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Thinking on art as a sustainable instrument of cultural diplomacy

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Abstract

The notion of art as an effective instrument of cultural diplomacy is undervalued and not fully explored, even though cultural diplomacy has a long history and has surged over recent years. It is argued that this may be because the methods are not researched or analysed enough, underestimating the intrinsic potential that art may have in wielding ‘power’ and transforming negotiations.

Art as an instrument of cultural diplomacy performs in rampant ways fostering multifarious forms of intercultural dialogue. Beyond the monetisation of art as an instrument of financial exchange, it needs to be looked at as an instrument for opening transformative spaces of enquiry, social interaction and participation, enculturation, education, research and dialogue as a means to promote betterment or policy-oriented solutions to issues affecting different nations, people and cultures.

The Maltese government is investing in cultural ecologies including a newly developing innovative infrastructure dedicated to contemporary art and internationalisation. The focus of this paper is to discuss the role of the contemporary art space as an instrumental tool harnessing new approaches of cultural diplomacy that engender sustainable and advantageous international relations; this whilst embracing curatorial practices that align with notions of alterity to effectively broker collective interests, present European values, and “unity in diversity”.

My particular standpoint in this reflection is three-fold: as a multi-disciplinary visual artist, educator of art and visual culture in architecture, and as art director of a developing national project that will provide a neutral platform for contemporary art.

The focus of this discussion will be addressed more pertinently from the geography of Malta which lies at the intersection of western European culture and southern to middle eastern cultures influential to the island’s idiosyncrasies on the cusp of bordering continents in the Mediterranean. The paper concludes with two brief curatorial experiences interpreting “metaphors of connectivity”.

Introduction

The notion of art as an effective instrument of cultural diplomacy is undervalued and not fully explored, even though cultural diplomacy has a long history and has surged over recent years. It is argued that this may be because the methods are not researched or analysed enough, underestimating the intrinsic potential that art may have in wielding ‘power’ and transforming negotiations.

Critics also question whether traditional approaches of cultural diplomacy really work and how efficient they prove to be in the long term in changing the perception of a country or in improving or reaping better relations between nations. One of the problems has been the difficulty of measuring the impact on audiences of cultural activities over time, since art events may be short-lived and not so effective in achieving more long-term mutual relations.

In reality, the global cultural landscape has changed and with it the role of art in cultural diplomacy. New technologies, Internet and social media have radically impacted methods of exporting, exposing, negotiating and communicating culture across borders. Cultural diplomacy is a form of “marketing” and the ubiquity of ITCs has changed the way artists operate. Increasingly, artists, curators and cultural operators have been able to create their own instruments of cultural diplomacy, exploring independent negotiations and management electronically outside the formality or involvement of governmental or corporate structures. In truth, artists have always been independent “ambassadors” of culture through their expression and exhibitions.

Art as an instrument of cultural diplomacy performs in rampant ways fostering multifarious forms of intercultural dialogue. Beyond the monetisation of art as an instrument of financial exchange, it needs to be looked at as an instrument for opening transformative spaces of enquiry, social interaction and participation, enculturation, education, research and dialogue as a means to promote betterment or policy-oriented solutions to issues affecting different nations, people and cultures.

The Maltese government is investing in cultural ecologies including a newly developing innovative infrastructure dedicated to contemporary art and internationalisation. The focus of this paper is to discuss the role of the contemporary art space as an instrumental tool harnessing new approaches of cultural diplomacy that engender sustainable and advantageous international relations; this whilst embracing curatorial practices that align with notions of alterity to effectively broker collective interests, present European values, and “unity in diversity”.

The methods in preparing this paper are based on primary research and secondary references pertaining to contemporary reflection, citation and writings by others on cultural diplomacy, the roles and relationship with the arts (particularly the contemporary visual arts), combined with previous published research, personal exhibitions and curatorial practice, educational experience, empirical observations and direct experiences gathered from my involvement in the development (from 2013 to the present) of a new government museum-space for contemporary art that is currently under construction on the island of Malta. This artistic consultancy has involved leading the formative work and extensive research to develop the philosophical tenet, operational, business, curatorial and educational strategies supporting the mission and vision; working with the architectural designers and restoration team to develop the physical space and leading the first phases to obtain European funding.

My particular standpoint in this reflection is three-fold: as a multi-disciplinary visual artist, educator of contemporary art and visual culture, and as art director of this developing national project that will provide a neutral platform for contemporary art.

Art as an expression of “soft power”

Typically, the general perception of art is more as a soft power “resource” or commodity than an instrument that can effect a nation’s diplomacy. My interest is to expand some thought on the role of “contemporary art” as a transformative tool to engender positive platforms and meaningful *outcome* with lasting benefit to art relations, country image promotion, and social enculturation beyond views of artistic *outputs* as merely temporal spectacles, like events or festivities. The focus of this discussion is addressed from the cultural dichotomies and alterities more pertinent to Malta’s geography which lies at the intersection of western European culture and southern to middle eastern cultures influential to the island’s idiosyncrasies on the cusp of bordering continents in the Mediterranean.

Cultural diplomacy has come to be described as a “soft power” in comparison to other forms of a more confrontational nature such as financial or public diplomacy. In some circles the two terms are used interchangeably. It is timely that the role of art as a mechanism of cultural diplomacy is reviewed in order to reinvest and transform the idea that “soft” denotes “weak” or meanings of lesser importance and therefore less recognition. This calls for a reevaluation of the role cultural diplomacy plays, even if the term “soft power” persists, by reviewing methods that are defunct and no longer sustainable for the times. The question of soft power diplomacy (as it was originally conceived by Joseph Nye in the 1980s) has arguably become increasingly contested in view of how media augments powers to individuals. Technologies have dismantled isolation barriers on diverse fronts. The ubiquity of social media (such as Facebook, U-Tube, Twitter and Instagram) has proliferated cybercultures in an aura of democratised space, propagating pervasive tools of cultural dissemination by individuals. These have gained powers of persuasion enabling autonomous marketing and self-promotion, invested with powerful sway, captive news, popularity and ease of branding. Artists and all types of cultural operators today negotiate their own borders of practice across platforms beyond the boundaries of physical galleries, state entities or the limits of their shores. They also work remotely across the globe and around systems outside traditional reliance and formal funding structures. The last decade has hailed a new era of independent sources like crowdfunding swiftly rising in popularity and operated purely through online platforms (like Kickstarter and Indiegogo). These self-sustaining trends empower individuals as independent generators of culture.

This is not to say that artists no longer need state support or that formal processes of cultural diplomacy are useless. Nor does it suggest that physical museums and art spaces, whether state or private, no longer play an important role. What it does mean is that we need to investigate how needs have changed and whether the cultural climate requires new approaches of negotiating space - how the processes link to other areas of formal diplomacy (foreign policy, public, economic and financial goals); better understanding amongst diplomats; and how culture can work co-productively with other negotiations to benefit international relations. This suggests that contemporary art spaces need optimised roles as enhanced platforms where cultural activities revamp the museum concept as a connective “space of production” rather than a static “space of representation”. The idea of the museum as a connective hub can exert an influence on the production of cultural relations, serving as a conduit for empowering the arts through creating national assets, both financial and moral, that build credibility and authority that predispose people’s view of a nation.

The question of state funding the arts is also a growing contention witnessed by regular drops in state aid funding for the arts globally. Traditional forms of cultural diplomacy are known to rely on government funding in most parts of the world, though there is a move towards decentralised and diversified funding. In an article on the efficacy of traditional arts funding, Michael Kaiser (Chairman of the DeVos Institute of Arts Management) questions some of these traditional processes arguing that state dependent methods have become obsolete and quite unsustainable. Almost every country outside the US relies on state funding for the bulk of its cultural support and since cultural diplomacy is a “form of marketing”, this would need frequent repetition. Sending the same expensive troupe of artists becomes untenable, besides the tenet of democratic states to provide opportunities across the different social bands and cultural strata of creative communities (e.g. international biennales vs popular carnivals). This kind of burdening, Kaiser argues, is proving ineffective because it cannot sustain itself. (Kaiser; 2011). This does not suggest abandoning traditional norms, but for administrators to rethink traditional methods of financing the arts through alternative strategies and diverse sources (private business corporations, construction, bank and building sponsorships) outside just state aided methods.

This is interesting as it broadens the spectrum of stakeholders particularly at the stages of establishing a new art institution. However, it may apply more readily to large and wealthier states especially in the case where seasoned contemporary arts scenes have long been established, as in the US. The situation may be more challenging for small states that are still developing their infrastructural and contemporary cultural ecologies (like the island state of Malta). The state inevitably plays embryonic roles in administering the right environment and providing cultural infrastructures to engender growth. In a democratic society these roles form the bedrock for fruitful intercultural advance through accessible platforms that embrace strategies for other power relations and exchanges to foster - the financial, the peacemaking, the educational, political stability and mutual solution policy-forming. The general outlook calls for reciprocal approaches to cultural diplomacy that can help to ameliorate perceptions of efficacy by bridging alienations and exploring relationships between artists, who indeed

are direct agents and catalysts of cultural relations, and the more formal envoys of culture or diplomats. In other words, accomplishing for the arts the role for its transformative power beyond traditional rhetoric.

Developing a sustainable cultural legacy

Malta, a small island state in the Mediterranean, has historically played a bridging role, given its strategic standpoint and the geopolitics of the region; one that looks outwards simultaneously to Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. The nation has always sought to embrace the new and conceives its surrounding waters as a connective resource rather than a separator. Given its geographical position the island has been perfectly poised to mediate between different cultures of varying proximities dotting the Mediterranean basin, having western Europe to our north and the African borders and the Middle East to our south.

This outlook became more firmly established when Malta became a member state of the European Union in 2004. The idea of unification and dismantling territorial barriers brought meaningful nuances for an island of proliferous fortifications and historic defenses and whose own culture evolved over a long history of multiple invasions, conflicts and foreign settlements. The EU enlargement along with burgeoning technologies influenced local governments to act on the instruments of culture to democratise space and invest in the creative industries. The years ahead prompted several initiatives primarily to set up the country's formal cultural policies through a council for arts and culture. Malta's creative ecology was set in motion under the guiding tenets of the Malta Arts Council with a focus on establishing a "creative industries platform" to champion professionalisation and internationalisation through the provision of various funding frameworks and export platforms for artists, residency, mobility and other cultural structures. Malta's first Cultural Policy was launched in 2011 followed by the capital city's designation in 2012 as European Capital of Culture (ECoC 2018).

This marked a significant milestone in Malta's cultural vision in revitalising its history through its capital of Valletta, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The EU programme enabled the nation to address some long-standing lacunas in the cultural sector and motivate many a national refurbishment project. A cultural strategy was formed for the years ahead leading to the events of 2018 and beyond. This inspired several private investments in embellishment, estate and hospitality services in the old city alongside major EU funded restorations of Valletta's historic buildings, auberges and bastions. In parallel, some of the key existing state entities and museums were rebranded whilst fashioning new infrastructures for the contemporary and creative arts. In the eyes of people this was tangibly invigorating – as the legacies we create today for posterity are invaluable because culture inevitably dilutes with advancing globalisation, but history stays.

The European Capital of Culture, a programme established since 1985, has become "*a key platform for city positioning and a catalyst for economic and cultural regeneration,*" as expressed in a study carried out by Beatriz Garcia & Tamsin Cox for the European Parliament Policy Department (Garcia & Cox; 2013). A significant role of any ECoC participation is future planning and securing sustainable legacy, as indicated by the structural and cohesion policies for culture and education established by the EU's Directorate-General for Internal Policies. The EP policy directorate stresses the beneficial impact on the hosting city and improved changes in the existing cultural system as well as urban contributions and other enhancements. This, in other words, implied the return on investment.

Garcia & Tamsin report good indicators in their study of cities improvement in image and positive perception leading to an increase in national and international ranking as top cultural or tourism destinations. Although evidence seems to be uneven, and there have also been negative repercussions from local communities or residents, there is indication of positive offset in terms of increased activity in social and business engagement to former Capitals of Culture. The study also reports increased pride and diversity of audiences to venues and cultural engagement. EP policy counsels that "*intention and commitment*" are critical from the formal levels of governance structures and policymaking in enabling the supportive environment. How these ripple out and extend from culture onto other social, educational or business sectors and their policy agendas is highly pertinent to the general wellbeing of both nation and individuals.

In the wake of Valletta's European title, the city's cultural environment continues to spur synergies between the different culture sector organisations to meet the visions of the Strategy 2020 programme. This outlines a set of goals, actions and strategic tools aligning to the Creative Europe Framework and

EU culture agendas. These objectives are reflected in the legal framework of the Malta Arts Council which was approved by the Maltese Parliament in 2015. The Council now seeks to cultivate a relationship with other agencies, stakeholders, individuals, museums as well as newly developing capital projects to guide strategies with the ultimate goal of building a holistic creative ecology; promote governance to facilitate cultural development, education, inclusivity, wellbeing, excellence and economy; increase diversification of community-led participation; foster trans-national and international cooperation; and position our arts and culture in the wider international arena. As spelt in the Council's legal cultural framework, *“the policy's vision is to transform cultural and creative activity into the most dynamic facet of Malta's socio-economic life in the 21st century.”* (ACM; 2019)

During 2019, a Valletta Cultural Agency (VCA) was formed with the specific remit of nurturing the dynamic rhythm of Valletta and to sustain and strengthen the capital city's vibrant cultural life boosted in 2018 through new artistic works and cultural activities (VCA; 2019). The VCA provides a channel to open doors for several cultural and creative organisations to collaborate with other Public Culture Organisations (PCOs). These are nascent legacy infrastructures currently under construction, co-funded by government and European Regional Development Funds (ERDF).

Together with other NGOs, established creative professionals, artists, curators and communities, these state institutions form dynamic resources and instruments of cultural diplomacy functioning interactively as well as independently towards a unified goal – that of promoting the island's contemporary culture and intercultural dialogue and expanding growth in the cultural sector.

The art space – enacting a dialogue between art, heritage, education and soft power

One such emergent legacy institution, is a dedicated contemporary art platform called MICAS – the Malta International Contemporary Art Space, supported by state and EU funds. This project is undergoing the regeneration of one of Malta's typically iconic architectural public legacies nesting within the peripheral suburbs forming the outer defenses of the capital city of Valletta. The museum's future galleries will lie ensconced within the spectacular ramparts that once served the Knights of St John as military battlements to ward off recurring seaborne invasions from the Ottoman Empire back in the 16th century.

Renovations will transform the original context of this architectural “war machine” into an open embracive statement for the exchange of innovative ideas and international works of arts, enabling the transnational mobility of culture. Structural works involve the restoration of a vast complex within the Old Ospizio and San Salvatore Fortifications comprising a Ritirata with a unique skewed arch and historic counterguard. Its platform extends outwards along the bastioned shoreline towards the Marsamxett Harbour - an impressive vernacular encompassing robust buttresses, tunnels, casemate vaults and open stretches of garden. This major refurbishment, with a footprint of 13,000 square metres, is led by the Restoration Directorate, the main government entity responsible for the rehabilitation and conservation of historical buildings and public property.

As the first of its type in Malta, this innovative art space will seek to position itself as a cultural magnet in the Mediterranean. Its mission is to showcase ground-breaking and exciting works of art from around the globe through exhibitions, contemporary discourse, collaborations, residences and exchanges, and a range of educational and interactive outreach activities. The vision is to implement a permeable platform for art with plural aims: to bridge differences and enculture, share knowledge, and transform insularity by promoting understanding and values that adapt to changing national identities. By engaging dialogues between past and present, between heritage sites and future possibilities, this museum-space will dynamically activate “soft power” through empowering the arts and creativity by expressing art's “voice”; opening international doors and fostering art relations that can benefit other forms of public policy (peace, conflict, economic).

This effectively transforms the art space into a lively mechanism to connect different worlds and peoples, expressing art relations in nation branding.

Supported by government, these purposes reflect the nation's focal commitment towards developing a sustainable cultural arena through an ecology of established and emergent interacting artistic clusters. One of the principle tasks of the new MICAS platform is to build recognition as an international space

where renowned artists would be keen to show their work and in so doing generate a spirit of global co-operation and reputation, and vice versa for Maltese artists. This truly harnesses European values; to liberate creativity and promote cultural cohesion and well-being. The values and contribution of developing sustainable international affairs are endorsed in Malta's foreign policy for the strengthening of relations with other nations both regionally and globally. Cultural isolation presents a formidable challenge for the Maltese islands particularly in the area of contemporary art. Malta's foreign policy recognises this stating that sustainability cannot be achieved through national efforts in isolation from other countries and their increasing interdependency – *“global and regional cooperation is essential in this regard, particularly because many environmental, economic and social impacts are not confined to a nation's territory.”* (NCSO; 2007-2016).

The remit of MICAS is to champion contemporary art and raise public awareness of its significance in contemporary life and how art and artists help mediate and interpret the world. Taking advantage of the island's geographical position, it will perform as a conduit between local and international, established and emergent artists, engaging curatorial programmes with a focus on the Mediterranean, North Africa, the Middle East, Continental Europe and beyond. This accessible idiom also identifies a shift from a focus of elite culture towards a liberal approach to convey an inclusive and broad contemporary image of the country's artistic and cultural outlook. This is an important facet of European values that engenders “unity in diversity”. The mission is to serve as a portal to engage creativity and positively inspire local communities and international audiences alike in the way Malta perceives art and the way the world perceives Malta.

The educational agenda is significant for such a contemporary art platform as this not only fulfills the social commitment of state-aided funds but counters other notions of monetisation and exclusive markets through a participatory, social and resourceful perspective of a democratic museum that promotes inclusivity, critical thinking and the arts for all. This outreach negotiates the art space as a more accessible and transformative catalyst for creativity and the human spirit. Education will be at the heart of this new platform as a promoter of artistic research, knowledge, understanding and visibility for contemporary practice and its leaders. Cohesive vision is critical within an expanding context of global culture coupled with the enormous strides of technology taking place today to connect the world. This ethos will strive for community-focused strands of programming engaging cultural alterity and multi-disciplinary forms of expression.

This concept proposes the museum as a “creative ecosystem” that interactively propagates other ecosystems. Art, education, built heritage, foreign affairs, tourism, environment, economy, industry and other sectors need to jointly nurture soft power. This is not always easy when tasks fall under different Government Ministries. An innovative art platform has to embody a creative unifying vision to harmonise asynchronous agendas at institutional levels that fuel common goals of cultural diplomacy towards *“attractiveness of a country's culture.”* (Nye; 2004). This apart, it should not be overlooked nor underestimated that whereas governments or institutions have formal powers to create favourable systems, *“artists are a stronger force than the systems in which they operate...(and) no market, no institutional power, no media can stop the soft power of art.”* (Kasini Kadour; 2016). Artists can and have always led change, as history depicts. The present world unravels increasing turbulence and racism daily, reaching historic levels of wealth inequality, suppression and instability. Western civilisation as we know it is changing. Away from the formal rhetoric of institutional diplomacy, the trend for museum-spaces today is to exert their democratic potential as facilitating mechanisms to liberate thinking – these are no longer hegemonic “cathedrals”.

Certainly, contemporary art spaces need to mediate between fierce market culture and business, education, nurture, enjoyment and social inclusivity. An art museum, however, is not by itself catalytic in bringing cultural change without its artists, nor indeed is any government. Good artists, Kadour argues, have always understood their innate ability to teach through their art; express empathy, emotional intelligence and divergent ways of seeing. When artists show or travel with their work, whether abroad or at home, they are indeed autonomous envoys of culture. The role of contemporary museum-spaces should stand as enabling powerhouses to allow art and “soft power” to operate with new consciousness, free choices, supportive co-existence and collective intelligence.

A transformative platform - aligning nation branding and European values

A sustainable legacy for a contemporary art platform relies on its international outlook and relations to promote stable long-term recognition in a competitive art world where museums continue to spring around the world. Malta faces particular challenges as a small island state in terms of place-branding as a contemporary art destination. Our contemporary art culture still seeks to assert itself since the nation's post-independence of the 60s/70s. Contemporary art has found resistance competing with the entrenched legacies of the rich Baroque, Knights' Order, and pre-historic heritage, together with warm climate and blue seas so attractive to tourists. The island's historical narrative has been fashioned by several influences and cultural fusions which has formed the backbone of the country's nation branding. The role of an emergent contemporary art space, therefore, has a requisite of enculturing, besides seeking to establish branding equity and parity with similar international art spaces to attract audiences worldwide and build an identity that situates the nation on the global cultural art map.

These challenges are exacerbated by instant technologies and a heavily mediated world which make the way image and place-branding operate complex. A country's political ideals, values and social policies go to influence the overall perception of a nation's "*attractiveness*" in the eyes of the world. Nye discusses these as valuable assets in political exchange rather than using coercion, payments or other forms of "hard" persuasive power (Nye; 2004). Place and nation branding, ultimately, go hand in hand with soft power in the building of reputation. This is an interesting point when it comes to state-owned and funded cultural spaces or museums, as the interests to build a good reputation are mutually enforced and tantamount to nation branding and positive international relations all round. It remains equally paramount that the art space pursues its own line and mission of autonomous thinking unconstrained by any state's ideologies. To flourish, art needs neutral transformative platforms to challenge existing stereotypes, stimulate, critique, provoke and move against the grain, as innovative thinking has always done.

In building "personality" both state and major museums come to share recognition through building trust and loyalty via audiences and "image". These actually become synonymous, just as the Tate or Victoria & Albert are synonymous with London, the Pompidou or Louvre with Paris, and the Guggenheim with Bilbao or New York. This goes to express how perceived image, quality and uniqueness have to combine in brand strategy to develop equity in a competitive arena. It has been described that the role of an emergent organisation is like that of a "*political player*" that requires assertive promoting to win people's hearts and minds in creating "*brand loyalty*" not only at home but around the world (van Ham; 2007).

The philosophical values promoted, hence, are integrative to the branding strategies of an art platform that aspires to perform as an effective instrument of international promotion. The Malta international contemporary art space is at the incipient stages of building such an identity. Situated in the heart of the Mediterranean, it aims to harness holistic approaches to embrace difference and the democratic values of a present-day Europe as outlined in its mission. The European dimension is also endorsed and central to any legacy project of the European Capital of Culture. Importantly, this infers how "branding and identity" are inextricably linked with the internationalisation processes as expressed in the EU Strategy Framework and Culture Agenda global aims: "*to reinforce the role and position of culture in an increasingly globalised world.*" (EC Culture; 2018)

Such values of harmonisation are strongly pronounced in the present climate of Europe and movement of people. As the outgoing EC President Jean Claude Juncker had stated in one of his televised speeches: "*Europe is more than the Single Market; it's about values... This is not something handed down; we have to fight for it.*" He encouraged member states to celebrate cultural diversity inherent in the democratic vision which forms the identity of Europe. These words continue to echo the challenges of migration, terror and separatism bludgeoning the current Europe, and stress the values of freedom, tolerance, and "*equality of opportunity*" which are the bedrock of democratic vision. (Juncker; 2017).

So, how do these sentiments align with an emergent space for contemporary art?

A contemporary art platform has to operate as a transformative enabler to democratise spaces where art generates freedom of expression, accessibility and "equality of opportunity", open to dialogue, cultural

alterities, plural ideas and “unity in diversity”. These humanitarian values equip art and artists with the tools of nurturing emotional intelligence, creating joy, respect and human dignity that enact “soft power” and inherently respond to the European perspective. When a country’s policies reflect these, they become an instrument of cultural diplomacy by projecting integrity outwardly that can improve “image” in the eyes of others. It is often remarked in cultural discourse that this power is underestimated by governments. It has been observed that better use can be made of cultural diplomacy at institutional levels beyond its perception as just a component of public policy, given its potential in reaching government and non-government audiences. (Mark; 2009). A British Council report on a more recent study investigating the leverage of cultural diplomacy used at the UN Office in Geneva, also reveals that clearer understanding of the “mechanics” connecting soft power and diplomacy is needed amongst diplomats. (Rose; 2017)

The MICAS project promises new paradigms in branding strategies that will focus on a cohesion of ideas and galvanising methods of marketing for organisational change to establish nation branding. Equitable values are important to steer the country’s impetus for multiple agencies to nourish the cultural ecosystem. These agencies comprise other capital cultural projects for the contemporary arts and culture integral to the Maltese cultural ecology. Co-funded by government and ERDF funds, some of these entities will be completed in the near future. These important developments include MUZA, a national community museum for fine arts housed in the restored Auberge d’Italie; the Valletta Design Cluster, situated in a refurbished heritage slaughter house that will serve as a hub for design start-ups; the Spazzju Kreattiv, a recently rebranded established centre for creativity; and the newly formed Valletta Cultural Agency, with the specific role of sustaining Valletta’s cultural momentum. Other private galleries have flourished augmented by myriad independent artist initiatives.

Collaborating with other public cultural entities and legacy structures, the MICAS project is an essential asset to Malta’s art ecology. It develops a determined transformative ethos to distribute culture but, chiefly, to enculture in art of the present, serve society and inspire artists in the international milieu. New interventions will be constructed within old fortifications. These combine innovation with the rehabilitation of a previously derelict heritage site that will be imbued with fresh architectural legibility and permeability. Designers have teamed up with the national restoration unit to develop an integrative master plan for the entire site with a vision to merge economy of design, conservation and greening with contemporary structural interventions that will blend the vernacular of past heritage with future sensibilities. Located within the peripheries of Floriana (once heralded as the Garden of Valletta) on the outer peninsula guarding Valletta’s Grand Harbour, these suburbs will be reinstated to their former glory. The ultimate goal of this master plan is to empower the city centre by empowering the periphery.

The expansion and redefining of a capital’s parameters are of great significance because a “living city” represents an evolving “living culture”. A city produces culture and, therefore, a people’s culture can be defined by its city. (Compitello; 2014). This architectural gem will form an integral part of the regenerative values, urban replenishment and place-branding ethic of this transformative platform to draw diverse communities around the universal language of the arts.

Summing up

This architectural context formed the backdrop for the introduction of the MICAS platform on the international stage. Partaking in the celebratory calendar of Valletta’s European title through a Concept Launch held in October 2018, this ongoing project was inaugurated as the country’s first major national venue for contemporary art. This concept vision was presented as a work-in-progress through two key launch exhibitions: one presenting the museum’s first international acquisition called the *Radiant* by Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone; the other through a collaborative exhibition of site-specific art installations describing the architectural context called *Connecting Geographies – from idea to project*.

This launch marked the beginning of this museum’s dialogue with the cultural world. It has since commenced its mission outside the walls of a physical gallery, and is currently developing strands of programming to reach multiple audiences and communities and embark on the road ahead. The second edition of its international programme was launched in October 2019 in conjunction with the Serpentine Galleries London featuring *Exomind (Deep Water)*, a work by French artist Pierre Huyghe. Future programming envisions enhanced learning activities to reach wide communities, children and families, alongside art talks, curator talks and international panel discussions to amplify intercultural dialogue and a conversation across varied sectors including students, researchers and policymakers.

In summing the current scenario for arts and culture on the Maltese islands, an encouraging stance has clearly been adopted in the state's commitment to develop the sector's contemporary idiom. The dynamics of the capital's European title led to a year of elevated cultural activities throughout the island. As cultural analysts observe, it will take more time and study to measure the impactful influences of soft power outputs on the economy or the nation's global front. A British study on *Soft Power Today* proposes a statistical framework that measures the influences that translate into economic, political and cultural benefits. It is encouraging that general consensus exists amongst United Nations diplomats on the efficacy of soft power and cultural diplomacy "*used to preserve and express hard political power.*" (Rose; 2017).

In the case of an awakened city life, the run of events of "Valletta 2018" infused vitality through a host of refurbishment and heritage projects, and a boost in cultural tourism and attractions. The spillage onto economy, business revenue and industry, is predisposed in strategic planning warranted by state capital investment. This has been elaborated in the Strategy 2020 vision integral to Creative Europe and endorsed by the guiding principles of the Malta Arts Council's mission: "*We invest in the cultural and creative sectors to achieve higher levels of excellence and develop Malta's creative ecology.*" (ACM; 2019).

The value of soft power in cultural diplomacy is undisputed. Though the perception of art as a "resource" rather than an instrument may persist (in terms of deploying or wielding power), a synergetic platform presents a "culturally militant" catalytic outpost for the visually new. This sees art as a pivotal vehicle to mitigate differences, create a forum for cultural conflicts, pass political messages, and generate good will and peace through dialogue, free expression and unity. In this sense *soft power* has greater transformative powers than *hard power* as the guard is down with art and people are more open to affinities, trust and appreciation.

Realistically, it takes time to build cultural leverage and the national assets that can engender authority and international recognition in a way that will effect global policymakers and economic strength. It does boil down to, nonetheless, the serious commitment by any government and its agencies to generate cultural capital through enabling attractive resources of soft power that can, with the right beliefs, finance and "will", propagate sustainable mechanisms of art diplomacy.

Malta's cultural platform presents a "connective biome" that aspires to this as a leading force of the nation's contemporary culture to sustain art and artists, and other facets of the public ecosystem.

Curatorial narratives - connecting geographies and artistic alterities

In conclusion, the following expands on two curatorial ventures prepared for the MICAS programme under my direction (one past, 2018; one future, 2020). These exhibition projects interpret "metaphors of connectivity" and relational spaces that align with notions of alterity and diversity in the art space.

Connecting Geographies – from idea to project

Curated by Ruth Bianco for the MICAS Concept Launch (October 2018)

Venue: Barrel Vaults of the MICAS grounds, Malta

This curatorial project reflects a multilayered concept uniting various levels of connectivity. It had an important place in the museum's Concept Launch in introducing the design narrative and significance to local and international communities. The project title echoes the mission of the museum and its priority to connect nations and people and bring unity through art.

Beyond illustrating the conceptual architectural drawings of the design process, the exhibition sought to merge art and architecture interactively and holistically within interdisciplinary installations situated in five interconnected casemates of the fortifications. The layout led visitors through an atmospheric journey interlinking the vaults, corresponding with the "geographies of time and space" through connecting physical and conceptual spaces. The project developed as a multisensorial collaboration between myself and the museum's lead architect, engaging workshops with students to embody a full interactive experience between art and architecture, combining different artefacts in an artistic, environmental and educational spirit.

This dialogue of “art in architecture” activates remarkable energy because of its transformative power in opening spaces of communication and discourse, bringing different research approaches, and establishing bonds between individuals of diverse cultural, educational and professional backgrounds.

Significantly, the project reflects a multidisciplinary perspective to the curatorial approach through collaborations, activating experimentation and enquiry through critical spatial practice. The curatorial metaphor to connect materials and spatial differences in new contexts reflects the international scope of the MICAS mission to promote harmony and connectivity through the language of art.

These poetic interpretations connect spaces, objects and found materials (*objets trouvés*) into new visual interactive narratives culminating through hybrid dialogues and interdisciplinary collaborations. Art installations include: *Prima Pietra* (Ruth Bianco); *Pellicola* (Claude Borg); *Aperturi* (teamwork); and wall projections. Virtual walkthroughs and architectural models were produced by the design architects (Restoration Directorate and Ipostudio, Italia) developing the museum design.



PRIMA PIETRA by Ruth Bianco
(stone pendulums & zen pond)
presented in *Connecting Geographies* (2018)
MICAS grounds, Floriana, Malta

Prima Pietra by Ruth Bianco (catenated stone pendulums and Zen pond)

This totemic stone-scape is a lyrical space, reminiscing “stone as fossilised water”. Inspired from the ancient "betyl" (conceived as the most primitive representation of the human form) the concept takes the form of suspended totem poles constructed from a variety of stone waste found lying in mounds on the site, such as porfido, granite, slate, lava, globigerina, each with its own density, textures, colours and character. This allegorical space hangs over a shallow stepping pool.





Aperturi - teamwork project (assemblage of objets trouvés)

A portal montage constructed from scavenged timber waste, doors and windows, upcycled and mounted to the vaulted façade. This colourful assemblage brings discarded apertures back to life in an environmental and architectural spirit allowing openings for light and passage.





***Pellicola by Claude Borg
(architectural ribbon)***

An architectural ribbon in the form of a winding band journeys and wraps round the innards of the vaulted ceilings through a filmic collage. This connective running commentary travels through a line of time, history and transformation. It stands as a visual metaphor uniting past with present as it leads viewers through the experimental narratives of the architect's drawings from first inception to the current stages of the gallery designs.

Arabicity – Mediterranean

Curated by Rose Issa, co-curated by Juliet Cestar and Ruth Bianco (June 2020)

Venue: MICAS – MUZA (community museum of art), Valletta, Malta

As has been established in the MICAS founding mission, an important facet of this platform's international programming should reflect the island's geographical position as a Mediterranean country which makes us a natural hub in *connecting geographies* between Europe and our neighbours in the southern and eastern parts of the Mediterranean.

This curatorial project featuring the contemporary art of transnational Arab artists from a region that spans from Morocco to Afghanistan will have an important place in reflecting this platform's vision to present a diversified spectrum of cultural representation connecting with diverse regions of the world through art and artists. The idea to present a Euro-Med Middle Eastern perspective therefore is of great cultural and public interest in promoting alterities and plural voices through art. This does not aim to be restricted to a region, as art and artists continuously reshape their boundaries for various complex reasons.

Conceptualised by Rose Issa, *Arabicity (Ourouba)* is about the different routes and roots that artists from the Arab world choose. She has curated several versions on the theme with an ongoing focus to reflect the aesthetic, conceptual and socio-political concerns of Arab artists over recent decades.

When twenty-two polymorphous countries share the same language, geographical and historical sphere, and most share the same religion, is there a common cultural link?

Arabicity is a response to this question; it explores Arab concerns artistically and socio-politically. Whether from within or outside the Arab world, it shows how Arab artists resist stereotyping, challenge the confines of their identity, reshape the parameters of their traditions and bring visual poetry to life. (Arabicity; Rose Issa 2019)

In showcasing the work of some of these artists, the exhibition will express some of these concerns that contemporary Arab artists confront as they navigate the world with their art. The exhibition offers a space to reflect some of these artists' responses whether to personal, national, regional or international issues affecting the Arab world. Explored through varied disciplinary backgrounds, artists reflect the existential, the loss of cultural and social history and the sense of impermanence in today's political and artistic landscape.

Art has the ability to express the complexity of the world. The works in the exhibition hence are not so much about politics or polemics but more about how these artists mediate the world and the circumstances of their life or countries and their histories.



Khalil Rabah (Palestine), *Not everything that shines is gold*, 60 metal barbed wires, 2017



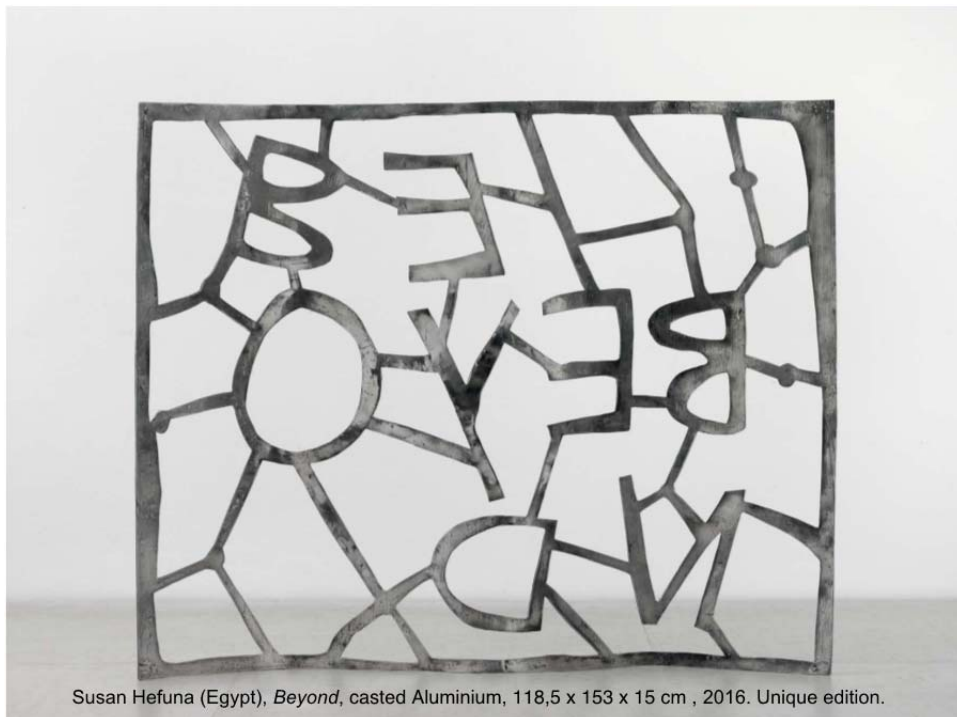
Batoul S'Himi (Morocco), *World Under Pressure*, aluminium gas cylinders and pressure cookers



Nayla Romanos Iliya (Lebanon), *Phoenician Alphabet* series, bronze:
A site-specific installation of 22 sculptures inspired by all the letters of the Phoenician alphabet



Kader Attia (French-Algerian), *La Mer Morte (The Dead Sea)*, 2015



Susan Hefuna (Egypt), *Beyond*, casted Aluminium, 118,5 x 153 x 15 cm , 2016. Unique edition.

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Biography

Ruth Bianco is a multidisciplinary artist who creates and leads projects in contemporary fine art contexts with a research specialism in transboundary movements, geo-political space and territories. Ruth has exhibited extensively and travelled to participate in significant exhibitions including *Femme d'Europe*, Saint-Tropez; *Dans la Nuit des Images*, Paris; *Breakthrough*, The Hague. Her editioned work *If I Just Turn and Run* is in the Special Archive Collections of Tate Britain London, Victoria & Albert Museum London, and Royal College of Art London.

Ruth has an MA and PhD in Fine Art from the University for the Creative Arts, Kent, UK; lectures in contemporary art practice, visual culture and architecture within the Built Environment Faculty at the University of Malta; and directs Art-in-Architecture research and exhibition programmes. She curates exhibitions independently and coordinates international artist collaborations, and has taught and lectured in the United Kingdom and other European Universities. She has a keen interest in internationalism, cultural geography and art diplomacy with a focus on the role of soft power, artistic mediation and connective space. Ruth has led the consultancy for MICAS and European funding from 2013. She is art director of MICAS and board member of the National Commission for UNESCO.