questioning Spaces – Forbidden Spectacle*, Fine Arts Museum, Valletta. [work by Carrie Levy – video art piece on screen.] (Image provided by Mark Mangion.)**

A large number of artists participated in the last chapter of this project, namely Rupert Ackroyd, Nat Breitenstein, Jessica Brouder, Austin Camilleri, Karen Caruana, Ann Kathrin Greiner, Carrie Levy, Pierre Portelli, Jaume Sabater I Garau, Martina Schmuecker, James Swainson, Raphael Vella, Brindalyn Webster, Douglas White, and Mark Mangion. The exhibition was held between May 31 and June 3.<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>518</sup> Fiona Galea Debono, "'Desperate need' for proper contemporary art space", *Times of Malta*, April 4, 2007.

<sup>519</sup> See <http://markmangion.com/index.php?/projects/search-for-a-space/>. (accessed July 20, 2015).

The importance of this series of exhibitions curated by Mark Mangion in 2007 is that they sought to highlight the desperate need for a professionally run contemporary art space with “vision, direction and philosophy”, where local and overseas artists could collaborate.<sup>520</sup> Apart from this, the art project can be regarded as one of the earliest examples of a contemporary curatorial project—following the START exhibitions—and is therefore also important as an example of the professionalisation of the sector.<sup>521</sup> For Mangion, the project was not only about making five shows, but “it was more a process of questioning the artwork and the curation to varying degree.”<sup>522</sup> In fact, this project reflects the shift in thinking about space and how art engages with social and political issues. The wider understanding to the social role of and the way that it intervenes in the understanding of contemporary issues shows the internationalisation by means of the different themes of the exhibitions which presented local and global issues.

This artistic project *The Search for a Space, Questioning Spaces* by Mangion directly led to the opening of the Malta Contemporary Art, better known as the MCA, founded by Mangion in December 2008 to serve as a space and also a foundation for contemporary art.

### **Malta Contemporary Art (MCA) and Mark Mangion**

On December 4, 2008, Malta inaugurated its first official contemporary art space. The space, or rather a concept, was called Malta Contemporary Art. Best known as MCA, it was initiated together with a foundation led by the artist Mark Mangion. Although Mangion’s initial idea had been to find a base in Valletta, it was difficult to find a site to turn into a wide cubic space inside the capital.<sup>523</sup> To introduce this concept in Malta Mangion opted for a warehouse measuring 450 square metres in Marsa, opposite the open centre for migrants [Figure 79]. For

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<sup>520</sup> Galea Debono, “‘Desperate need’ for proper contemporary art space”.

<sup>521</sup> All exhibitions were privately funded.

<sup>522</sup> Mark Mangion interview with the author on 18 May 2017.

<sup>523</sup> Brian O’Doherty, ed., *Inside the White Cube: The ideology of a Gallery Space Expanded* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

the first time in Malta, Mangion and the MCA foundation introduced a space with large white walls and suitable lighting, ideal for exhibiting contemporary art. This was an opportunity for local artists who had been long awaiting such a space to accommodate their works.



**Fig. 79 Malta Contemporary Art – MCA, Marsa.  
(Image provided by Pierre Portelli.)**

The MCA foundation, funded by private entities, was committed to supporting ground-breaking projects by promoting local and foreign international artists. Moreover, apart from high quality activities related to visual art exhibitions, the MCA presented an extensive programme that included guest talks and critical fora. The importance of such events was later to be a key element of the National Cultural Policy of 2011.<sup>524</sup>

The first event to be officially inaugurated by MCA was a collective show by the START contemporary art group, together with a number of up-and-coming Maltese artists. This exhibition, entitled ‘eight eighteen’, was curated by the eight START artists: ‘eight’ standing for the members and ‘eighteen’ for the number of artists participating in this collective exhibition. Each member chose a young Maltese artist to exhibit together with two more established contemporary artists. The selection of both artists and works and the group’s willingness to mentor and collaborate with up-and-coming artists was innovative for

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<sup>524</sup> *National Cultural Policy 2011*, 69.

the local art sector and the exhibition may be considered to be one of the most inspiring exhibitions held within the MCA white-washed open space. It was the first contemporary exhibition in which established artists interacted with younger artists thereby introducing and promoting the idea of intergenerational dialogue.

Seven other exhibitions implementing various aspects of contemporary art were held in Marsa [See Volume 2: Catalogue – Pages 47 & 48 Catalogue No. 59]. These were mainly solo exhibitions of young international artists, namely the British artist Rupert Ackroyd (b. 1978), with a project entitled *Moon Under Water*; Tatiana Echeverri Fernandez (b. 1974) from Costa Rica, who presented a body of works entitled *New Plane*; German artist Martina Schmuecker (b. 1973), who combined a set of drawings and a performance presented under the title of *Visual Mechanics*; Douglas White (b. 1977), a British artist who was inspired by Kit Williams' children's book and created a bone-like figurative sculpture which bore the title *Masquerade*; and the late Stuart Croft (1970-2015), who presented his film *The Death Waltz*. Each of these solo shows were curated by Mangion. He also had a solo exhibition entitled *Black Out* in March 2009 that presented a series of films and sculptures in which Mangion paid homage to the dangerous and often tragic exodus of African migrants into Europe.<sup>525</sup>

Following the first group show *eight eighteen* that launched Malta Contemporary Art, the only other group show at MCA was *The World Next Door* in June 2009, curated by Ruth Bianco, which featured eight video works. The invited artists were once again international: Reem Bader from Palestine; Maria Papanastasiou from Greece; Sumita Chauhan from India; Linda Gibson from the UK; Leah Decter from Canada; Josephine Turalba from the Philippines; Esin Croft from Turkey, and Bianco herself. Bianco's project grew out of her continuing interest in the "notion of territory".<sup>526</sup> The participants were artists she had met on

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<sup>525</sup> See <http://maltacontemporaryart.com/blackout.html> (accessed March 31, 2016).

<sup>526</sup> Ruth Bianco, "The World Next Door" (accessed March 31, 2015).  
<http://www.ruthbianco.com/The%20World%20Next%20Door.html>.

her travels and who were also engaged in fine art research on contextually fluid, nomadic, open-ended journeys of artists working away from home. This exhibition is a clear example of global networks that were possible with mobility and awareness of cultural multiplicity. In the exhibition Bianco quoted from Nicolas Bourriaud's publication *Altermodernity* to discuss territory and the globalisation of culture.<sup>527</sup> This exhibition reflects the nomadic idea of crossing borders argued by Raphael Vella in the introductory chapter of *Cross Currents* discussed in the previous chapter, while it also linked to Rogoff 'de-territoriality' argument, especially when she uses the exhibition entitled 'Territories', held in 2003 as an example.<sup>528</sup> In this exhibition the curators like Bianco, grouped together artists dealing with territory within an acceptable geographical location.

Talks and events that took place within the Marsa space included Rupert Ackroyd's *IKEA* that examined IKEA as an example of lifestyle branding taken to a new level; Mangion's artist talk about his project *Black Out*, which dealt with asylum seekers landing on the island of Malta, and the MCA Art Forum entitled 'Cross Currents: Contemporaneity and Maltese Art', which was dedicated to the previously discussed recent publication edited by Raphael Vella.

This forum was another landmark in Malta's contemporary art history, being the first time that Maltese contemporary art was the subject of a well-attended forum [Figure 80]. The forum's starting point was Vella's edited publication *Cross-Currents*. Several questions were put forward to provoke discussions, such as: What does the word 'contemporary' mean in Maltese contemporary art and architecture? What 'time' do Maltese artists and architects inhabit? How does the global affect the local in Maltese art and culture? The authors of the

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<sup>527</sup> Ruth Bianco, "The World Next Door" (accessed March 31, 2015).

<http://www.ruthbianco.com/The%20World%20Next%20Door.html>.

<sup>528</sup> Rogoff, Irit, "Geo-Cultures. Circuits of Arts and Globalizations", *Open Magazine* No.16/2009, pp.106-115.



essays were present, and the general public was encouraged to participate in the discussion.<sup>529</sup>

This type of forum was the first of its kind in Malta.



**Fig. 80 Forum - *Cross-Currents: Critical Essays on Maltese Art and Culture*, MCA, Marsa, 15 March 2009 (Image was provided by Mark Mangion)**

In January 2010, the MCA foundation relocated to the upper galleries of the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity. Mangion's wish of finding a space within the precincts of Valletta had come to pass. The new space was still run with the support of private funding; in fact, one of the largest insurance companies in Malta became one of the main patrons of MCA by giving a generous donation to the foundation.<sup>530</sup> The local government also supported the foundation by subsidising the rent while the foundation covered all other expenses, including the transformation of the galleries into a neutral white space.<sup>531</sup> This move from Marsa to Valletta created new opportunities for the growth and understanding of contemporary art in the capital.

The new location at St James Cavalier was inaugurated with the group show *A New Generation* on January 14, 2010 [Figure 81]. The works of ten emerging Maltese artist—

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<sup>529</sup> The forum, chaired by Professor Peter Mayo, was held on March 15, 2009. The speakers were Professor Kenneth Wain, Professor Paul Clough, Ms Isabelle Borg, Dr Raphael Vella, Professor John Baldacchino, and Mr Peter Brincat. See "MCA: Art Forum", *Times of Malta* (The Weekender), March 14, 2009.

<sup>530</sup> "Gasam Mamo Insurance gives leg-up to Malta Art", *The Sunday Times of Malta*, February 7, 2010.

<sup>531</sup> Verbal communication with Mark Mangion, March 23, 2017. This measure was possible since the galleries formed part of the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity (St James Cavalier Foundation) which is a government institution.

Adrian Abela, George Mario Attard, John Paul Azzopardi, Maria Bonnici, Karen Caruana, Dustin Cauchi, Selina Scerri, Teresa Sciberras, Elisa von Brockdorff, and Michael Xuereb—were exhibited at the MCA under the curation of Mangion. According to Mangion, the aim of this exhibition was to act as a platform for discussion where the artists had to challenge their own perceptions of where their work was heading, allowing it to adopt new approaches with an international dimension.<sup>532</sup>

The artistic programme of the MCA foundation within the St James Cavalier Centre for 2010 was similar to the one implemented in 2009 inside the Marsa warehouse.<sup>533</sup> The main difference was that the majority were group exhibitions predominately presenting invited international artists. Notably, as the following necessarily brief outline of the group exhibitions show, the dominant themes explored centred on the global and the local, transit and movement, fluidity, and questions of geography and identity [See Volume 2: Catalogue – Pages 52 & 53 Catalogue No. 63].



**Fig. 81 A photograph showing one of the four galleries which were turned into MCA, St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, Valletta. Exhibition title: *A New Generation*, 2010 (Image provided by Mark Mangion.)**

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<sup>532</sup> *New Generation*, exhibition leaflet, Malta Contemporary Art, St James Cavalier Upper Galleries, Malta, January 14 to February 7, 2010.

<sup>533</sup> The main patrons of MCA were St James Cavalier Foundation (a government entity), the Bank of Valletta, and Bawag Bank, Malta. Other patrons were the Gasan Mamo Insurance Agency, EC Language School, 6pm, and the Austrian Embassy.

The first group show in 2010, held between February 11 and March 14, was entitled *Upon Arrival Spatial Explorations*. The curator was Margit Neuhold, while the seven participating Austrian artists were Sabine Bitter and Helmut Weber, Michael Gumhold, Nikola Hansalik, Veronika Hauer, Andreas Heller, Nicole Six and Paul Petritsch, and Gerald Straub. The exhibition was accompanied by a publication featuring texts by Jeff Derksen, Franziska Hederer, Margit Neuhold, Walter Seidl, Gerald Straub and Ulrich Tragatschnig, and was published in collaboration with the Center for Intermediality Studies (CIMIG) at the Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz/Austria. The main theme of this exhibition comprised of methods of negotiating and exploring unknown geographies and their relation to notions of the local and global. *Upon Arrival* investigated spatial micro-perspectives by means of very concrete examples of physical spatial structures or social interactions in the world.<sup>534</sup>

The second group show curated by Kris Van Dessel was held between March 19 and April 18, 2010. Entitled *Transit Station*, it focused on the work of four overseas artists including artist-curator Kris Van Dessel, Christian Noirfalise, Olphaert Den Otter, and Jean Marie Bytebier who staked out a temporary “transit station” of their own on the island of Malta. A strategic junction of ancient trade routes overseen by its legendary knights, Malta is a harbour, a travel destination, but not a place to take root in. Christophe Van Eecke describes the concept behind this exhibition as a geographical passageway where Malta is the ultimate transit station for these images before they enter the realm of disappearance. For Van Eecke, Malta is a strategic junction and a travel destination but not a place to take root in.<sup>535</sup>

The third group show, *Embassy of the Liquid States*, from April 29 to June 30, 2010, was about the liquid character inherent in the development of Western civilisation, European history, the history of Malta, and the cultural environment in which artists’ activity develops.

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<sup>534</sup> See MCA’s official website archive on <http://maltacontemporaryart.com/upon-arrival-spatial-explorations.html>. (accessed January 15, 2015). No local or international reviews/interviews were found by the author.

<sup>535</sup> See MCA’s official website archive on <http://maltacontemporaryart.com/transit-station.html>. (accessed January 15, 2015). No local or international reviews/interviews were found by the author.

The moment is indefinable because it changes incessantly. The artists involved were Ingrid Buchwald Eguia, Jaume Simo Sabater I Garau, and Manuel Saiz.<sup>536</sup>

The final group show, between October 14 and November 11, 2010, bore the title *Geography of Proximity*. This travelling exhibition, curated by Roberto Daolio and Alessandro Castiglioni, formed part of the *Little Constellation* project led by Rita Canarezza and Pier Paolo Coro, discussed previously in chapter five. The narration of a journey into the world inhabited by artists through art, the exhibition covered a constellation of small states in Europe, namely Andorra, Cyprus, Iceland, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, San Marino, and other significant geocultural micro-areas such as Canton Ticino, Ceuta, Gibraltar or Kaliningrad. An accompanying publication by Mousse reproduced the exhibited works, the biographies of the twenty artists and groups involved, using texts, images, and interviews to illustrate the legs of a journey spanning six years between 2004 and 2010.<sup>537</sup> As the above brief summary of the exhibitions indicates, the key themes of the collective exhibitions at MCA were movement, leaving and arriving, fluidity and negotiation of new conditions in local and global settings.

The diversity of the MCA programme is evident in the three other exhibitions held in 2010, featuring either one artist's oeuvre or a collaboration between two artists. One showcased artist was by the French international artist Cyprien Gaillard, who questioned humanity's traces in nature in an iconoclastic way in 'The Fight against Vegetation'. Here, three of the artist's major films, *The Lake Arches* (2006), *Desniansky Raion* (2007), *Cities of Gold* and *Mirrors* (2009) were exhibited in the upper galleries of St James Cavalier. Curated by Mangion between June 11 and July 4, 2010, the films were conceived as a triptych with scenes shifting from a street fight in the suburbs of St Petersburg, a Parisian apartment

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<sup>536</sup> See MCA's official website archive on <http://maltacontemporaryart.com/embassy-of-the-liquid-states.html>. (accessed January 15, 2015). No local or international reviews/interviews were found by the author.

<sup>537</sup> Rita Canarezza and Pier Paolo Coro, *Little Constellation: Contemporary Art in Geocultural Micro-Areas and Small States of Europe*, (Milan, Italy: Mousse Publication, 2010).

complex accompanied by lightshows and fireworks, to a bird's eye view of a housing complex district in Desniansky Raion, Kiev, echoing Stonehenge's structures.<sup>538</sup>

The second exhibition was a collaboration with the British duo Jess Flood-Paddock and Spartacus Chetwynd, which questioned the benefits of parameters, routines, and regulation to creativity. The two artists sought a cultural journey of discovery, recreation, and collaboration which resulted in an open-ended presentation based on their research. Titled *The Grid System: A Regime*, it ran between August 19 and September 19, 2010, and once again was curated by Mangion.<sup>539</sup> The last exhibition at MCA Valletta was by the local contemporary artist Austin Camilleri. Camilleri who was the first Maltese visual artist to be given the opportunity to present a solo show at MCA, apart from Mangion's solo exhibition held in 2009 at the Marsa building. What is more noteworthy about Camilleri's exhibition is that MCA showed a collection of ten paintings whereas prior exhibitions featured multimedia installation work. However, it was only the medium that was different, since all the paintings still served as a social commentary on contemporary everyday lifestyles.<sup>540</sup>

Like the Marsa warehouse experience, the MCA foundation in Valletta was short-lived. It lasted for a year and closed in December 2010. Several issues arose; the major one according to Mangion was funding. When asked to identify the major challenges to running the MCA in an online interview, Mangion refers to the task of receiving appropriate funding from the government and the private sector in Malta, where presenting contemporary work to the public suffers from a lack of exposure.<sup>541</sup> After this experience, Mangion and the MCA temporarily moved away from the Maltese Islands and continued to organise contemporary

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<sup>538</sup> See MCA's official website archive on <http://maltacontemporaryart.com/the-fight-against-vegetation.html>. (accessed January 15, 2015). No local or international reviews/interviews were found by the author.

<sup>539</sup> See MCA's official website archive <http://maltacontemporaryart.com/the-grid-system-a-regime.html>. (accessed January 15, 2015). No local or international reviews/interviews were found by the author.

<sup>540</sup> See MCA's official website archive <http://maltacontemporaryart.com/austin-camilleri.html>. (accessed January 15, 2015); and Lisa Gwen Baldacchino, "Stratigraphically Speaking", *Times of Malta*, December 9, 2010 and Charlene Vella, "Sacred and profane", *The Sunday Times of Malta*, January 30, 2011.

<sup>541</sup> "Multicultural Creativity in the Mediterranean – Malta Contemporary Art", on *Bianet* (accessed January 20, 2016). <http://bianet.org/bianet/people/130213-malta-contemporary-art>

art exhibitions under the umbrella of the MCA. The exhibitions were all held in European cities including Athens, Rome, Zurich, Frankfurt, Brussels, Paris, London, and Graz.<sup>542</sup>

Mangion later returned to Malta in 2014 when opportunities for artists-curators became more stable as discussed in the following chapter.

### **No. 68 and Alexandra Pace**

Another artist who contributed significantly to the search for a space for contemporary art in the immediate years prior to the 2011 Cultural Policy was Alexandra Pace (b. 1977). In October 2008, Pace inaugurated her own exhibition at No.68, a 400-year-old restored house in Valletta that originally belonged to Pace's grandmother. *Redprints* featured fifty-six black and white and colour photographs of portraits and scenes specifically produced for the exhibition.<sup>543</sup> The well-established contemporary fine art medium of photography lacked exposure in Malta with few photographic exhibitions held locally. In addition to having introduced a new creative space in Valletta, Pace's passion for cameras, photographic technique, and fine art in general injected a new vision in the field of contemporary photography in Malta.<sup>544</sup> Pace herself admitted that she had never thought the venue would have so much potential for showcasing other artists' works but, following her experience, she considered the idea of opening it to fellow artists.<sup>545</sup>

Exhibiting brilliant entrepreneurial skills (as evidenced by the publishing strategy employed for her own exhibition) and willingness to collaborate, Pace decided to make the space available for other projects [See Volume 2: Catalogue – Page 48 Catalogue No. 60].

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<sup>542</sup> See Mark Mangion's website <http://www.markmangion.com/index.php?/projects/parallel-borders/> (accessed February 15, 2017).

<sup>543</sup> *Redprints: Fine Art Photography* by Alexandra Pace. (accessed September 21, 2015). <https://redprints.wordpress.com>

<sup>544</sup> The majority of photography exhibited in Malta prior to this exhibition was documentary in nature with a focus on technique rather than on how to exploit this medium for contemporary art purposes. Even though a photographic association had been active for years, the first full-time fine art photographic course in Malta was only launched in 2011, two years after Pace's exhibition.

<sup>545</sup> Fiona Galea Debono, "Letting Light into the 'darkrooms'", *Times of Malta*, October 28, 2008.

Pace first collaborated with Pierre Portelli who curated an exhibition entitled *Square* in May 2009, for which she gathered the works of forty-two artists from among the fifty-eight who expressed interest in the open call.<sup>546</sup> The exhibition consisted of ninety-one squares of art measuring ten inches by ten inches placed around the house.<sup>547</sup> According to Pace, “the aim was to fill No.68 with these little squares of art.”<sup>548</sup> The works included photography, paintings, sculptures, installations and illustrations using the floors and walls inside the premises.

The aim of this new space in Valletta was to provide exposure to both emerging and established artists. No.68 was marketed to host artistic and cultural events, including the Malta Arts Festival in 2009.<sup>549</sup> The first exhibition chosen by the festival, *The Life Model: between the nude and the naked*, centred on a subject that still raised a number of eyebrows in Malta in 2009.<sup>550</sup> In fact, the work of Raphael Vella chosen by the curator was excluded from the exhibition by the main organisers of the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts (MCCA), on the grounds of it being potentially libellous.<sup>551</sup> Within a year, No.68 turned into an ideal space for film nights, vernissages, installation pieces, video art, illustrations, as well painting and photography exhibitions. For four years, from 2008 to 2012, it acted, alongside the MCA, as a space that was fully dedicated to contemporary art practice, and remained so until Pace decided to adopt a much stronger concept, renaming the space Blitz in 2013 (as discussed below).

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<sup>546</sup> “A square of many sides”, *Times of Malta*, May 6, 2009.

<sup>547</sup> The participating artists were: Adrian Abela, Alberto Favaro, Alexandra Pace, Andre Arends, Anna Nightingale, Austin Camilleri, Celia Borg Cardona, Charlot Cassar, Christian Sant Fournier, Christiane Brams, Christiane Stelberg, Christine X, Claude Mallia, David Xuereb, Denise Scicluna, Derek Fenech, Elisa Von Brockdorff, Elise Billiard, Fabio Borg, George Abdilla, Jacqueline Agius, James Vella Clark, Jelena Tomic, Jimmy Grima, Jon Calleja, Julie Apap, Karen Caruana, Karl Consiglio, Kenneth Zammit Tabona, Laurent Muller +211C, Lewis Zammit, Marisa Attard, Michelle Borg, Monica Daza, Nadine Lab, Olaug Vethal, Paul Mizzi, Pierre Portelli, Ruth Bianco, Sandro Gauci, Stephanie Borg, and Vince Briffa.

<sup>548</sup> *Times of Malta*, May 6, 2009.

<sup>549</sup> The exhibition held at No. 68 in the 2009 Malta Arts Festival and was entitled *The Life Model – Between Naked and Nude*.

<sup>550</sup> Participating artists: Jeni Caruana (Malta), Vince Briffa (Malta), Antony Calleja (Malta), Patrick Dalli (Malta), Alexandra Pace (Malta), Astrid Steinbrecher (Germany), and Zygimantas Augustinas (Lithuania). It was curated by Patrick J. Fenech.

<sup>551</sup> Kristine Chetcuti, “We do have a sense of humour after all.” *The Times of Malta*. September 7, 2009.

## Other Initiatives: 2007-12

The willingness to look for an appropriate space for contemporary art in Valletta was also evident in the museum sector. Following an unsuccessful attempt by the curatorial team of the National Museum of Fine Arts and Heritage Malta to develop a building adjacent to the museum in 1998,<sup>552</sup> Dennis Vella, the curator of Modern and Contemporary from the same curatorial team, presented a report in 2007, making a case for an independent Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art.<sup>553</sup> The earmarked building was the Biagio Steps building which today is the Fortification Centre. This building was close to the National Museum of Fine Arts, had several access points, and had a number of rooms which could host the collection. Coincidentally, at the same time, the artist-curator Mark Mangion also envisioned Biagio Steps as a possible contemporary art space through his first exhibition of *The Search of a Space, Questioning Spaces* located at Biagio Steps, Valletta, as discussed above. Neither proposal was realised due to the costs involved.

Similarly unrealised was the flagship project listed in the electoral manifesto of the Nationalist Party in 2008. The Mediterranean Art Project and Sculpture Park (MAP) was proposed in an area known as Ospizio, a space within Floriana, a town on the outskirts of Valletta. This project was an initiative of the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts (MCCA) who asked visual artist Anton Grech—later assisted by another visual artist Vince Briffa—to come up with a concept for an art and an education space.<sup>554</sup> Apart from hosting sculpture in

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<sup>552</sup> Museum Department Annual Report 1998, 151. “The Museum secured an adjoining property - no. 8, Old Mint Street, Valletta. It was planned to convert this property into a Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art.” As the former curator Theresa Vella notes, access to the adjacent building in one of the narrow streets in Valletta was difficult and the building was in need of substantial restoration. Interview with the author on January 2, 2018.

<sup>553</sup> Discussion with the late Dennis Vella in 2007. Information as verified by his former colleague and curator Theresa Vella.

<sup>554</sup> Anton Grech interview with the author on October 5, 2017. Details were later discussed and confirmed with Vince Briffa.



outside open areas, it was proposed to house an exhibition space for contemporary works and a fine art practice workshop.

Following the launch of the National Cultural Policy in July 2011, in which one of the suggested actions was to create a museum space for modern and contemporary art, a delegation from Plus Tate, a network associated with the prestigious Tate museums in Britain, visited Malta. The purpose of the visit was to discuss a contemporary art museum space with the Maltese authorities. These networking meetings went on until the end of 2011 and a number of possible locations were earmarked but again, unfortunately, this project did not materialise.<sup>555</sup>

One of the final attempts to create a permanent contemporary art space was by the Maltese architect Chis Briffa who proposed the Valletta Art Museum (VAM) in the heart of Valletta in 2012. This museum project was controversial because Briffa's proposed site was the capital's run down covered market area. The architect's visuals, presented in exhibition format, revealed the covered market's 1,200 square metres of floor space with walls measuring nine metres in height.<sup>556</sup> This was enough space to accommodate artworks, installations and sculptures of substantial dimensions. Incorporating the history of the site, Briffa envisaged integrating the existing market stalls along the building's exterior side walls.<sup>557</sup> While Briffa did his utmost to promote his proposal, it was unsuccessful.<sup>558</sup>

Although there are a number of different reasons why the above-mentioned proposals failed, the chief cause was a lack of funding. Until the launch of the National Cultural Policy

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<sup>555</sup> In addition to this, a proposal for a new museum of art was launched by the government, which would have been led by Heritage Malta—the government entity that looks after the national collection. *Heritage Malta Annual Report*, 2011.

<sup>556</sup> Valletta Art Museum (VAM), an architectural exhibition at the Lily Agius Gallery, Sliema, Malta. It was held between March 22 and April 14, 2012.

<sup>557</sup> See VAM concept on <http://chrisbriffa.com/projects/valletta-art-museum-2012/>. (accessed July 1, 2012).

<sup>558</sup> Chris Briffa Architects presented the project to the exhibition visitors who had the opportunity to leave their comments and was subsequently presented to the media and the authorities. See interview with Chris Briffa, "Proposing The 'VAM' – a Valletta Art Museum", *The Malta Independent*, March 25, 2012. (accessed August 14, 2015). <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2012-03-25/news/proposing-the-vam-a-valletta-art-museum-307553/>.

in 2011 and the announcement in 2012 of Valletta's title as Europe's Capital City of Culture for 2018, the people involved in the creative sector were few.<sup>559</sup> With the ongoing developments of new structures in the sector and further interest by the general public, more funds were allocated by the government after 2012.<sup>560</sup> This type of support was well-received by private entities and entrepreneurs.

One such example of private enterprise occurred in 2011 when Fondazzjoni Temi Zammit took over a building in Valetta that had served as a hotel until the sixties, and made it available for contemporary exhibitions.<sup>561</sup> The space was launched with an exhibition entitled *The Gut* (2011). The fourteen Maltese artists who took part were inspired by the history of the space, and through different media they creatively brought back to life the incident that had caused this hotel to close its doors. By using original furnishings and old decorative furniture found inside the hotel, they recreated the murder scene of the prostitute who had been stabbed to death in one of the bathrooms. The idea of the project was remarkable, especially since the Splendid Hotel was situated in Valletta's Strait Street, an area known to have been the island's red-light district between the 1920s and 1960s. The foundation, however, never upgraded or restored the building in an adequate way, and artists longing for such a space had to make do with the way it was. The Splendid Hotel was extremely popular because of its location and high ceilings, but unfortunately it was not suitable for accommodating professional standard art exhibitions [Figure 82].<sup>562</sup>

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<sup>559</sup> *Compendium: Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe*, 47-48, 80-83.

[https://www.culturalpolicies.net/down/malta\\_022015.pdf](https://www.culturalpolicies.net/down/malta_022015.pdf) accessed on March 6, 2013

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-39, 65-68, 73-79, 35-39, and 65-68.

<sup>561</sup> Fondazzjoni Temi Zammit (FTZ) is a local development agency established in 2004. Together with several stakeholders, it acts as a collaborative network for the implementation of local and international projects of benefit to the Maltese community. The foundation was supported by the University of Malta.

<sup>562</sup> Splendid was still used for contemporary exhibitions and design project up till 2015, and it was never restored. One of the many events taking place as Splendid was "Malta Showcase 2015" (accessed January 20, 2016). <https://www.artscouncilmalta.org/blog/malta-showcase-2015>.



**Fig. 82 Splendid Hotel, 67, Strait Street, Valletta. (Author’s Collection)**

#### **6.4 Professionalism in Malta’s Cultural Sector**

It is significant that the 2011 cultural policy specifically identified the need for “the strengthening of the professional status of cultural workers”,<sup>563</sup> producing figures that showed that Malta’s average education level amongst this group was substantially lower than the EU level.<sup>564</sup> Among others, cultural workers could be seen to refer to the need for professional art curators, art critics, and gallerists, specialising particularly in contemporary art. Such professionals were a rarity in Malta—and continue to be so even today—partly due to the unavailability of related qualifications locally, the lack of infrastructure, and the general cultural milieu. The general mentality was that one should look at the past and promote the islands’ rich history rather than promote contemporary developments.

A curator’s role was to oversee the museum collection and the ongoing museum administration, and very little to nearly no resources were available to promote young talent and expose new concepts to the public.<sup>565</sup> Meanwhile, local newspaper art critics usually had an art historical background and focused on the formal description of the work rather than discussing contemporary art concepts. Moreover, gallerists—of whom there are still

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<sup>563</sup> *Malta National Cultural Policy*, 16.

<sup>564</sup> *Malta National Cultural Policy*, 50.

<sup>565</sup> Until recently, following the launch of the *National Cultural Policy* in 2011, the only curators in Malta were those working within the public sector. Only on a very few occasions, such as the Malta Summer Arts Festival, were individuals commissioned to act as curators. Mostly, they acted more as coordinators rather than curators.

unfortunately only a few—are normally art lovers with strong entrepreneur skills who strive to promote the contemporary art market. The situation locally was that several exhibitions were held and reviewed, but relatively little occurred in parallel with what was happening in terms of curating and art criticism in cosmopolitan centres.<sup>566</sup>

Owing to the dearth of professionals, most of the contemporary exhibitions held in Malta were self-curated by artists. This automatically placed the artist in the role of sole curator of their exhibition and this has largely remained the case until recently. Sometimes, art critics writing for local papers would be approached by the artist and requested to write a piece about the exhibition to be included in the leaflet or catalogue. As noted previously, little, or rather no structure, was visible until 1999, when the Bank of Valletta (BOV) started commissioning specific curators to contribute to catalogues for their retrospective exhibitions.<sup>567</sup> The St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity also incorporated the same system. Joseph Paul Cassar, who was responsible for the centre's visual art section, curated some of the first exhibitions—this included being responsible for curating the opening exhibition, consisting of mainly contemporary works, as discussed in chapter four. All the exhibitions subsequently curated by Cassar largely featured abstract art and included the Victor Pasmore and Alfred Chircop exhibitions of 2002.

The first contemporary exhibitions to be professionally curated after *Art in Malta* by Cassar in 2000 were the collective shows by the START contemporary art group. An interesting switch occurred whereby contemporary artists started curating contemporary collective exhibitions. This phenomenon had its boom in the UK in the nineties.<sup>568</sup> The

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<sup>566</sup> In fact, change has only become apparent in the last few years. The bid of Valletta as the European Capital City of culture made people more aware of certain requirements in culture. In view of this, Raphael Vella, with the assistance of the V18 Foundation, introduced the Curatorial School in 2014 (an intensive week-long course), while individuals with experience were assigned curatorial projects when Malta had the Presidency of the EU between January and June 2017.

<sup>567</sup> These initially took place on the BOV premises twice a year and from 2007 were reduced to once a year. The works exhibited, however, followed a modernist and rather traditional approach.

<sup>568</sup> A popular initiative was *Freeze*, an exhibition organised by a group of young artists which was held in an empty London Port Authority building. This exhibition launched many of the artists known as YBA - *Young British Artists*.

Maltese artist-curators, like other international artist-curators, were practising artists who curated shows in which they exhibited their own art and that of other artists.<sup>569</sup> Usually, the chosen spaces were temporary places, such as warehouses and unoccupied buildings that could be used for free or for a low short-term rent. Initially, their intentions were not necessarily to work with institutions, but after a few years most of the artist-curators were commissioned to curate important exhibitions. Examples of local artists who established their curatorial experience during the early 2010s were Patrick Fenech, Austin Camilleri and Raphael Vella, who later co-curated the Maltese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017 (see Chapter 7).

Notably, the 2011 Cultural Policy focused on Malta's need to develop professional training, fora for critical debate, and initiatives which "improve the interpretative and critical role of academics, journalists, critics and the general public."<sup>570</sup> These initiatives included the provision of specialised talks as well as financial support to enrol in short courses for specific professions.<sup>571</sup> To date, the most successful project is the one headed by Raphael Vella. In 2014, he introduced the Curatorial School, an intensive one-week summer course where international curators, artists, and professionals in the field were invited to deliver a series of lectures.<sup>572</sup> Today, professionalisation of the sector remains one of the key items on the Arts Council Malta agenda.<sup>573</sup> Nevertheless, more time and experience are required to develop experienced people to work full-time within the visual arts.

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<sup>569</sup> Joseph Doubtfire and Giulia Ranchetti, "Curator as Artist as Curator", on *Curating the Contemporary*. (accessed August 14, 2015). <https://curatingthecontemporary.org/2015/04/30/curator-as-artist-as-curator/> and the Tate's official website (accessed August 14, 2015). <http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/a/artist-curators>.

<sup>570</sup> *Malta National Cultural Policy*, 92.

<sup>571</sup> More cultural funds, managed by the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts, were allocated to those who applied for short courses.

<sup>572</sup> "Press Release: Curatorial School and Curators in Residence programme as part of VIVA" (accessed July 20, 2014). [https://www.um.edu.mt/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/218801/04\\_07\\_14\\_-\\_Curatorial\\_School...\\_EN.pdf](https://www.um.edu.mt/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/218801/04_07_14_-_Curatorial_School..._EN.pdf)

<sup>573</sup> Malta Council for Culture and the Arts, "New Training and Development Grants for Creative Professionals" <http://www.maltaculture.com/news/new-training-and-development-grants-for-creative-professionals> accessed 17 April, 2014.

## **Blitz**

As discussed above, No.68 was an influential art space, originally opened as an exhibition space for its owner Alexandra Pace. Its sixteen rooms were cleaned up and adequate lighting and hanging facilities installed.<sup>574</sup> While continuing her studies at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts in London from 2012 to 2014, the owner and founder—with the support of public and private entities—decided to reopen the space under a more structured creative and managerial concept.<sup>575</sup> In 2013, Blitz officially became an independent, not-for-profit project space supporting experimental and radical arts practice in all its forms. Supported by Arts Council Malta through a cultural partnership agreement and in accordance with the 2011 Cultural Policy, Blitz's aim was to act as a space to develop ideas, build relationships, and nurture creative talent through exhibitions and education, as well as serving as a social space for the creative and the curious. In 2015, a residency programme was launched. Blitz focused on creating a programme that would be valued by different new audiences in the contemporary arts. At the same time, it sought to investigate how to access high-quality exhibitions while serving as a stimulus to expand the local contemporary cultural infrastructure. In fact, following the termination of the MCA, No.68 and Blitz served as the main contemporary art galleries in Valletta and Malta, alongside other small galleries that organised one-off exhibitions or events to promote contemporary art [Figure 83].

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<sup>574</sup>Pace retained the original colour schemes of the walls as well as the original staircase and the patterned floor tiles. See Fiona Galea Debono, "Letting light into the 'darkrooms'", *Times of Malta*, October 28, 2008.

<sup>575</sup> A number of projects were funded by diverse supporters including Arts Council Malta (a public entity) and various private patrons. See <http://thisisblitz.com/our-supporters/> and <https://www.artscouncilmalta.org/funds/cultural-partnership-agreement>. Accessed 12 February 2016.



**Fig. 83 Blitz, 68, St Lucy Street, Valletta.**

The first project which launched the new concept of Blitz was *Tampered*, an exhibition of Pace's own work from June 24 to July 20, 2013, supported by the Malta Arts Fund. This exhibition was followed by several others, all of which had an impact on the local contemporary art scene. Every project served as an opportunity to lay the groundwork for other large projects and collaborations. Today, Blitz collaborators, partners, and supporters include Central Saint Martins (UK), the European Graduate School (EGS), TATE Art Exchange (UK), Galerie Allen (Paris), Fab Lab Valletta, Valentino Architects, the Aditus Foundation, the University of Malta (UoM), Resartis Art Basel, the Culture Directorate, and the Rupert Arts Centre in Vilnius, among others.<sup>576</sup>

### **St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity – Exhibitions post-MCA**

After the official closing of the MCA in December 2010, innovative visual art exhibitions were still held in the galleries of the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity. One might say that MCA created a legacy through which contemporary international visual art values were

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<sup>576</sup> All ongoing and past projects are available on <http://thisisblitz.com/past/> (accessed July 10, 2016).

nurtured by Mangion's friends and contemporaries within this space.<sup>577</sup> This was possible in part because of Vince Briffa, one of Malta's leading contemporary artists and a close friend and art collaborator of Mangion. At the time of the opening and closing of the MCA, Briffa was a member of the board of the Fondazzjoni Ċentru għall-Kreattività (The Foundation for the Centre for Creativity), where he was specifically responsible for the visual arts.<sup>578</sup>

The exhibitions held within the creativity centre were still varied, combining traditional contemporary visual art genres with a more contemporary international flavour and outlook. This was in line with the National Cultural Policy's outcomes that "contemporary society contributes and interacts with current developments, in the international sphere."<sup>579</sup> Of interest is a collaborative project between Raphael Vella and Baptiste Debombourg. The project, titled 'Aux Armes' (2012), is a reference to the French national anthem *La Marseillaise* [See Volume 2: Catalogue – Page 60 Catalogue No. 70]. Here the two artists adopted a global view of all the constraints imposed by society and focused on human, environmentally friendly fundamentals.<sup>580</sup> The idea of internationalisation was also evident in *Threshold*, 2012 the collective exhibition organised by the British Council [See Volume 2: Catalogue – Pages 63 Catalogue No. 73]. The works for this exhibition were selected from the British Art collection by artist-curator Paula Rego. The aspect of internationalisation was also evident in the travelling exhibition of the international

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<sup>577</sup> Among the various new innovative trends, one has to mention the *Contemporary Art in Dialogue* with... series organised by Raphael Vella. Two were held at St James Cavalier. These were held in 2011 and were launched on March 18, 2011. The first talk was by Carl-Peter Buschkühle on "Politics and Education: Joseph Beuys as Teacher and Social Sculptor" [Refer to Helidon Gjergji, *Times of Malta*, July 10, 2011 and Baptiste Debombourg, *The Malta Independent*, November 27, 2011]

<sup>578</sup> The board is appointed by the Ministry for Justice, Culture and Local Government and the foundation is the executive body which runs the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity – The National Arts Centre. Briffa was on this board between 2010 and 2013. See <http://www.sjcav.org/> (accessed January 2, 2013). Vince Briffa was interviewed by the author on May 28 2015.

<sup>579</sup> *National Cultural Policy*, 19.

<sup>580</sup> "To Arms", *The Sunday Times of Malta*, January 8, 2012.



photographer Steve McCurry.<sup>581</sup> In conjunction with this exhibition, a discussion session and a book signing with the McCurry was held on 19 June 2012.<sup>582</sup>

The National Cultural Policy “committed to investing further in order to facilitate contemporary forms of exhibiting which encourage an active involvement of individuals through technology, innovation, and imagination.”<sup>583</sup> Among these various exhibitions at the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity was *Terrain Vague* by Vince Briffa (2011), in which the artist presented multimedia digital artwork such as video art, sound art, and photography.<sup>584</sup> Two other veteran contemporary visual artists who exhibited within this space in 2012 were Patrick Fenech, who presented a photographic project entitled *Traces of Traces*, and Caesar Attard, who presented a concept under the title *H-ARDCORE*, a participatory exhibition which involved the audience [Figure 84].<sup>585</sup>



**Fig. 84** *White Pages* (2012) by Caesar Attard, acrylic on paper 400 x 480 cm and 32 chairs; *H-ardcore*, St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, Valletta. (Image provided by Caesar Attard.)

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<sup>581</sup> British Council, *Collective Threshold* exhibition at the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, Upper Galleries, April 13 to May 20, 2012; and the Steve Mc Curry Photographic Exhibition at the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, Upper Galleries, May 24 to June 25, 2012.

<sup>582</sup> This exhibition was organised by Eman Pulis with the support of the American Embassy in Malta. See “McCurry’s ‘Afghan Girl’ exhibited at St James”, *The Malta Independent*, June 13, 2012. (accessed July 15, 2015). <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2012-06-13/news/mccurrys-afghan-girl-exhibited-at-st-james-311487/>.

<sup>583</sup> *National Cultural Policy*, 74.

<sup>584</sup> *Terrain Vague*, Exhibition at the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, Upper Galleries, April 29 to May 23, 2011; and see Volume 2: Catalogue – Page 49 Catalogue No. 66.

<sup>585</sup> Patrick Fenech’s *Traces of Traces* exhibition at the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, Upper Galleries, January 11 to February 12, 2012; and Caesar Attard’s *H-ARDCORE* exhibition at the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, Upper Galleries, December 10, 2012 to January 13, 2013.

The space also gave up-and-coming artists the opportunity to present interesting projects such as *Call your Girlfriend*, a collective photographic exhibition organised by Matthew Navarro, and two separate solo exhibitions featuring Adrian Abela, who presented *Bills*, and Ritty Tacsum with her first exhibition *Humanoids* in 2011.<sup>586</sup> The empowerment of up-and-coming artists was also visible in group shows, particularly those which had a huge impact on the outlook of contemporary art practice. These were *Wiċċ imb'Wiċċ – Images of the Self*, a collective exhibition curated by Austin Camilleri as part of the Malta Arts Festival of 2012 [Figure 85], and the *Milkshake* project, which was put together by the artist Gilbert Calleja and shown between March 8 and May 7, 2013. The former featured the works of Maltese artists John Paul Azzopardi, Vince Briffa, Joseph Calleja, Raphael Vella, and Elisa von Brockdorff alongside those of international artists Zarko Baseski from Macedonia, Dominique de Beir from France, Jessica Harrison from Scotland, Davor Ljubicic from Croatia/Germany, and Åsa Riton from Sweden.<sup>587</sup> In *Milkshake*, twenty artists participated in the multi-media artistic project [See Volume 2: Catalogue – Page 64 & 65 Catalogue No. 7].

New opportunities to promote young artists were also embraced by government funded social institutions, mainly Aġenzija Żgħażaġh (Youth Agency), which from 2012 started the annual exhibition series *Divergent Thinkers* in collaboration with Raphael Vella.<sup>588</sup> The *Divergent Thinkers* exhibition is important in the local contemporary art scene because it enables young artists, through the provision of opportunities and spaces, to present their artistic thoughts. Over the years it has also established itself as the main platform for emerging artists in Malta since it encourages innovative thinking and artistic projects, focuses

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<sup>586</sup> *Bills* by Adrian Abela, exhibition at the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, Upper Galleries, June 4 to 26, 2011; and *Humanoids – Photographic Exhibition* by Ritty Tacsum, exhibition at the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, Upper Galleries, September 27 to October 30, 2011.

<sup>587</sup> Ramona Depares, “Creative representation of the self”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, July 8, 2012.

<sup>588</sup> One of the key policies action states: “initiatives shall give priority to the needs and interests of children and young people in terms of physical and intellectual access, participation, interactivity and creativity, and shall be developed in partnership with professional creatives and cultural operators.” See *National Cultural Policy*, 60.

on the actual processes of artistic creation, and commissions new work from the selected participants.<sup>589</sup>



**Fig. 85 Two photos showing *Wiċċ imb'Wiċċ – The Image of the Self*, (2012) Upper Galleries, St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, Valletta. (Courtesy of Spazju Kreattiv.)**

The most important group show, or rather festival, was VIVA – the Valletta International Visual Art Festival, which was launched in 2014. This entailed a collaboration between the Valletta 2018 Foundation and St James Cavalier under the curatorial administration of Raphael Vella.<sup>590</sup> VIVA, together with a Curatorial School, hosted important artists, curators, and thinkers including Mieke Bal over the years. The main purpose of VIVA is to create a platform for contemporary art in Malta. The festival is seen as part of the process of fostering a change of mentality in the local cultural scene and has a special focus on curatorial practice. The organisers, due to the local context, envisage a programme of events which can be embraced by everyone, both Maltese and foreigners. VIVA and the Curatorial School were launched in 2014 and in the following years these developed along separate paths.

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<sup>589</sup> “Agenzija Zghazagh Calls for Divergent Thinkers”, *The Malta Independent*, February 19, 2012. (accessed August 14, 2014). <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2012-02-19/local-news/A%C4%A1enzija-%C5%BBg%C4%A7a%C5%BCag%C4%A7-Calls-for-Divergent-Thinkers-305951> and exhibition catalogues.

<sup>590</sup> See *VIVA: The first International Visual Art Festival held in Malta*, written by the author. For further information on the first edition of VIVA on <https://interartive.org/2014/10/viva-malta>

## **6.5 Conclusion**

By 2008, both political parties—the Malta Labour Party and the Nationalist Party—were in favour of culture becoming a political priority and, in view of this, various measures were introduced. The Creative Economy Working Group was appointed to work on the National Cultural Policy, publicly launched in 2011, which established new funded schemes for the arts, including visual art, emphasising two areas of intervention: the creation of an adequate infrastructure and the development of educational facilities.

This chapter has identified that the National Cultural Policy initiated positive changes by creating a framework for further internationalisation, professionalisation and investment in new technologies which were visible at exhibitions organised at St James Cavalier Centre after 2011. Other radical outcomes included, as I have shown, the introduction of the first full-time art courses into Malta's tertiary level education system, including a full-time BA (Hons) in Fine Arts and a Master's in Digital Arts; allocation of funds for art scholarships to support students studying abroad, and a new contemporary acquisition fund managed by government entities. These distinct advances strengthened the local art scene but physical space for contemporary art was more difficult task to achieve.

These new opportunities, in addition to more art students having the possibility to study and live abroad, is a reflection of a new identity for contemporary Maltese artists, that was promoted through important European opportunities, including Malta's European Presidency for 2017 and Valletta becoming the European Capital City for Culture in 2018. This shift in identity is evident through the visual art practices of contemporary Maltese artists, the themes of exhibitions, and the language used by artists, curators and critical theorists to describe their positioning in relation to local and global issues. No longer considered peripheral, this new identity was promoted as nomadic, fluid and part of a global art world.

Although a government-led contemporary art space was not yet available in Malta by 2013, in less than ten years, contemporary Maltese artists presented themselves and were promoted as leaders in the sector by opening artist-led private galleries showcasing international artists together with established and emerging Maltese artists. Notably, exhibition in galleries such as Blitz and MCA offered artist-curated exhibitions that critically reflected on contemporary issues, the role of the artworks, curating as a practice and the importance of engaging intergenerational artists in this endeavour. This shift in mentality brought about by private and government actions and sponsorship, re-positioned Malta and Maltese artistic identity within a distinctly more European and international arena.

**Chapter 7**  
**Maltese Contemporary Art in Europe: The Venice Biennale, European Presidency and European Capital City of Culture**

### **7.1 Introduction**

An important milestone in contemporary Maltese culture was Malta's application in 2011 for the European Capital of Culture for 2018. The decision to apply marks the ambitions of the Maltese government to be a key player in Europe and to invest, as the press release states, "in the creative and cultural sector so as to effectively prepare for the European Capital of Culture project as well as for investing in the future of the sector beyond 2018."<sup>591</sup>

Preparations for the application and its delivery after the successful award in 2012 had wide-reaching effects on Malta's cultural infrastructure, its organisation and the development of strategic frameworks for the arts. This chapter focuses on these key developments in relation to the contemporary visual art scene, including the central role of the newly-legislated Arts Council Malta responsible also for preparing the art scene for Malta's European Union Presidency of 2017 and Malta's participation in the fifty-seventh edition of the Venice Biennale, and the artists and curators who enthusiastically initiated new projects and opened new spaces.

The aim of this chapter is to evaluate the significant changes that occurred between Malta's initial application for European Capital of Culture in 2011 and the preparations for its delivery in 2018 in terms of the national and international positioning and the identity of Maltese contemporary art. Hence, rather than detailing the complex political and multi-layered organisational processes involved in such major undertakings, I focus on the key themes and preoccupations manifested through contemporary art exhibition programmes and events, and the role of artists and curators in building and promoting a new identity for contemporary Maltese art. Here I argue that the key themes discussed throughout this thesis -

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<sup>591</sup> "Valletta's Bid for the Europe Capital of Culture (2018) Passes the Pre-Selection Stage," Department of Information Malta Press Release (PR 0106) January 18, 2012. p. 2.

mobility, professionalization, the international stage, the Maltese diaspora, artist-led curation and collaboration – together with vital government support, interweave and are crystallised in the return of Malta, after seventeen years of absence, to the Malta Pavilion at the Venice Biennale with the conceptual collective exhibition *Maltese Man, Homo Melitensis: An Incomplete Inventory in 19 Chapters*, curated by Raphael Vella and Bettina Hutschek.

## **7.2 Valletta as European Capital City of Culture for 2018**

In 2011, Malta took the decision to apply for European Capital of Culture (ECoC) for 2018. This lengthy and arduous process was led by the Minister for Tourism, Culture and the Environment, Mario de Marco, who began the process with consultations, public workshops, and a conference entitled ‘Imagine 18’ in June 2011.<sup>592</sup>

Initiated in 1983 as the European Capital City of Culture in 1985, the European City of Culture programme was launched with Athens as the first titleholder. This evolved into the present title in 1999 and the ECoC has since developed into a official EU event providing a significant opportunity for cities to implement changes in art, culture, and society.<sup>593</sup>

The Valletta 2018 Foundation, led by a Board of ten members, was founded in 2011 to oversee the first submissions and to later build the programme of events. The first responsibility of the foundation was to prepare the bid and to deliver the objectives, which included professionalising of the arts sector, generating cultural industries, and raising the standards of artistic endeavour at grass-roots level [Figure 86]. The pre-selection phase took place in January 2012 when the official bid was presented to the panel of thirteen individuals whose role was to assess whether the bid delivered a credible and dedicated vision to fulfil

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<sup>592</sup> “Imagine 18 paves way for Valletta’s ECoC bid,” *Malta Today*, June 21, 2011.

<sup>593</sup> Selected capital cities across the EU include Paris, Brussels, and Rome, as well as lesser-known cities such as Stavanger in Norway, Vilnius in Lithuania, Weimar in Germany and Liverpool in the UK. The latter held the title in 2008 and is significant because it sought far-reaching benefits for society by regenerating whole areas of the city. See “European Capitals of Culture,” *European Commission*, accessed May 10, 2017. [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/actions/capitals-culture\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/actions/capitals-culture_en).

the promise of a European Capital of Culture.<sup>594</sup> The subsequent phase focused on the strategic framework for a cultural programme with the final selection held in October 2012.



**Fig. 86 Valletta 2018, *Imagine V.18*, bid publication presented to the EU Commission in 2012.**

The final verdict on whether Malta was going to carry the ECoC title was announced and confirmed by Manfred Gaulhofer in October 2012 at the site of Caravaggio's masterpiece, *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*, inside St John's Co-Cathedral.<sup>595</sup> Notwithstanding this, Gaulhofer commented that "[o]ne of the issues is that Malta is a very small country at the periphery of the EU and there is a certain tendency to be very inward-looking and focus on Malta."<sup>596</sup> In view of this, Valletta as ECoC aimed to bring an overall European aspect. In May 2013, Valletta was officially declared Europe's Capital City of Culture for 2018 by the European Council of Ministers during a meeting of the same council which took place in Brussels.<sup>597</sup>

The official declaration by the Council of Ministers was issued in May 2013. This outcome required strong support from a range of stakeholders for the foundation to continue its preparation. In fact, the foundation gradually expanded its cultural programme,

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<sup>594</sup> Department of Information Press Release, January 18, 2012. [http://www.doi-archived.gov.mt/EN/press\\_releases/2012/01/pr0106.pdf](http://www.doi-archived.gov.mt/EN/press_releases/2012/01/pr0106.pdf)

<sup>595</sup> Kristina Chetcuti, "Valletta is Named Capital of Culture," *Times of Malta*, October 13, 2012.

<sup>596</sup> Ibid.

<sup>597</sup> Ibid.



strengthening its administrative structures, increasing its efforts in communicating and engaging with the public, and developing its research programme.<sup>598</sup> This new venture created much excitement among locals, especially those who were directly involved in the cultural sector. These expectations were further reflected in the conference which took place in June 2013, called ‘Small City - Big Dreams’. One of the keynote speakers, Jonathan McClory, remarked: “while I am aware there are some shortcomings, especially related to performance venues and space, I do think V18 will do a lot to catalyse some action.”<sup>599</sup> McClory also stressed the economic value of Valletta 2018. According to McClory, “[c]ulture will get people interested in Valletta—to work in and play in; a spirit of entrepreneurship is very important for the country’s future.”<sup>600</sup>

The Valletta 2018 Foundation together with the local government earmarked various projects to be developed by 2018. These included large-scale infrastructural projects, among which the restoration and conservation of Maltese architectural treasures and landmarks, such as *Is-Suq l-Antik*, the old covered market in Valletta, and *Il-Biċċerija*, the old abattoir. One of these infrastructural projects, MUŻA, is the new national community art museum which will be housed within the Auberge d’Italie. In parallel with this, multiple projects on a smaller scale were designed and have been taking place within different communities.

This mammoth project had several phases which were strongly affected by social and political aspects. These included the two national elections, one of which took place in the very early phases of the process in March 2013, and the following which affected the final preparations held in June 2017. Various individuals have been part of the Valletta 2018 Foundation over the years, some of whom affected the sector more than others. In fact,

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<sup>598</sup> V18 was part of the branding used for Valletta when promoted as the European Capital City of Culture 2018. See *Valletta 2018*, accessed June 22, 2015. <https://valletta2018.org>.

<sup>599</sup> Jo Caruana, “Shaping Valletta Cultural Narrative,” *The Sunday Times of Malta*, June 2, 2013.

<sup>600</sup> Jonathan McClory, an independent strategy consultant specialising in soft power, public diplomacy, cultural relations, place branding, and creative industries, led the London-based creative agency Winkreative and was Senior Researcher at the Institute for Government, where he remains an Associate.

certain changes were heavily criticised while others were only partially noticed.<sup>601</sup> For example, the structure of the artistic direction changed a number of times from the initial to the last stages. In its earliest phase, there was one artistic director and seven artistic programme directors. In 2013, there was a restructuring and all directorship positions were removed.<sup>602</sup> A number of people working in the cultural sector reacted negatively to the absence of artistic direction, claiming that it showed “no direction and no vision for the arts.”<sup>603</sup>

In October 2014 a new artistic director was appointed.<sup>604</sup> Several other changes followed since the projects were large in number and varied in size. The artistic director looked after five special events while a much larger executive team consisting of programme coordinators and officers looked after the programming department, led by the executive director.<sup>605</sup> The programming team worked closely with the international artistic advisor.<sup>606</sup> Throughout the whole process, the European advisory and monitoring panel continued to monitor outcomes.<sup>607</sup>

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<sup>601</sup> An example of heavy criticism can be noted in the local press when new members joined the foundation while others were removed. Initially, apart from the governance board, the foundation was made up of one artistic director and seven artistic programme directors but these contracts were not renewed in December 2013. See Kristina Chetchuti, “Capital of Culture needs to have value for money,” *Times of Malta*, December 4, 2013.

<sup>602</sup> Ibid.

<sup>603</sup> According to Vicki Ann Cremona, the grounds for the non-renewal were artistically unacceptable. She clarifies that the appointments—made through a regular call for applications, proper evaluation, and interview—were intended to provide time for proper planning and growth of the artistic sector. Programme directors were intended to start in time to gather experience and create the right momentum to launch projects with a lasting cultural legacy well after 2018. Vicki Ann Cremona, “No Direction and No Vision for the Arts,” *Times of Malta*, January 8, 2014.

<sup>604</sup> Caroline Muscat, “V-18 is Silent on Appointment of Artistic Director,” *Times of Malta*, October 30, 2014.

<sup>605</sup> “Executive Team,” *Valletta 2018*, accessed January 10, 2018. <http://valletta2018.org/executive-team/>; “Artistic Director: Special Events,” *Valletta 2018*, accessed January 10, 2018. <http://valletta2018.org/artistic-director-special-events/>.

<sup>606</sup> The international artistic advisor Airan Berg (born 1961 in Tel-Aviv of Austrian nationality), lives in Vienna, Mannheim, and Istanbul. Founder and manager of Theater ohne Grenzen and the International Puppetry Festival for Adults, Die Macht des Staunens (1993-2001); artistic director of Schauspielhaus Vienna (2001-2007) was artistic director for performing arts at Linz2009: European Capital of Culture. See “International Artistic Advisor for the Valletta 2018,” *Valletta 2018*, accessed January 10, 2018. <http://valletta2018.org/news/international-artistic-advisor-for-the-valletta-2018-foundation/#sthash.sDOIx3GI.dpuf>.

<sup>607</sup> “Monitoring Report,” September 2015, *European Commission*, accessed November 22, 2017. [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/sites/creative-europe/files/files/ecoc-2018-malta-monitoring\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/sites/creative-europe/files/files/ecoc-2018-malta-monitoring_en.pdf); “Second Monitoring Report,” March 2017, *European Commission*, accessed November 22, 2017. [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/sites/creative-europe/files/library/ecoc-2018-valletta-second-monitoring\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/sites/creative-europe/files/library/ecoc-2018-valletta-second-monitoring_en.pdf).

Unlike the initial stages, in which the main motivation was concept-based and developed by seven artistic programme directors from different art fields, the programming of the last three years between 2015 and 2017 was focused on communities living in specific regions within the archipelago. The general feeling in the sector is that from a concept formulated by the first group of artistic programme directors, the work of the Valletta 2018 Foundation turned into something more practical and factual, possibly rendered less visible since it was community-based.<sup>608</sup>

In relation to the contemporary visual arts, Valletta as the European Capital City of Culture in 2018 has provided an impetus for both small and large art projects to take place. Obvious examples of ambitious large scale infrastructure projects supported by the local government and Europe's Regional Development Fund are MUŻA, the new community art museum considered the flagship project of Valletta 2018, that opened in November 2018, and MICAS, the Malta International Art Space that should be running by 2021.<sup>609</sup> During 2018, MICAS launched its site with an open-air international exhibition entitled *Connecting Geographies*.<sup>610</sup> The exhibition presented MICAS concept as a "work-in-progress" and aimed to project the architectural design and transformation of the site from past to present.

Curated by MICAS Art Director, Dr Ruth Bianco, the exhibition took the form of artistic and architectural installations, which include a sculptural ribbon by lead architect Claude Borg constructed with students, projections, models, interactive media and a digital walkthrough. The entire exhibition is a holistic concept that integrates experimental art with designs by architects who worked on the MICAS design, together with workshop-based art

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<sup>608</sup> See Vicki Ann Cremona (ed.), *On Culture: Mapping Valletta 2018* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2016).

<sup>609</sup> Matthew Vella, "Inside the forgotten Knights' Ospizio: How Malta will make its mark in the art world", *Malta Today*, October 10, 2018 and Albert Galea, "Transforming a military relic into an innovative art space; introducing the MICAS project", *The Malta Independent*, October 6, 2018.

<sup>610</sup> See <https://micas.art/exhibitions/connecting-geographies-from-idea-to-project/> (accessed on October 30, 2018).

installations entitled *Prima Pietra* (Vault 1), *Pellicola* (Vault 2 - 5) and *Aperturi* (Vault 2), led by Ruth Bianco and Claude Borg and involved the participation of students [Figure 87].



**Fig. 87 *Prima Pietra*, *Pellicola* and *Aperturi*, site specific workshop-based art installation inaugurated during MICAS Concept launch, October 5, 2018. (Photo provided MICAS)**

Private institutions and foundations also put forward new spaces and concepts during the planning period. One of the largest private projects related to contemporary visual art is Valetta Contemporary (VC), the brainchild of Norbert Francis Attard, which will be run by the META Foundation.<sup>611</sup> Attard redesigned a space within Valetta and transformed it into a contemporary art space to host local and international art works and exhibitions. The space was launched in December 2017 and its official opening was in April 2018.<sup>612</sup> Another important landmark is the reopening of Malta Contemporary Art (MCA) by its original founder Mark Mangion.<sup>613</sup> MCA, supported by private patrons, reopened in a small space in Valetta in June 2017. Meanwhile, projects like Blitz are still going strong in 2019 with numerous exhibitions and projects in the pipeline.<sup>614</sup> Among one of their most exciting projects for 2018 was *Transformer*, a multifaceted, two-year project presented in

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<sup>611</sup> VCA is supported both by private and public funds. See “Cultural Partnership Agreement,” *Arts Council Malta*, accessed December 12, 2016. <https://www.artscouncilmalta.org/funds/cultural-partnership-agreement>.

<sup>612</sup> See <https://www.vallettacontemporary.com/> accessed June 19, 2018.

<sup>613</sup> See <https://lovinmalta.com/lifestyle/art/malta-contemporary-art-mca-is-back-with-a-brand-new-space> accessed June 19, 2018.

<sup>614</sup> “Programme”, *Blitz*, accessed January 10, 2018. <http://thisisblitz.com/programme/>.

collaboration with Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London, that will continue to present talks related to the *Art + Feminism* (an international project started in 2013) and exhibit works by different artists both local and foreign, including Anna Ridler (United Kingdom), Latitude36 (Malta), and Zahra Al-Mahdi (Kuwait).<sup>615</sup>

On a much smaller scale, up-and-coming and established artists perceived 2018 as a year of possibilities. In view of this, they noticeably strengthened their portfolio of work, participated in important exhibitions, and worked to create a strong network.<sup>616</sup> The more established artists availed themselves of every possibility to exhibit or curate projects with substantial value, which improved their level of professionalism both for the purposes of personal growth and in regard to public encounters. Notably, artist-curators who came to public attention in the early 1990s as discussed in Chapter Two, were now appointed to lead major projects. For example, Vince Briffa curated *In Transit* as part of Malta's European Presidency 2017 and Raphael Vella co-curated the Maltese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Ruth Bianco was appointed on the working team and later became the art director of MICAS (Malta International Contemporary Art Space).

The longer-term effects of Valletta 2018 on the contemporary visual art sector will not be possible to evaluate until later in 2019 and 2020 and this analysis is therefore outside the scope of this thesis.

### **7.3 Arts Council Malta**

On May 12, 2015, the Maltese Parliament approved a new legal structure for Arts Council Malta, following its rebranding from Malta Council for Culture and the Arts in 2014. This law, registered as Act 15 of 2015, placed the Council in a central position to encourage and

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<sup>615</sup> *Art + Feminism* aims to improve the content on women and the arts on Wikipedia and encourages women's participation in the online encyclopaedia. See <https://thisisblitz.com/Art-Feminism> accessed June 19, 2018.

<sup>616</sup> A number of young and established artists, including Ritty Tacsum, Joe Smith and Vince Briffa, were involved in a number of projects both in Malta and abroad in 2017 as part of Malta's European Presidency. See <https://www.reunion.org.mt/en/Pages/default.aspx> (accessed December 12, 2017)

promote the cultural and creative sectors within the wider socio-economic landscape. The new law highlighted eleven objectives, including the council's mandate to "initiate, develop and promote strategies, programmes and initiatives necessary to enhance the performance of the sectors"; "facilitate the participation in, and access to, cultural and creative activity"; and "promote intellectual property in the sector". In relation to contemporary practice, it also specified "promot[ing] innovation in the sectors and stimulate a creative ecosystem for the generation of contemporary creative content."<sup>617</sup>

In December 2015, Arts Council Malta launched the publication 'Strategy 2020' which effectively defined the Council's five-year work plan during the first national conference, 'Create 2020', organised by the council.<sup>618</sup> Former European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, Androulla Vassiliou, addressed the conference. Other key international speakers such as Paul Dujardin, Director General of BOZAR in Brussels; Shelagh Wright, Associate at DEMOS; Sebastien Cavalier, Director of Culture, Marseille, France; Airan Berg, Artistic Director, Linz09; Ragnar Siil, Managing Partner at Creativity Lab; and Cristina Farinha, Executive Producer at ADDICT, also participated in this conference.<sup>619</sup> The year 2018 was the fulcrum of the plan, building around the Valletta European Capital of Culture programme and simultaneously working towards its legacy for post-2020 cultural development.

Apart from the various commitments, Act 15 of 2015 entrusted Arts Council Malta with the responsibility of strengthening the organisations listed as public cultural organisations.<sup>620</sup> The role of Arts Council Malta was to assess and monitor the strategies, financial estimates, and financial records of public cultural organisations. This, together with

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<sup>617</sup> See Appendix for Act 2015. Also refer to "Create 2020," *Malta Culture*, accessed November 10, 2017. [http://www.maltaculture.com/files/uploads/misc/English-Create2020\\_web.pdf](http://www.maltaculture.com/files/uploads/misc/English-Create2020_web.pdf).

<sup>618</sup> The conference was held on December 14, 2015, at the Mediterranean Conference Centre, Valletta.

<sup>619</sup> "Arts Council Malta to hold its first national conference," *Malta Today*, December 4, 2015.

<sup>620</sup> The Public Cultural Organisations are Teatru Manoel, The Mediterranean Conference Centre, The Malta Philharmonic Orchestra, Fondazzjoni Ċentru għall-Kreattività, Pjazza Teatru Rjal, Fondazzjoni Valletta 2018, and ŻfinMalta.

continuous improvement in methods of data collection, was to contribute towards the building of a knowledge base that assisted and informed public cultural organisations in their decision-making.

With Arts Council Malta now occupying the central role in implementing policies, funding, and organisations within the cultural sector, of particular significance for this thesis is the Council's organisation of the cultural programme for the Malta European Presidency between January and June 2017 and its role as the main commissioner of the Maltese Pavilion in the fifty-seventh edition of the Venice Biennale, as discussed below.

### **Malta European Union Presidency: The Cultural Programme and Visual Art Events**

Between January and June 2017, Malta was responsible for the European Union presidency, a responsibility that rotates among the member states of the European Union every six months. Twelve months in advance of this obligation, Arts Council Malta launched the Malta Showcase in February 2016, purposely designed as groundwork to sustain the cultural programme during Malta's forthcoming European Union presidency [Figure 88]. The Malta Showcase was a curated collection of contemporary dance, music, visual arts, and performance created in Malta specifically intended to be available for programming internationally by cultural organisations, Maltese diplomatic representations overseas, ECoCs, international festivals, and theatres and museums, among other entities. The programme was based on a public call for proposed events and considered work that had already been created by Maltese artists. The 2016 edition included fifty-four artistic projects, including thirteen contemporary visual art exhibitions.<sup>621</sup>

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<sup>621</sup> *Malta Showcase*, accessed September 6, 2017. <http://www.maltashowcase.com/>.



**Fig. 88 Malta Showcase 2016-2017 Book.**

The contemporary visual arts projects were all solo exhibitions of varied media ranging from photography to performance, video art to printmaking, and installation to drawing and paintings. These included the fashion photographer Antonella Muscat (b. 1993); multi-media artist and curator Bettina Hutschek (b. 1977), later to co-curate the Malta Pavilion; photojournalist Darrin Zammit Lupi (b. 1968); photographers David Pisani (b. 1965), Joseph P. Smith (b. 1959), Kris Micallef (b. 1988); artists Jesmond Vassallo (b. 1976), and Robert Zahra (b. 1977), Gilbert Calleja (b. 1978), Norbert Francis Attard, Raphael Vella, and Ruth Bianco.<sup>622</sup> The works served as the title denotes as an international showcase of Malta's current visual art identity by presenting works created in different media, styles and themes. As the above list indicates, these included both established artists and young photographic artists. However, one has to keep in mind that only works by those artists who had reacted to the public call were included and hence some distinguished works and artists were not represented.<sup>623</sup>

The projects which formed part of the Malta Showcase were exported through eleven European cultural networks, which included the IETM (International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts), CAE (Culture Action Europe), IMC (International Music

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<sup>622</sup> "Malta Showcase Booklet," *Arts Council Malta*, accessed May 16, 2017.

<http://www.artscouncilmalta.org/files/uploads/misc/Malta%20Showcase%20Booklet%202016.pdf>.

<sup>623</sup> Mark Mangion, Austin Camilleri, and Vince Briffa were among the established artists not represented.



Council), ResArtis, Gasworks, and Trans Europe Halles. The 2016-2017 Malta Showcase edition was a cultural and financial collaboration between the Valletta 2018 Foundation, Fondazzjoni Kreattività, and the Parliamentary Secretary for the EU Presidency 2017, and was supported by European Union funds.<sup>624</sup>

Subsequently, on December 19, 2016, the six-month cultural programme of the 2017 Maltese Presidency of the Council of the EU was officially launched under the title of ‘rEUnion’. This was a close collaboration between the Presidency Cultural Programme Working Group led by Arts Council Malta, Heritage Malta, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Valletta 2018 Foundation was also a partner in this cultural programme by promoting the events presented in Malta.<sup>625</sup> The artistic director of the Cultural Programme was Airan Berg.

The visual arts section together with the other art forms featured the Maltese Islands and their different aspects—which make up the islands’ geographical, historical, anthropological, and social realities—in the Presidency cultural programme while encouraging the participation and involvement of the citizens.<sup>626</sup>

During the six-month programme, twenty-eight events were dedicated to the visual arts, most of which exhibited contemporary artists, with one of the events being the Maltese Pavilion at the fifty-seventh edition Venice Biennale. All events were held in European countries except for three which travelled to China, India, and Israel.<sup>627</sup> The only two

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<sup>624</sup> Further information is available in “Malta Showcase 2016-2017 launched,” *Valletta 2018*, accessed May 16, 2017. <http://valletta2018.org/news/malta-showcase-2016-2017-launched/>.

<sup>625</sup> “Launch of the 2017 Cultural Programme,” *Arts Council Malta*, accessed May 16, 2017. <https://www.artscouncilmalta.org/news/launch-of-the-cultural-programme-of-the-2017-maltese-presidency-of-the-council-of-the-eu-reunion>.

<sup>626</sup> “rEUnion – Breaking Barriers through Culture during the 2017 Maltese EU Presidency,” *European Union 2017*, accessed November 16, 2017. <https://www.eu2017.mt/en/news/Pages/Reunion-Breaking-Barriers-Culture-2017-Maltese-EU-Presidency.aspx>

<sup>627</sup> *The Texture of Memory* by Joe Smith travelled to China and Belgium; *Vanishing Valletta* by David Pisani was exhibited in Israel and Belgium; and *Moving Lands* by Robert Zahra, was shown in India.

exhibitions held in Malta were two group shows entitled *Applied Nostalgia* and *The Future of Art*.<sup>628</sup>

Given the explicit remit of promoting Malta and its contemporary art abroad, an overview of these overseas exhibitions provides significant insights into the preoccupations of the selected artists and the emerging identity of contemporary Maltese art. The events varied from solo exhibitions by established and up-and-coming artists to collective exhibitions. The majority (doubtless for economic reasons) were photographic exhibitions, which included *Islelanders* by Darrin Zammit Lupi, a project based on the documentation of the lives of asylum seekers and migrants in their journey across the Mediterranean.<sup>629</sup> Another documentary-based project was *Lampara* by Gilbert Calleja. Here, Calleja captured the lampara type of fishing through film, sound, and photography, which resulted in an immersive artistic, anthropological, and social experience.<sup>630</sup> Another project closely related to the sea was the photographic work by Kris Micallef, *REGNVM*, which focused on the imaginary underwater kingdom.<sup>631</sup>

Other artists captured the changing landscape of Malta, mainly of the capital Valletta. In his photographic project *Vanishing Valletta*, for example, David Pisani captured the changing landscape of the capital in the last twenty-nine years.<sup>632</sup> Ritty Tacsum also worked on *Valletta: Another Landscape*, where she reframed the pre-conceived images that one usually finds in books and postcards capturing the Maltese capital and presented an

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<sup>628</sup> See <https://www.reunion.org.mt/en/events/Pages/Applied-Nostalgia-Belgrade-Valletta.aspx?isDlg=1> and <https://www.reunion.org.mt/en/events/Pages/The-Future-of-Art-in-collaboration-with-the-Malta-International-Arts-Festival.aspx?isDlg=1> accessed June 1, 2018.

<sup>629</sup> *Islelanders*, accessed September 10, 2017. <https://islelanders.com/>.

<sup>630</sup> “*Lampara*, Gilbert Calleja,” *Malta Showcase*, accessed June 1, 2018.

<http://www.maltashowcase.com/showcase/lampara-gilbert-calleja/>; Joanna Demarco, “FIRST: Fishing in the dark, consuming in the dark,” *The Malta Independent*, May 17, 2018, accessed June 1, 2018.

<http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2018-04-10/local-news/FIRST-Fishing-in-the-dark-consuming-in-the-dark-6736187831>.

<sup>631</sup> “REGNVM, Kris Micallef,” *Malta Showcase*, accessed May 16, 2017.

<http://www.maltashowcase.com/showcase/regnvm-kris-micallef/>; “Kris Micallef’s REGNVM,” *Iggy Fenech*, accessed May 16, 2017. <http://iggyfenech.com/kris-micallefs-regnvm/>.

<sup>632</sup> “Vanishing Valletta”, Neumünster Abbey, Luxembourg, March 10 to April 16, 2017, rEUnion, accessed May 16, 2017, <https://www.eu2017.mt/en/Events/Pages/Vanishing-Valletta.aspx>

alternative view by using superimposed fabrications of the landscape [Figure 89].<sup>633</sup> Another project focusing on the same city was the collective exhibition entitled *Valletta: Ideal City, Colonial Capital, Gentle Metropolis*. Curated by the architect Conrad Buhagiar, this project brought together works by artists inspired by the transformation visible in Valletta, including its new reality as an active protagonist in Europe as opposed to that of a previously silent onlooker.<sup>634</sup> Transformation in architecture and place was also tackled from a painterly aspect by the artist Robert Zahra in his exhibition *Moving Lands*, inaugurated in Delhi, India.<sup>635</sup>



**Fig. 89. Tacsum Ritty, *Valletta: Another Landscape*, 2017, digital photography, 100 x 100 cm, Dar Malta. Brussels, Belgium. (Photo provided by Ritty Tacsum.)**

Individual projects which also reflect the transformations in Malta from the social and technical aspects included the EU exhibition *In Transit*, curated by Vince Briffa, shown in Amsterdam and Holland.<sup>636</sup> This focused on the diverse applications of digital media as a phenomenon of the Maltese contemporary art scene. Apart from the technological standpoint taken, the contemporary artists were also interested in the medium as a generator of content

<sup>633</sup> “Valletta: Another Landscape”, rEUnion, accessed May 16, 2017

<https://www.eu2017.mt/mt/Avvenimenti/Pages/Valletta-Another-Landscape---Ritty-Tacsum1202-5033.aspx>

<sup>634</sup> “Valletta Ideal City,” rEUnion, accessed May 16, 2017.

<https://www.reunion.org.mt/en/events/Pages/Valletta-Ideal-City-Colonial-Capital-Gentle-Metropolis.aspx?isDlg=1>.

<sup>635</sup> “*Moving Lands*, Robert Zahra,” *Malta Showcase*, accessed November 22, 2017.

<http://www.maltashowcase.com/showcase/moving-lands-robert-zahra/>; “*Moving Lands*: Exhibition inaugurated in New Delhi,” *Foreign Affairs*, accessed November 22, 2017.

[https://foreignaffairs.gov.mt/en/Embassies/Hc\\_New\\_Delhi/Pages/News/%E2%80%98Moving-Lands%E2%80%99-exhibition-inaugurated-in-New-Delhi-.aspx](https://foreignaffairs.gov.mt/en/Embassies/Hc_New_Delhi/Pages/News/%E2%80%98Moving-Lands%E2%80%99-exhibition-inaugurated-in-New-Delhi-.aspx).

<sup>636</sup> *In Transit* exhibition was held RW-Forum, Düsseldorf, Germany between March 24, 2017 and April 16, 2017; and at Statskantoor, Leeuwarden, Netherlands between May 8 and 24, 2017.

and concepts of art.<sup>637</sup> Another project which related to international fora was the exhibition by Norbert Francis Attard entitled *Between the Setting and the Rising Sun: History Re-Imagined*, held at the European Court of Justice, Luxembourg, in May 2017.<sup>638</sup> The images used by the artist were comments on controversial and political subjects related to different countries and religions. All works were an interconnected visual statement on or against power, which Attard achieved through the juxtaposition, appropriation, and manipulation of existent images.<sup>639</sup>

The above-mentioned art projects and exhibitions effectively act as a retrospective of Malta's contemporary visual art scene since 2004, the year Malta became an EU member state. Crucially, with the majority of these exhibitions taking place outside of Malta, Maltese artists showed themselves to be engaged with, and responding to, recent events such as Africa's immigration to Europe (documented by Zammit Lupi in the photographic exhibition *Islanders*) alongside critically exploring Malta's colonial past and current positioning in relation to Valletta's transformation from an abandoned city to a European Capital City of Culture (with exhibitions ranging from *Vanishing Valletta* by Pisani to the collective exhibition *Valletta: Ideal City, Colonial Capital, Gentle Metropolis*, exhibited at the European Parliament, Brussels). The theme of nostalgia for a past era was also captured by Joe Smith in *The Texture of Memory* and the collective exhibition *Applied Nostalgia*. Themes of transition and the future were directly evidenced through digital and experimental media with collective exhibitions such as *In Transit* and *The Future of Art* held in Malta.<sup>640</sup>

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<sup>637</sup> "In Transit," *rEUnion*, accessed May 18, 2017. <https://www.reunion.org.mt/en/events/Pages/IN-TRANSIT-2.aspx?isDlg=1>.

<sup>638</sup> *Between the Setting and the Rising Sun: History Re-Imagined* by Norbert Francis Attard was held at the European Court of Justice, Luxembourg, between May 9 and 30, 2017.

<sup>639</sup> For further information, refer to *rEUnion*, accessed April 10, 2017. <https://www.reunion.org.mt/en/Pages/default.aspx>.

<sup>640</sup> "In Transit," *rEUnion*, accessed May 18, 2017. <https://www.reunion.org.mt/en/events/Pages/IN-TRANSIT-2.aspx?isDlg=1> and "The Future of Art" *rEUnion*, accessed May 18, 2017 <https://www.reunion.org.mt/en/Pages/default.aspx>

#### **7.4 Malta Pavilion at the 57<sup>th</sup> Edition of the Venice Biennale**

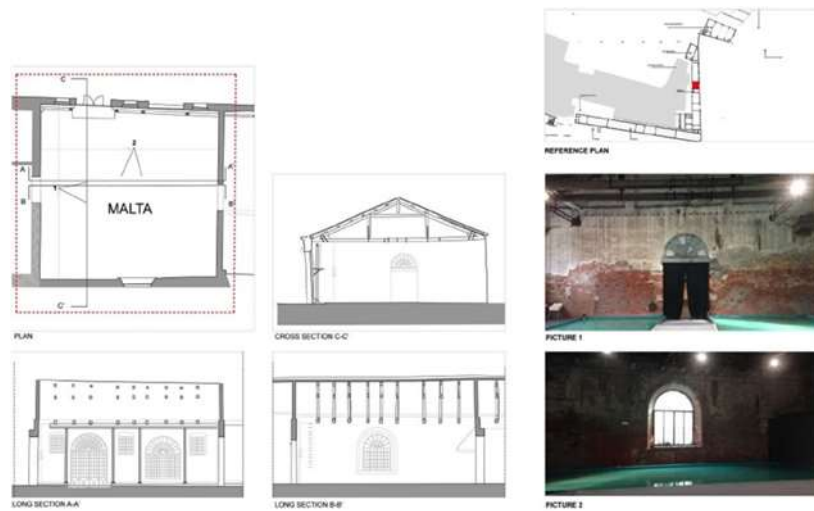
In October 2015, Arts Council Malta initiated discussions with the Venice Biennale Foundation with a view to securing Malta's participation in 2017. The declared aim of the Malta Pavilion was to offer a platform through which Maltese contemporary artistic practices—understood in the broadest sense of the term—could be exposed, contextualised, and presented to an international audience.

In February 2016, in its capacity as Pavilion Commissioner, Arts Council Malta in collaboration with MUŻA and under the auspices of the Ministry of Justice, Culture and Local Government published an international call for the engagement of curators or a group of curators for the Malta Pavilion at the fifty-seventh edition of the Venice Biennale [Figure 84]. The call was open to Maltese and international curators with a strong curatorial track record and it noted that multi-national curatorial teams including Maltese candidates would be favourably considered.<sup>641</sup> Proposals were submitted on March 30, 2016. A total of twenty-two applications were received in response to the open call; of these, fourteen were deemed eligible. All the eligible projects were given the opportunity to pitch in front of the jury committee. The winning project was unanimously selected by the jury committee and included a mix of high-profile international names and local experts on the culture sector.<sup>642</sup>

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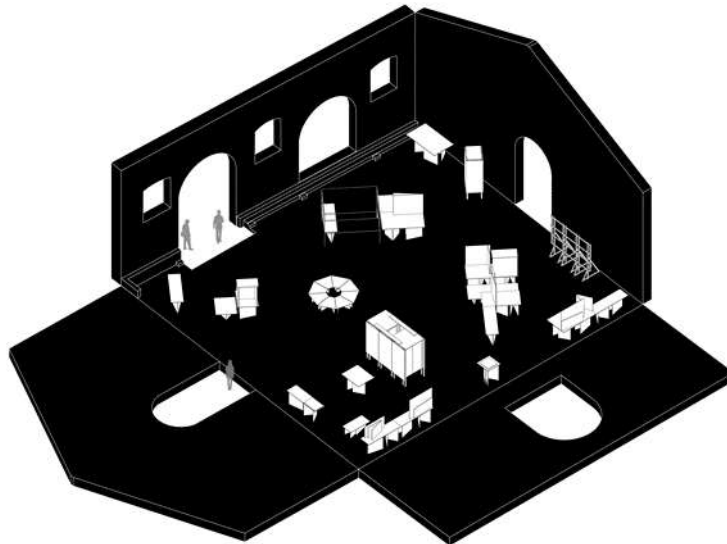
<sup>641</sup> This curator call was advertised on various platforms including the following, accessed November 16, 2017. <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/11298/the-malta-pavilion-at-the-venice-biennale-2017/>; <http://c-e-a.asso.fr/call-for-applications-the-malta-pavilion-at-the-venice-biennale-2017/>.

<sup>642</sup> Fulya Erdemci is an international curator and writer based in Istanbul; Alfredo Cramerotti is the director of MOSTYN Visual Arts Centre, Wales; Vince Briffa is an artist, researcher, and Head of Department of Digital Arts at the University of Malta; and Alexander Debono is a senior curator of the National Museum of Fine Arts and Project Leader for MUŻA.



**Fig. 90 The Pavilion earmarked for the Maltese Pavilion, 2017. (Courtesy of Arts Council Malta.)**

In May 2016 the curatorial team selected for the Maltese Pavilion were announced. These were Raphael Vella and the German curator and former Blitz exhibitor Bettina Hutschek who presented the concept entitled *Homo Melitensis: An Incomplete Inventory in 19 Chapters*. The concept entailed a poetic compilation of unique objects that supposedly define the imaginary of Maltese identity through artistic, archival, and documentary elements. Everyday objects were interconnected within the poetic, associative space of a cabinet of curiosities. The concept was rendered possible by the Maltese-based architectural team led by Tom Van Malderen (Architecture Project), who was responsible for the design of the exhibition layout [Figure 91]. The Malta Pavilion was located at the Artiglierie in the Arsenale area from May 13 until November 26, 2017.



**Fig. 91 Pavilion layout designed by Tom Van Malderen, 2017. (Image provided by Tom Van Malderen.)**

The curators drew upon Maltese art from the past and present, juxtaposing historical items with contemporary ones. These included works by contemporary artists, folk artefacts, works from private and national collections, and other artefacts and images drawn from journalism and popular culture. The curatorial team selected the participating artists in two ways. Contemporary artists based in Malta were contacted directly by the curators and their inclusion in the pavilion was by invitation. Artists of ‘Maltese origins’—including Maltese nationals living abroad or citizens of another country with first, second or third generation connections to Malta—were invited to submit proposals through a public call. After the selection process, the curatorial team brought together this diverse group of artists working across a variety of media, and presented their work in a playful and poetic layout to define the imaginative spirit of the Maltese identity.

A brief overview of the selected artists indicates the expansive definition of ‘Maltese’ nationality employed and the breadth of their work. The cartoonist and journalist Joe Sacco (b. 1960), who was brought up in Melbourne and is currently living in Portland, Oregon,

specialises in political themes.<sup>643</sup> Karine Rougier (b. 1982) is a Maltese-born artist living in Marseilles, France.<sup>644</sup> The multidisciplinary artist Roxman Gatt (b. 1989), who was born in Malta and is currently living in London after studying at St Martins College of Art and Design and at the Royal College of Art, explores sexuality, identity, and women in popular and culture contexts. Teresa Sciberras (b.1979), who was born in Ibadan, Nigeria and lives in Malta, studied Fine Arts in Florence, Aberdeen and Malta. Darren Tanti (b. 1987) is a Maltese hyperreality artist who explores photorealistic painting techniques. Aaron Bezzina (b.1991) is a Maltese artist who works with juxtaposed symbols and ideas which he experiences on a daily basis. David Pisani (b. 1965) a Malta-based photographer mostly known for architecture and urban reportage, although he also focuses on the human body. Pia Borg (b. 1977) is an Australian-born artist with Maltese parents who works mainly with film and photography. Austin Camilleri (b. 1972) is an artist and curator working simultaneously in painting installation, drawing, video, and sculpture.<sup>645</sup> John Paul Azzopardi (b. 1978), who was born in London and currently resides in Malta, works mainly with animal bones to create complex delicate sculptures.<sup>646</sup> Gilbert Calleja (b. 1978), who is currently in London reading for a PhD after studying at the University of Paris, Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne, creates photographic documentaries based on lengthy processes after familiarising with individuals and communities.<sup>647</sup> Adrian Abela (b. 1989), who is currently living and studying Fine Arts in Los Angeles after living most of his life in Malta, creates narratives with different

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<sup>643</sup> “The world of cartoonist and journalist Joe Sacco,” *Telegraph*, accessed November 21, 2017. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/10334363/The-world-of-cartoonist-and-journalist-Joe-Sacco.html>.

<sup>644</sup> “Karine Rougier,” *Galerie Dukan*, accessed November 21, 2017. <http://www.galeriedukan.com/artist-home/karine-rougier>.

<sup>645</sup> More information on the above-mentioned artists can be seen in the following links, accessed November 21, 2017: *Roxman Gatt*. <http://www.roxmangatt.com/>; *Teresa Sciberras*. <http://www.teresasciberras.com/>; *Darren Tanti*. <http://www.darrentanti.com/>; *Aaron Bezzina*. <https://www.aaronbezzina.com/>; *David Pisani*. <http://www.davidpisani.com/>; *Pia Borg*. <http://piaborg.com/>; *Austin Camilleri*. <https://austin-camilleri.squarespace.com>.

<sup>646</sup> “Meet the Artist Making Giant Sculptures out of Animal Bones,” *Creators*, accessed November 21, 2017. [https://creators.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/kbn3px/meet-the-artist-making-giant-sculptures-out-of-animal-bones](https://creators.vice.com/en_uk/article/kbn3px/meet-the-artist-making-giant-sculptures-out-of-animal-bones).

<sup>647</sup> *Gilbert Calleja*, accessed November 21, 2017. <http://gilbertcalleja.com/>.



materials to try and understand the human condition and its surroundings.<sup>648</sup> The late Maurice Tanti Burlò (1936-2014), was an important Maltese satirical cartoonist whose work was published on local newspapers under the pseudonym of Nalizpelra and MTB.<sup>649</sup>



**Fig. 92 Group Photo of Artists and Curators (2017). From left to right: Aaron Bezzina, Gilbert Calleja, Darren Tanti, Austin Camilleri, Karine Rougier, Roxman Gatt, Raphael Vella, Bettina Hutschek, Adrian Abela, Teresa Sciberras, and John Paul Azzopardi. (Courtesy of Arts Council Malta.)**

If the broad definition of Maltese is apparent in the selection of the diverse artists the works by the thirteen selected artists were also placed in a playful narrative that questioned Maltese identity. *Homo Melitensis* (meaning ‘Maltese Man’) inhabits an island surrounded by the sea and an ancient wall. The *Incomplete Inventory in 19 Chapters* (incomplete because it only includes the first nineteen letters of the Maltese Alphabet) tells his stories about nationhood, memory, war, diaspora, dreams, and island life. Through different collections available in Malta and other contemporary works, the curators created a web of relations made perceptible through the 19 designated chapters. Irony and juxtaposition of meaning were key to these chapters which cover themes such as religious objects, myths, war history, immigration, sexuality, phallic forms, gender, physiognomy, local feasts, local landscape, and the diaspora.

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<sup>648</sup> “Adrian Abela,” *Greater LA MFA*, accessed November 21, 2017. <http://greaterlamfa.com/adrian-abela-2/>.

<sup>649</sup> See *Homo Melitensis*, Exhibition Catalogue, Malta Pavilion, Biennale Arte Venezia, 2017, (Italy: Mousse Publishing, 2017) p. 265.

To narrate the story of *Homo Melitensis*, the curators of the Maltese Pavilion used letters from the Maltese alphabet and transformed them into different chapters that were attributed a sub-heading to explore Malta's history and the identity of the *Homo Melitensis*. The layout of the pavilion, designed by Van Malderen, groups subheadings together with these chapters, juxtaposing the works of contemporary artists with items from the various national collections. A 270-page catalogue following these chapters was created to accompany the visitor in this journey.<sup>650</sup>

A brief outline of some of the sections of the Pavilion gives a sense of the complexity and humour of the curatorial approach [Figures 93-95]. In the first section, for example, the visitor encountered one of the two black and white photographs exhibited by David Pisani. This portrays locals during the Our Lady of Sorrows procession—a very popular Lent ritual—featured in 'A' and attributed with the sub-heading "il-mam(m)a", a Maltese word which carries different meanings but in this case is synonymous with maternity. In the same section was Karine Rougier's work *The Appointment* (2015), representing maternity revealed as a poetic journey by the use of folklore and mythological symbols.

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<sup>650</sup> *Homo Melitensis: The Incomplete Inventory in 19 Chapters* (Venice, Italy: Biennale Arte, 2017), Malta Pavilion exhibition catalogue (Italy: Mousse Publishing, 2017).



**Fig. 93 Photo showing the Malta Pavilion, Arsenale, 57<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, 2017. The two main sections featured in this photo are ‘K’ which stands for “small malta-big malta” and ‘I’ which stands for “strangers coming to stay.” (Image provided by Tom Van Malderen)**

The second Pisani photograph portrayed *138 Strait Street Valletta* (2000), once the gathering point for prostitutes in Valletta. This work was inserted under ‘G’, the heading for the section entitled “Subjects to avoid when talking to strangers”.<sup>651</sup> This section explored censorship, political correctness, and taboos. Here, for example, the comic journalist Joe Sacco and the satirical cartoonist Maurice Tanti Burlò (known as Nalizpelra) addressed the reaction to the immigration crisis in *The Unwanted* (2010) and hunting lobbyists in *Shots for Votes* (1998), while Roxman Gatt’s animation, *Virgin Mary’s Love Juice* (2015), playfully juxtaposes religious images and blasphemy. These controversial works call into question certain aspects of Maltese identity which are normally contentious subjects to avoid in discussion with foreigners or others that are taken for granted in Malta. Equally, a subject that has only recently become acknowledged in Malta was evident in the ‘GH’ section, standing

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<sup>651</sup> Ibid.

for “Gender and/or”, which featured Gilbert Calleja’s works entitled *Liminal* (2013-16). This series of dazzling and intimate portraits of transgender life challenged the nearby representation of an ideal female torso, the *Headless Seated Lady*, a copy of a prehistoric clay statue found in one of Malta’s ancient temples.



**Fig. 94 Photo showing the Malta Pavilion, Arsenale, 57th Venice Biennale, 2017. Various sections are featured in this photo mainly ‘GH’ section, standing for “gender and/or”, ‘D’ section standing for “fortified island” and part of ‘H section standing for “religious objects.”**

**(Image provided by Tom Van Malderen)**

The popular themes of Maltese local feasts and religion also featured in the national pavilion. Adrian Abela’s video piece *Nebula* (2014-17), for example, explored the fireworks which are part of the traditional feasts that occur across the Maltese islands. Fireworks, which often bring communities together in spring and summer, featured in ‘IE’ for “festa!!!” Practices of ritual and Catholic prayer were explored through Austin Camilleri’s provocative sculpture *Rosary*—which is a piece inspired by rosary beads and made up of dozens of crying baby heads—in “Religious Objects”, under chapter ‘H’. Meanwhile, holy relics were reimagined in Aaron Bezzina’s sculpture *Untitled* where he addressed religious beliefs by juxtaposing religious symbols—cruci-hammer and nail—via the media of bronze and wood, which subvert the image of the cross in ‘H’, under the subtheme of “Us and Them”.

The formality of painting was not overlooked, and traditions of Maltese society, culture, and beliefs were metaphorically represented in Darren Tanti's portraiture. Sainthood iconography is incorporated into Tanti's *L'Annalisa*, a modern, young Maltese woman featured in 'G' for "physiognomy", in a chapter that examines the 'face' of the Maltese. Whereas Pia Borg's film *Silica*, featuring in 'I' which stands for "strangers coming to stay", examines the Maltese diaspora from the perspective of being born in Australia, alongside a consideration of the 'alien' of red palm weevils which have destroyed many Maltese palm trees.



**Fig. 95 Photo showing the Malta Pavilion, Arsenale, 57th Venice Biennale, 2017. Various sections are featured in this photo mainly 'G' which stands for "physiognomy", 'B' which stands for "san pawl magnus" and a section from 'A' for "il-mam(m)a." (Image provided by Tom Van Malderen)**

The re-purposing of remnants of death form the basis of John Paul Azzopardi's fossilised sculptures to arresting effect. The intricate sculptures comprised of hundreds of rabbit bones symmetrically fused together, exhibited in the chapter 'L' for "between melangia and uff", ("uff" is a monosyllabic noise used in Malta that means "that's annoying") which addresses past lives and nostalgia but also visions of the future. The journey of the curators started—or finished, or rather continued—with the element of play,

using the past as an inspiration for the future, by using Teresa Sciberras' work at this point. Her work presented hybrid structures and enclosures, representative of Malta's capital city Valletta; For instance, the letter 'D' represents the "fortified island" and the great feats of engineering involved in the construction of the walls made by the Medieval Knights to defend Valletta.

What is striking is the ambition of the pavilion to bring together the different historic times and sites of Malta from its prehistoric and colonial past to the present, and their accompanying diverse forms of visual culture, to show the complexities of Maltese identity. If this shows the new found confidence of Maltese art, the underlying concept of 'an incomplete inventory' suggests that there is both more to discover and that Maltese art and identity is fluid and changing. The unfinished inventory also carries a momentum toward the future.

Malta's return to the major international platform of Venice Biennale was well received. A number of international websites including Art Net and E-Flux announced the return while others included Malta in the list of pavilions to visit. Culture Trip listed Malta's Pavilion among the ten national pavilions not to miss, together with the German Pavilion, the Italian Pavilion, and the American Pavilion.<sup>652</sup> Forbes' online magazine listed Malta's Pavilion among the thirteen reasons why to visit the fifty-seventh edition of the Biennale.<sup>653</sup> An important mention was the one by Laura Cumming who for her review in *The Guardian*: "57<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale: The Germans steal the show," she listed the Maltese Pavilion with the best five pavilions that included Germany, Slovenia, Romania, and Russia. Cumming described the pavilion as:

Sardonic, hilarious, Malta's tongue-in-cheek portrait of itself through films, paintings and sculptures as a set of nearly insurmountable clichés – Maltese

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<sup>652</sup> Freire Barnes, "The 10 National Pavilions you can't miss," *The Culture Trip*, accessed September 10, 2017. <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/italy/articles/the-10-national-pavilions-you-cant-miss-at-the-venice-biennale/>.

<sup>653</sup> Joanne Shurvell, "Thirteen Reasons to visit the 2017 Venice Biennale," *Forbes*, accessed September 10, 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joanneshurvell/2017/05/21/thirteen-reasons-to-visit-the-2017-venice-biennale/#3572a1f72c84>.

knights, falcons, rabbits, votives, Maltesers (who knew?). An island so riven by politics that even appearing at the Biennale is controversial: is it a vote-catcher?<sup>654</sup>

## 7.5 Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, with the title of Valletta as the European Capital City of Culture for 2018, the Maltese government together with several stakeholders had to join forces to make this entitlement possible. For the first time the government substantially invested in infrastructure and sustainability, including the legal formation of Arts Council Malta, while individual artists and institutions found confidence and ambition to propose, process, and create major art projects. With substantial financial support from the EU, Arts Council Malta delivered the Malta Showcase of 2016, the 2017 Cultural Programme of Malta's European Presidency, and the Malta Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

The recognition by the government to use art as a means of promotion and diplomacy is key in this chapter. The development of new strategic frameworks launched by the new Arts Council Malta was imperative for this to happen. In its leading role the council designed an inclusive contemporary cultural programme which made it around Europe and other countries such as India.

While it is still too early to carry out an analysis of the impact of these significant events on the local contemporary visual art scene, nonetheless, as I have argued, the themes that emerged through the various exhibitions show a new critical awareness of evaluating Malta's positioning in Europe and of contemporary art as a means of reflecting upon this positioning through juxtaposition of the past and present, the intersection of the local with the international. and the porousness of borders and de-territorialisation through involvement of the Maltese diaspora. These all show the contemporaneous response to changing

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<sup>654</sup> Laura Cumming, "57<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale 2017 Review: The Germans Steal the Show," *The Guardian*, accessed September 10, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/may/14/57th-venice-biennale-2017-review-the-germans-steal-the-show>.

circumstances of globalisation. In just over twelve years since the first contemporary Maltese artists such as Borg engaged with the theme of Maltese identity as an island fortress, the Maltese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale can be seen to have centred on the complexities of Maltese identity and, as I argue, used this theme to promote a country that has the national confidence to both recognise its diversity and to playfully point to the stereotypical images of the Maltese and the historical and social constraints that the country has experienced.

Meanwhile, artists and individuals involved in the visual art scene look forward to the opening of MICAS, the Malta International Contemporary Art Space, planned for 2021.<sup>655</sup>

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<sup>655</sup> See <https://www.gov.mt/en/Government/Press%20Releases/Pages/2018/June/13/PR181336en.aspx>. Accessed June 13, 2018:



## **Conclusion**

This thesis presents a comprehensive account of the development of contemporary art in Malta from 1989 to 2017 situated within the specific socio-political and cultural context. The analysis is based on historical, theoretical and empirical research of key exhibitions, exhibition reviews, catalogues, artist interviews, artworks, and artists. This investigation has identified the overall shift in the Maltese art scene from 1989 to 2017 as one of isolation to globalisation. Apart from the seven chapters where I present my arguments and research, the research was used to create an image-led, chronological catalogue that works as a quick guide to the many artists, exhibitions and events that I refer to in the thesis volume and as an aid to assist future researchers.

Throughout the thesis chapters I have shown how key factors affected this change, including Malta's participation in the 48th edition of the Venice Biennale in 1999 and subsequently in the 56th edition in 2017; Malta becoming a member state of the European Union in 2004; the introduction of new full-time art courses in 2010; the launch of the first National Cultural Policy in 2011, and Valletta, Malta's capital city, being chosen as the European City of Culture for 2018. Moreover, Chapter One is dedicated to crucial aspects affecting Malta's art scene prior to Malta's independence from the British in 1964 and up until the late 1980s.

As shown throughout this thesis artists both individually and collectively were key to this shift. Apart from acknowledging and adopting contemporary art developments by moving beyond painting (mainly abstract in form) and implementing new media and themes including reflections of the self, critical thinking on local identities, and placing the local into a more global perspective, they also acted and introduced curatorial aspects by questioning how, what, and where to display, while publishing catalogues in which they introduced a new

form of documentation and theoretical debate that included artists' biographies and critical essays.

This investigation shows how these accomplishments were possible through several individuals, mainly those who in the early 2000s who formed START, a contemporary art group that self-curated their exhibitions in alternative spaces away from Valletta, which had hitherto been the centre of culture. This new outlook strengthened the theme of expansion by moving beyond previous borders. The study shows how START created a legacy of artist-led initiatives which in subsequent years voiced artists' opinions, especially with respect to government policies, as evident in 2007 during the Valletta Contemporary Art Forum when contemporary artists were involved in decision and policymaking. Artists from the same group, and others, were also active in introducing the first residency programmes in Malta and opening art galleries where only contemporary artworks were, and still are, regularly exhibited.

It is important to note that this analysis is the first of its kind and contributes to existing knowledge by highlighting the achievements of Maltese artists who familiarised themselves with innovative contemporary art practices, acted as artists-curators who shifted the mentality in exhibition making, with some also becoming entrepreneurs. If artists through their actions and networks introduced professionalisation and internationalisation in Malta that was backed up by the introduction of the cultural act, the launch of the National Cultural Policy and the support provided by Art Council Malta. In particular, this research is the first comprehensive study to encompass contemporary art in Malta developments from the last decade of the century up to 2017. The in-depth analysis is dedicated to tracing the emergence of a more contemporary mode of art which, as shown in Chapter One was previously predominately modernist in style, and was transformed into art which could be included in international art fairs and also exhibited at the Venice Biennale. In this respect, the journal article by Partha Mitter, 'Modern Global Art and Its Discontents', was useful to reinforce the

argument that ex-colonial countries on the periphery of cultural centres were appropriating dominant styles—mainly cubism—in order to develop a more contemporary style.<sup>656</sup> Employing James Elkins’ working definition of contemporary art—a work of art from a specific region, country, or area that can easily be exhibited in an international art fair—was a helpful guide for considering the development of contemporary art in Malta and its relationship to globalisation.<sup>657</sup> Drawing on these framings, I have shown how local artists moved from a state of isolation as a postcolonial country transformed their art practice into a significant international contemporary art language.

A further aspect highlighted throughout the analysis is the strong British connections evident until the first decade of the new millennium, mainly through exhibitions organised at the Centre for Creativity and artists electing to continue their studies in the UK. It was only after 2004, when Malta became a member state of the EU, that a stronger European influence became evident as artists had a number of opportunities to collaborate with other European artists on Europe-wide projects and exhibitions. The new dynamic of the global environment of an ex-British colony as part of the European Union was analysed in Chapter Five. It was shown that, in part, this represents a larger decolonialisation process that questions the legacies of a colonial past and its centre periphery model by establishing what Irit Rogoff defines in ‘Geo-Cultures - Circuits of Arts and Globalizations’ as “new relational geographies” and innovative methods of criticism which “advance a host of new regional imaginations.”<sup>658</sup> Furthermore, I have argued that the Maltese cultural sector embraced this new state of affairs with a positive attitude of creating a new artistic identity which positioned the sector within an international context.

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<sup>656</sup> Partha Mitter, “Modern Global Art and Its Discontents”, *Avant-Garde Critical Studies*, Vol. 30, (2014).

<sup>657</sup> Loredana Niculet, “The Shifting Condition of Art Discourse: An Interview with James Elkins,” *Disturbis*, no. 8, (2010) pp. 8-16.

<sup>658</sup> Rogoff, Irit, “Geo-Cultures. Circuits of Arts and Globalizations”, *Open Magazine* No.16/2009, p. 115.

This research contributes to existing knowledge by presenting the development of contemporary art in Malta as no longer experienced or seen in isolation but as interconnected with both local and international developments. In this respect, the analysis has focused on recognising Malta's new identity from that of an island country in the centre of the Mediterranean into one of the many EU nations where Maltese artists continued to strengthen their alliances and connections with other European artists through new communication technologies and increased mobility. Nonetheless, this new phenomenon, as recognised by Raphael Vella, was not a fast forward "to a happy land of equal opportunities," largely due to the lack of supporting infrastructure and the general local mentality.<sup>659</sup> Chapter Four detailed the lack of designated contemporary art space and spaces of exchange and the new measures which the local government prepared in view of Malta becoming a member of the EU. This analysis shows how artists as individuals or groups intervened to create spaces through developing alternative models of residencies, initiating proposals for possible contemporary art spaces, and expanding the sites of display of contemporary art beyond the limited existing institutional spaces.

The above mentioned spaces which served as an alternative to the lack of appropriate infrastructures for contemporary art in Malta were a result of the tight network of the local micro-ecosystem. With their existence, aided by increased communication technologies and travel, they accelerated Malta's transformation from being an isolated network as seen in Chapter One and Chapter Two, to a fully participant art sector which could be involved in a more globalized network of contemporary art as highlighted in the last chapters of this thesis..

This research also identifies how the local artistic sector changed so quickly, especially after the launch of the first National Cultural Policy in 2011 which initiated positive changes by creating a framework for further internationalisation, professionalisation,

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<sup>659</sup> Raphael Vella, ed., *Cross-Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta* (Malta: Allied Publishers, 2008) p. 15.

and investment in new technologies which were visible at exhibitions organised at the Centre for Creativity. Other radical outcomes included, as I have shown, the introduction of the first full-time art courses in Malta's tertiary level education system, including a full-time BA (Hons) in Fine Arts and a Master's in Digital Arts. Actions prior the launch of the National Cultural Policy were also analysed in Chapter Four, including the reforms held between 1998 and 2003, when the Maltese government instigated a radical review of the cultural field that led to the decentralisation of cultural management, as well as the creation of the Centre for Creativity, discussed together with the presentation of the first Cultural Act in 2002.

Furthermore, this study for the first time identifies key events which changed the local mentality towards contemporary art practice in Malta. It identifies one of the first important turning points for contemporary art in Malta as 1999 when both Maltese artists and curators of the National Museum on separate occasions presented works of art in spaces other than traditional exhibition venues. Some of these were site-specific, while others were installation art and a happening. Through my analysis, I have shown that artists and curators sought to build bridges between the internationalisation of art and local audiences through several attempts to engage audiences and increase opportunities for encounters with contemporary art. As this study reveals in Chapter Three this new approach did not work out as expected in the Malta of 1999, particularly with regard to Malta's participation for the first time as an independent nation at the Venice Biennale. The in-depth investigation shows the different stages of this new venture for Malta, including the process of artist selection, the lack of promotion, and how certain decisions were not well received by other artists and art aficionados, including art reviewers. On the other hand, as I have argued, this important event was significant for artists and others in the art sector who longed for such an opportunity and hoped that a similar opportunity would happen again. It also brought to the foreground the question of what contemporary art in Malta was when placed in a global context.

In contrast, the Maltese government's positive attitude towards contemporary art in recent years was researched and analysed in Chapter Seven. Here I have shown how contemporary art was recognised by the government as a means of promotion and diplomacy in 2017 when Malta was chairing the European presidency. One of the many exhibitions promoted as part of Malta's European Presidency programmes was the re-introduction of Malta's National Pavilion at the Venice Biennale after eighteen years of absence. Exhibitions and artists selected for the presidency's cultural programme were also analysed in line with the development of new strategic frameworks launched by the newly established Arts Council Malta which was crucial to these developments.

In order to investigate the existing fragmented narrative of contemporary art in Malta, largely due to the absence of available material, I first investigated Malta's recent history as a British colony applying interdisciplinary methods and postcolonial discourse. Research by postcolonial theorists provided important standpoints, in particular *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (1995) by Néstor García Canclini, and the concept of a 'third space', or the in-between space of hybridity in *The Location of Culture* (1994) by Homi K. Bhabha. This investigation enhanced my awareness of the effects of colonisation on Maltese art which are still evident today and furthered my understanding of the interconnected effects of globalisation.

Secondly, from the beginning of this research project I realised that given the dearth of material, it was imperative for me to establish a dialogic relationship of trust with the artists and the few individuals working in the sector. Through establishing this relationship I interviewed artists and people involved in the art sector, while I was also given permission to review the artists' archives. These archives were extremely helpful to structure the different chapters and the catalogue in Volume Two which forms a central part of this research. The primary research material generated through these interviews and the artists' private archive

are a significant contribution to knowledge and provide a strong basis for future researchers of contemporary art in Malta.

To date, the research presented in this PhD has already had a direct impact on the understanding of the importance of contemporary art in Malta and on the museum sector through three national curatorial projects. In 2015, I was given permission to access the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity's archives which at the time consisted of dispersed documents. Following months of research, I located exhibition posters, catalogues, and newspaper cuttings of exhibitions held at the centre and was also given permission to investigate the contents of the Centre's art collection.<sup>660</sup> These materials and artefacts subsequently provided the basis for *Past! Present. Future? A Research Project*, launched in 2015, that is now organised annually at Spazju Kreattiv (formerly St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity) and coordinated by the centre's Artistic Director (Dr Toni Sant) and the Visual Arts Programme Coordinator. The research has also resulted in Spazju Kreattiv establishing an on-going archive collection.

The second project, *Jumpstart: An Incomplete Timeline*, is a visual projection presented on 21st June 2019 as part of MICAS's (Malta International Contemporary Art Space) summer celebration, co-curated by myself and Dr Georgina Portelli.<sup>661</sup> The timeline was realized as a series of large scale projections shown on the bastions walls of St. James Cavalier, an impressive 16th century military building that houses Spazju Kreattiv. The curators employed a comparative visual methodology that juxtaposed world events, national events, iconic world art and the work of Maltese artists across the decades from Malta's independence until 2017. The curated timeline, together with the audio-visual material used for projections will form part of the MICAS archive and will also be integrated into future national projects. The project sought to promote contemporary Maltese art, contemporary art

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<sup>660</sup> This is also part of the National Collection, but its location is within the centre's premises.

<sup>661</sup> See <https://micas.art/press-release-by-the-ministry-for-justice-culture-and-local-government/> (accessed on July 1, 2019)

developments, artists archives, and the importance of documenting works of practicing contemporary artists.

In addition, thirdly, as part of the curatorial team within the Visual Arts Section of Heritage Malta, I contributed to the curatorial narratives and museum display of *MUŻA: The Community National Art Museum*, launched in 2018. Instead of a chronological historical approach, MUŻA was developed along four narratives: Mediterranean, Empire, Europe, and The Artist, reflecting the contents of the Visual Art National Collection and Malta's identity.<sup>662</sup> My contribution throughout was the concept development of the four narratives, from selecting the works on display which comprise modern and contemporary works in combination with historic works of art, and the design of each gallery, including interpretation and display set up. My PhD research, which was taking place throughout the different phases of the museum development project, started in 2012 and continued until 2018 when MUŻA was inaugurated, contributed extensively to the museum's aims. For example, lengthy discussions were held on Malta's role in the Mediterranean region with internal and external stakeholders. I was also in charge of modern and contemporary acquisitions which, in the last five years between 2014 and 2018, were aligned with MUŻA's narratives and displays. My research is also evident in the fourth narrative, The Artist, which is dedicated to Maltese artists practicing between the 1950s and the 2000s. Throughout the galleries of this section important events such as Malta's participation at the Venice Biennale of 1958 and Victor Pasmore's influence on Maltese artists are prominent.

Following decades of neglect and misinterpretation works created by Maltese artists in the last three decades under the broad description of contemporary art, today, with the support of this thesis and the efforts of like-minded professionals in the local art sector, can be seen as responding to and being part of wider field of global contemporary art. The thesis

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<sup>662</sup> For further information on MUŻA: The Community National Art Museum access <https://heritagemalta.org/muza-national-community-art-museum/>



offers both an example of studying contemporary art in diverse micro-ecosystems and a comprehensive starting point for future research on contemporary art and curating in Malta.

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## Appendix

### START Mission Statement

#### Mission Statement

Why does Maltese need an artists' group? The idea of an artists' group came to us primarily because we feel that artists' problems are best understood by artists. Contemporary artists are in a far better position than 'outsiders' to gauge their own situation at present and propose possible remedies for problems. But artists know very well that the implementation of 'remedies' usually requires 'outsiders': administrators, public institutions, the government, private companies and the press. For this reason, our group wants to work with other people to try to propose concrete solutions to problems related to the visual arts here in Malta. Malta needs an artists' group also because it has never had a visual-arts group involved in cultural activism. This means that Maltese artists have never really has a voice. There are many possible cultural explanations for this lack of a voice (or a unison voices), not least amongst them the fear of retribution. Naturally, very little positive change can be implemented without public voice, nor can it even happen without a listening ear.

Our group therefore wasn't to try to turn art into an important issue. As yet, contemporary art in Malta is still far from having achieved the full recognition it deserves. Due to this general apathy at all levels, a number of contemporary, Maltese artists are searching for possibilities abroad. This means that the Maltese artist is essential define as a homeless animal.

We also want to ask administrators and other people responsible for cultural decisions to listen before implementing. Although we believe that any culture today is varied rather than unitary, we also believe that 'cutting-edge' art should be allowed to play a central role in local, cultural activities. At present, 'cutting edge' art is considered a fringe phenomenon and gets much less attention (not to mention funding!) than exhibition of antique furniture.

Contemporary art is important because it promotes innovation, perseverance, and productivity. If treated professionally by relevant authorities, it can also encourage tourism, the most economic activity here in Malta. It is wrong to think that most foreigners come here for our 'history'. The later argument is usually coupled with the idea that those who visit Malta for our history are more "intelligent" than those who come here for the sea.

"Intelligent" people often like be intellectually challenged by the new, by emerging, forward-looking ideas. It is too convenient to rely on the doings of our forefathers: to stress history at the expense of contemporary ideas is easy way out.

Our group wants to be able to discuss artists' problems in a spirit of dialogue. Because we believe in productivity, we are not satisfied with token, "democratic" meetings which lead nowhere. We would like our dialogues with the relevant authorities to be constructive this means that something concrete should issue from such meetings.

#### 1) Education

There can be little doubt that one of the main course of present deficiencies vis-avis contemporary art in Malta is the lack of proper aesthetic education structure. The absence of an art academy in Malta means that no rigorous study of arts is encouraged. Many young art-students find no professional guidance. The problem is especially evident at the University of Malta, which as yet does not offer a BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) degree. Cultural activities related to contemporary art at the University are rare mainly because there exists no competent authority to organise such activities. The lack of a University art gallery does not

help either. The University of Malta has basically freed itself of the responsibility any series university has to encourage research in the creative arts.

## 2) Open Village of Arts

The recent cultural policy makes a very clear reference to the establishment of an Open Village of the Arts in Floriana. We agree with this proposal, but as yet no concrete action has been taken to put this proposal into practice. We believe that Malta needs such a 'village' where local and foreign artists participating in international exchange programmes can come together. If managed well such centre can even be commercially viable. We are concerned that procrastination in this area might mean that this project has been shelved indefinitely.

## 3) Exhibition spaces and funding

Adequate exhibition spaces for contemporary art (such as installations) do not yet exist in Malta. In the last ten years, Maltese art has passed through a number of exciting changes but exhibition spaces have not as yet reflected this trend. Spaces are important because an inadequate space basically excludes certain artists. Spaces also encourage specific forms of art, so a conservative space encourage conservative art. The existence of good spaces and competent authorities to manage them must also go hand-in-hand with funding. In the cultural budget, funds set aside for contemporary artistic, temporary exhibitions are negligible. Acquisitions of contemporary art-works by the State is practically non-existent (except by donation).

## 4) Quality

An artists' group such as ours can easily be branded as being 'elitist'. We simply prefer rigour and professional standards to mediocrity. We prefer artists who are serious and reflective practitioners to Sunday painters who receive more prominence merely because what they produce is easy in fathom. We also prefer experimental shows to unscrupulous collectives which pass off as "biennales". We feel that it is about time that the latter kind of collective exhibitions should stop receiving support.