



Raining fire as blood.

DIPLOMAZIJA ASTUTA, the Malta Pavilion for the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia

Professor Keith Sciberras

When steel is heated at 1500 degrees it turns into a liquid state. It lights up in an intensely luminous orange-red. In this red hot state it is pulled by gravity and drops, at its own pace. When it hits water, it is engulfed. The light disappears softly, slowly as the molten steel loses its energy and returns to darkness and to its solid state. That molten drop is so much akin to a drop of blood, to drops that make us reflect on the tragedies of humankind.*



Articles by Academics

In performing *this*, *DIPLOMAZIJA ASTUTA*, the Malta Pavilion for the 59th International Art Exhibition – *La Biennale di Venezia* offers, so we hope, a space for reflection on the themes of justice, reconciliation, and peace. In the manner that it uses molten steel it pushes the boundaries of metal sculpture in ways that have not been seen before. But it is also, importantly, a project that engages with one of the most extraordinary productions of world art, namely Caravaggio's Beheading of St John the Baptist (Oratory of the Decollato, Valletta, 1608). It is anchored in an age-old narrative of injustice and how humans can strive to overcome it.

The Maltese Pavilion reimagines Caravaggio's seminal altarpiece as an immersive, site-responsive installation that overlays biblical narrative onto the present and the noetic onto the metaphysical. It is collaborative effort of curators Jeffrey Usliip and myself, artists Arcangelo Sassolino and Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, and composer Brian Schembri. Commissioned by Arts Council Malta, *Diplomazija Astuta* is the work of a rather unexpected team from Malta, Italy and the United States. This team is composed of a Caravaggio

scholar, a contemporary art curator, a kinetic art sculptor, a theorist/artist, a musician/conductor, and art managers and brilliant engineers.

Our project was actually born in 2018 when Arcangelo Sassolino and Jeffrey Usliip contacted me and explained their wish to anchor Sassolino's drop of molten steel in Caravaggio's revolutionary method. We discussed the possibility of contemporary immersive engagement with Caravaggio's milestone Beheading of St John the Baptist. Exciting dynamics and creative challenges pushed us through a research path that explored multiple and often complex layers of artistic engagement. Thought processes engaged with Caravaggio's penetrating realism, his chiaroscuro, and brazen inventive boldness. We quickly zoomed on to the blood of John. It oozes from his slashed throat in the monumental altar painting that dominates the Oratory of the Decollato, or *Misericordia* in Valletta.

Our first intent was to make Sassolino's molten steel drop repeatedly and poignantly exactly beneath Caravaggio's painting in the Crypt of the Decollato, where it could bridge time and serve as

a perpetual reminder of unjust death. We then moved on to recreate it in the vast space of the Malta Pavilion within the Arsenale of the Venice Biennale. Through *Diplomazija Astuta*, we wished to bridge time and to engage with the tragedies of humankind. Our signature material is steel, however, not pigment.

Through our Malta Pavilion we want to re-situate Caravaggio's response to execution within Modern culture and society. Our pavilion provides space for *Misericordia*, where the audience can reflect freely on contemporary injustices and how to overcome them, even in death.

Diplomazija Astuta evolved to what is exhibited now at the Arsenale, in which a monumental, freestanding solid steel plate, weighing sixteen tons and measuring 360 x 520 cm—the exact dimensions of Caravaggio's canvas—is placed in an austere setting that mirrors the original context of Caravaggio's own work. Placed throughout the exhibition space of the hall are seven steel, water-filled square basins that reflect the arrangement of the seven figures in Caravaggio's own composition. Each basin represents one of these figures: John the



Baptist, the executioner, Salome, her assistant, the jailer, and two prisoners. That of John, is placed centrally and directly in front of the monumental steel plate.

The installation situated in front of the metal sheet is a kinetic sculpture of metal, fire and water, produced by Arcangelo Sassolino. Placed above each pool is a computer-programmed system that feeds coils of steel into induction machines whose electromagnetic field almost instantaneously melts the metal at 1500 degrees Celsius, producing droplets of molten steel to fall from the ceiling into the seven basins of water. Upon contact with the water, the bright orange embers hiss, cool, and recede into darkness.

In metal sculpture, the act of casting is an intermediary state in the production phase that leads to the final work. In Sassolino's work, the molten drop produced during casting constitute the work itself. It turns metal sculpture into the realm of the ephemeral, reacting to a dialogue between sculpture and the ephemeral that had gained popularity in seventeenth century art.





“the space of religion to the multicultural and embodies physicalised scripture, a “manifestation through incisions, slashes, and cracks,” and calls for silence, listening, literacy, and, in turn, healing...”

The work resonates with Sassolino’s creative synergy: “What I am trying to capture is the change of state, that instant in which something is becoming something else, that energy and power that exist in the flash of absolute instability between the moments of equilibrium that are the before and the after. I want to free metal from that closed form, to expose its luminous liquid origin” (Sassolino, *Diplomazija Astuta*, 2022).

The Malta Pavilion has a multiplicity of layers, or points of departure. It penetrates through the textual

resonance of Schembri Bonaci’s incisions and the powerful percussive score of Brian Schembri. Brian Schembri interacts with the machine’s output—falling fire—through a set of musical organising principles. Schembri based his engagement on a number of musical works, including Gregorian chant attributed to Guido d’Arezzo; rhythmical motifs derived from Carlo Diacono and Charles Camilleri. Schembri challenges the installation to reinterpret his percussive score in aleatoric dialogue among itself, its various components, and the original composition.



On its other axis, the monumental steel plate reveals Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci's *Metal and Silence*, a fascinating multilingual incision of text that engages with Ezekiel's can these bones live and weaves Mediterranean languages into the form of the artist's cardiac rhythm. Schembri Bonaci's intervention broadens "the space of religion to the multicultural and embodies physicalised scripture, a "manifestation through incisions, slashes, and cracks," and calls for silence, listening, literacy, and, in turn, healing" (Schembri Bonaci, *Diplomazija Astuta - Metal and Silence*, 2022).

It must be underlined that the team is much larger than the group of five of the core Curatorial Team. It includes project managers Nikki Petroni, Laura Dequal and Esther Flurry, and an extraordinary production team made up of architects, engineers, metal workers and designers who manufactured the project. Importantly, it also includes a major educational programme that was directed by the Department of Art and Art History and entrusted to Nikki Petroni. Students and recent graduates have participated in workshops in Malta, Venice and Vicenza, and a team of Maltese curatorial assistants are effectively running the pavilion throughout the seven months of the Biennale (23 April - 27 November 2022). Added to these, obviously, is the entire team of the commissioner, Arts Council Malta. My role is that of team leader, co-curator and art historian, therefore also handling the many production and curatorial aspects, including connections with the Commissioner, the Venice Biennale organisation and the wider platforms of the international artistic community.

The challenges of this project, a complex production of metal, were numerous. In technically terms, the realisation of the entire installation (weighing

approximately seventy tons) materialised in Vicenza. Importantly, Sassolino's studio is based Vicenza, so we obviously availed ourselves to expertise, engineers and specialised companies that formed part of his technical entourage. The choice of Vicenza as a production centre is also due to the sheer weight, complexity and size of the work. We needed to find a place to design and construct as close as possible to Venice. It is obviously much easier for artists and curators to travel to the production site, than for gigantic sheets of metal to go to where the artists and curators are.

The production and running costs of this project are enormous. These were made more complicated because it materialised in the midst a global pandemic. The entire project included costs of the tonnage of steel, transportation, handling, engineering, design, testing and manufacturing costs. We worked largely with steel, a medium which spiralled in terms of costs due to the pandemic. The Commissioner covers part of the project, but there are also major international patrons whose financial support was crucial for the project to materialise (these are all listed in the didactic material for *Diplomazija Astuta*). Supporters who believed in it, who invested in artistic excellence. In terms of its creative challenges and material production, *Diplomazija Astuta* is a work that we are not usually accustomed to within the Maltese context of contemporary art.

** This text includes extracts from the Curatorial Team's didactic material for Diplomazija Astuta, Malta Pavilion for the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2022. See also www.maltapavilion2022.com.*