

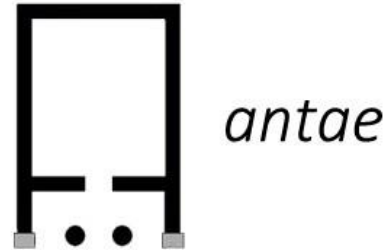
## Standard History/Marginal History: Comments on the Narrative of Twentieth-Century Maltese Art

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## **Standard History/Marginal History: Comments on the Narrative of Twentieth-Century Maltese Art**

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It is a common though not wholly unjustified misconception that Maltese twentieth-century art is backwards, anachronistic, and a softcopy of the Western avant-garde. The art of this period indeed resisted radical or even subtle modernist, aesthetic, and political developments, and there are seminal instances of direct engagement with the modernist project that lack an adequate discourse. Not only is such art hardly visible in the public sphere, but it has, furthermore, been historically undermined by an avoidance of critical and theoretical scrutiny. Studying art and its textual representation incited the realisation that the epistemological foundations of art-historical literature on Maltese modern art were debilitated by inconsistencies, passive narrative approaches, and, most perplexingly, unsatisfactory deductions posed as conclusive answers. Frankly, much material is repetitive and disengaged because of habitual preferences for biographical readings, prohibiting a thorough and contextualised understanding of images which could not be textually translated with the existing discourse.

Maltese art history was evidently built on three primary methodologies for understanding the past: an ideological view of historical time, chronological accounts, and a reliance on the traditional and modern art canons. The first considers history as a propagator of national identity that fits the suitable past into the desired ideological self-image. The second develops accounts across clear biographical or periodical beginning and end points presenting history as a series of ordered events that happen to pre-date and post-date one another. Finally, the gradual emergence of new artistic developments provoked the veneration of the traditional canon and a coexisting dependence on the canon of modernism as a means of legitimisation and self-validation. That Maltese art could and should participate in Western modern history when it was denied this opportunity is a legitimate purpose; comparative methods, however, are often linear and superficial. The modernist canon's exclusionary politics make its uncritical use in Maltese art history contentious, since its historical framework for the studying of content intentionally marginalised by this same canon could only result in the subordination of that which is already regarded as peripheral. Maltese modern art needs to be studied and historicised on its own particular terms and resolutely placed within the global spectrum.

Art history has long-endeavoured to analyse the processes of interpretation and historicisation that determine what and how art is looked at as well as included or excluded in literature. The knowledge that reaches us and that is stored in our collective memory is not necessarily that

of greatest historical importance but that which sustains an identity-myth.<sup>1</sup> Modular impositions on the chronicling of memory that detach the past from the present by objectifying experience tamper with and exclude “unwanted” knowledge. It was not art alone that fell victim to ideological exigencies, but also history, struggling to deal with the marginal and the anomalous.

This article will centre on prominent ideological visions of Maltese art and culture to work towards an understanding of the material and historical challenges that artists faced in the twentieth century. It intends to evince that standard historical narratives of Maltese modern art have inadvertently or not legitimised the canonical presuppositions that peripheral art, developed outside of modernism’s positivist progressive evolutionary timeline, is anachronistic and thus of lesser historical importance. The marginal status of Maltese modern art is arguably the result of an adherence to both the traditional and modern canon of art history without challenging these systems of historical writing. Therefore, Malta’s marginal or peripheral position is sustained by a self-imposed insularity. Alternative theoretical models will be explored to contend with standard historical narratives and the temporal implications of spatial politics.

### **Time and tradition: the beginnings of Maltese art history**

In his erudite analysis of Maltese insularity, Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci argued that ‘[t]he insular recognises its own interests within those of the cosmopolitan centre. By equating its interests to the interests of the dominant power, the isla becomes the borgo (the village), the city, the urban cosmopolitan centre’.<sup>2</sup> If one can look and act like the dominant subject, then one can also be the dominant and think in similar fashions. The cosmopolitan image is adopted as the image of power even when the intention is to oppose the ruling factions. Manwel Dimech, the radical socialist who opposed all forms of colonial and clerical authority and who advocated the need for intellectual independence above all other aspects of freedom, established a set of rules for members of his movement. Dress, behaviour, cultivation; members had to be properly dressed, well-rounded and exemplary individuals. He wanted the birth of a new Maltese subject designed in the image of the powerful coloniser. Folk cultural forms were discouraged for being ugly and vulgar. Juan Mamo, one of Dimech’s most trusted

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<sup>1</sup> In order to understand art’s role in the creation and sustaining of identity-myth, see essays by Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, ‘Isla, Insula, Insularity and the Arts. With a Footnote on St Paul and Sancho Panza—The Relationship between the Maltese Art Scene and the Development of Modern Art’, in *Insularity: Representations and Constructions of Small Worlds*, ed. by Katrin Dautel and Kathrin Schödel (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2016), pp. 267-275; and ‘The Live Tradition of Maltese Baroque: Cosmopolitanism and Insularity in the Twentieth Century’, in *At Home in Art: Essays in Honour of Mario Buhagiar*, ed. by Charlene Vella (Valletta: Midsea, 2016), pp. 485-501. Historian Carmel Cassar and sociologist Mark-Anthony Falzon have also both analysed the effects of Malta’s insular cultural imagination: see Carmel Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta* (Msida: Mireva, 2000), and Mark-Anthony Falzon, ‘Tista’ l-Identita’ Maltija Tkun Kosmopolitana?’, in *Bliet (u miti): Kitbiet li jistharrgu l-qari u l-kitba mill-ġdid ta’ l-immaginarju Malti*, ed. by Adrian Grima (Pembroke: Inizjamed, 2002), pp. 8-10.

<sup>2</sup> Schembri Bonaci, ‘Isla, Insula, Insularity and the Arts’, p. 274.

disciples, confessed to admiring the British for being so powerful, for having the intellectual capacity to subordinate others.

Art was encumbered by the same desire of looking beyond the self to assert a national or collective identity. The advocates of traditionalism and the aspiring moderns all yearned for self-definition in a period of perpetual change and renewal. Their outward-facing approach was necessary to deconstruct provincial ways of thinking and visualise a horizon of expectation for future art. However, the predominance of the centre retained an authoritative grasp over art production and interpretation. From this line, a retrospective look at the philosophical foundations of Maltese art history as advocated by Vincenzo Bonello, the acknowledged father of the discipline, would outline how the standards of national narratives were constructed.

Bonello's art historical writings are recognised for their scholarly attempt at piecing together seminal episodes from Malta's artistic evolution, in which he emphasised the preponderance of the Knight's period. As the principal art consultant to the church, the first curator of Fine Arts Section at the National Museum (later to become the National Museum of Fine Arts), a member of aesthetic boards and other committees, and also coordinator of several restoration initiatives, Bonello's authority was largely undisputed.

His greatest contribution to the art historical discipline was not solely his rigorous study of the country's art history. Of deeper interest is his philosophy of time as not only a continuous concept but as one that could resist changes that interrupted the steadfast pursuit to preserve the idea of a desired identity. Art encapsulated the image of national identity and was henceforth a defiant object that shaped reality according to visual sentiments associated with elaborate memories. Bonello's notion of Maltese identity was that of an island engulfed in the art of the time of the Order, the country's "Golden Age"; 'All Malta, cities and villages, piazzas and alleys, churches and palaces, are an immense Saint John's Co-Cathedral'.<sup>3</sup> By conceiving the whole of Malta as a baroque *gesamtkunstwerk*, Bonello pictured the island as total artistic model dependent on unity and harmony wherein diverse elements are permitted so long as they do not disrupt the harmonious momentum of the space. Imagining Malta as one large and interconnected work of art prohibited the inclusion of any uncustomary or aberrant developments; it was a priority to maintain the traditional centre of gravity whilst welcoming the unobtrusive contemporary. This possibly explains why Bonello accepted the modern direction taken by Antonio Sciortino in sculpture, whose aesthetic still evoked a reverence for the grandeur of the past.

Within this nationalist spatial projection is an equivalent temporal dynamic that maintains the same ideological principles: time as singular, continuous, omnipotent, embodying the capacity for revision within its own ideological parameters. In other words, art need not be static or lacking in invention, yet it must fit into an endless schema of art production that supports incremental shifts. His narrative was built upon an ideology rooted in pre-Modern imaginings of identity.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Tutta Malta, citta e villaggi, piazze e straducole, chiese e palazzi, sono un immenso San Giovanni'. Vincenzo Bonello, 'Un culto che redime: il passato. Riflessioni artistiche', *Melita*, 1, (1921), 53-61, p. 53.

Art produced outside of the *gesamtkunstwerk* and discordant with the comprehensive, multi-temporal visual schema of the local church was prohibited from entering into this divine world. This is a central argument as to why Giorgio Preca's *Crucifixion* (1947) was received with hostility and attacked by the Stella Maris parishioners: it struck a disharmonious chord against a consonant visual worldview illustrated by the baroque, despite the church being built in the late nineteenth century (another challenge to the argument in favour of linear teleological histories).<sup>4</sup>

Bonello's line of thought bound the work of art to its traditional symbolic status, meaning that it had the responsibility to maintain this conventional aesthetic function; the altarpiece, devotional statue, and public monument. In this sense, Bonello's mythology diametrically opposed Hegel's historical conception of non-repeatability posited in *Lectures on Aesthetics* and analysed in the more recent writings of Hans Belting.<sup>5</sup> In the words of Belting:

Art is something "past" not only because it was created in another time in history but also because it fulfilled another function in history, precisely that function from which, in Hegel's view, it had achieved aesthetic emancipation in his time.<sup>6</sup>

This is not to say that Bonello's view of history was static; on the contrary, history progressively evolved until it hit a stumbling block in the modern era.

According to Bonello's inferences, in fact, modernity did not form part of the epistemological beingness of the Maltese people. It was a British importation; part of a much larger imperial culture which was alien to the enduring history of the Maltese. Bonello's abhorrence of abstraction and the avant-garde was made very clear in his writings. The Modern age was one of decadence, and this opinion he inextricably linked to the British colonial presence. Bonello's vision of history deems that, from the nineteenth century onwards, Malta was at the mercy of barbaric forces which destroyed the high cultural and moral history of the country prior to 1798.<sup>7</sup> His aim was to construct a bridge of remembrance between the end of the eighteenth century and his early twentieth-century present, which promised a revival of the golden age in Maltese history. The arrival of British culture and neoclassical aesthetics in the nineteenth century disrupted the steady continuity of Bonello's Baroque historical memory.

His ideas on restoration aimed to preserve the past and the traditions which this past encapsulated, as if resuscitating the past during the present. He worked arduously to fossilise the art of the past, conducting archival research and highlighting the need for restoration projects. Bonello's restoration theory was to 'preserve the building as it had evolved during the period of the Order's rule in Malta', ridding it of any nineteenth-century additions which

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<sup>4</sup> The cause for hostility towards Preca's painting is repeatedly attributed to the non-frontal positioning of the crucifixion. Such an inference is speculative at best, and does not contend with the grander scheme of religious painting and viewing experiences.

<sup>5</sup> Artists, Hegel argues, had to be conscious of their epoch as 'it is no help for him to adopt again, as that substance, so to say, past world-views'. As quoted in Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*, trans. by Christopher S. Wood (Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> See Vincenzo Bonello, 'Quod non fecerunt barbari...', *Malta Letteraria*, XI, (1914), 299-305.

tampered with his idea of Malta's artistic identity, and hence subjecting the new to his iconoclastic worldview.<sup>8</sup> What was of no artistic value could not become part of history.

Bonello fundamentally shaped the development of aesthetic and even moral principles of Maltese twentieth-century art through his presupposition of the past as undisputed truth. As Hayden White points out, the writing of history is synonymous to the creation of myths.<sup>9</sup> History is subject to the interpretation and affinities of the author, and such interpretations of history are posited as true, a truth which incites nostalgia for a "better time" which those living in the present were unfortunate enough to miss. This forces the living consciousness to disregard the realities of the present, with its ideas and material conditions. This is why modernism resisted history, or the conception of history, and its use to justify antiquated traditions, precisely because it limited the present creative experience of the artist. This repudiation of contemporary existence conceals the realities of the period, conceding any responsibility to tackle the problems and changes particular to the present.

On the other hand, Bonello's aesthetic philosophy—despite its dependency on the past—projected time as something open, infinite, and spatially cosmopolitan. His efforts aimed to empower and overthrow the damaging conception of the country's diminutive scale. Many texts covering social, cultural, and artistic subjects begin by justifying the modest ambitions set out in the content through the excuse of being "small". This apologetic tone is exploited to validate why Malta did not, and could never, create shockwaves or indeed change the course of history. This mindset tendentially cleanses any sense of responsibility, and dangerously negates any agency to local subjects. Sociologist Mark-Anthony Falzon described the popular idea of Maltese identity as envisioning a small and essentially rural society, one that, contrary to historical evidence, never did change.<sup>10</sup>

What Bonello instituted was the idea that Maltese identity was not irrelevant but rather denoted by an ancient story of resistance and renewal, with the Knight's period being the ultimate tale of heroism. He emphasised cultural duration across a chronological timeline that rivalled those of larger nations. The Maltese Islands were one colossal work of art. With a long history of grand episodes, art could not be momentary by following inconsequential trends; it bore the responsibility of commemorating the pervasive strength of the nation in order to claim its place with the annals of art history. Bonello's motives for international recognition were significant in the context of Malta's status as a British dominion during years of heightening nationalist tension.

## Experience and the canon

The birth of an art historical consciousness with such an ideological basis no doubt paved the way for future art production. A standard history, the national art canon, was being written

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<sup>8</sup> Stephanie Vella, 'Vincenzo Bonello as a pioneer in Maltese Art History and Criticism' (unpublished BA dissertation, University of Malta, 1997), p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> See Hayden White, 'Modernism and the sense of history', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 15, (2016), 1-15, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> See Falzon, p. 8.

and, in turn, establishing criteria for local art production. Mediocrity was heavily contested after years of scarce innovation and modernism was perceived as a deterrent to the quest for great art that could compete with that of the ruling European centres. It was, naturally, not an anomalous idiom that the local establishment was after, but one that developed upon the masterpieces of church and monumental art that could sustain the relevance of the traditional art canon. Scale played a determining role in the history of Maltese twentieth-century art; magnitude was essential to overthrow the crippling mentality of the island's small geographical scale as limiting and mirroring the capabilities of the nation.

However, qualitative improvements were to be loyal to orthodoxy. The perseverance of traditional notions of artistic judgement set a moral precedent for "right" and "wrong" art more than acting as a distinguishing body for separating "good" from "bad". Skill was secondary to retaining art's symbolic function as a lavish object that served the dominant ideological purpose. Only with overt links to the authoritative line of pre-modern European development, specifically to the art of Rome, was art recognised as legitimate regardless of qualitative shortcomings and unmistakable rehashing.

Shaping history on these grounds excluded and even repressed the production of art responsive to its own particular temporal moment. A common attribute amongst modern artists was a grave dissatisfaction with the country's overworked official artistic culture: 'I will say that our vision is blunt, we cling so forcibly to anything that is traditionally old that we have grown stale'.<sup>11</sup> These words, penned by in 1951 by artist J.F. Muscat, are in response to an earlier letter written by his friend and fellow artist Saviour Casabene, one which Muscat thought to be true yet not satisfactorily severe. Unable to decide whether the continued production of 'old and greasy' art was due to a fear or misunderstanding of modern art, Muscat made it clear that the younger generation of artists confronted the adversity of the public (it is always the generic public that is blamed) with 'a new vision, a tendency to seek, investigate and explore the hidden realms of truth and beauty, to do the thing for its own sake, seek it, create it and uphold it'.<sup>12</sup> The need for a true art was set in motion in the immediate post-war years by the young artists who had studied together in Valletta and Rome.

Casabene's preceding article, however, was uncompromisingly self-critical, exposing the presence of cracks within the emergent modern movement that prohibited the reconciliation of young artists' sincere yearnings and the actual result of their actions. After mentioning a string of eminent names—Matisse, Braque, Sironi, Guttuso, Pasmore, Rouault, De Chirico, and others—Casabene briefly but directly proclaimed that:

[i]t is rather strange not to be acquainted with these men when the very air we breathe is saturated with their influence [...]; the streamlined car and aeroplane, the furniture in our houses and even the pattern and cut of our clothes owe their elegance to the genius of these great artists.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> J.F. Muscat, 'Local Art and the Younger Generation', *Times of Malta*, 23 May 1951, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Saviour Casabene, 'The Present State of Art in Malta', *Times of Malta*, 12 May 1951, p. 9. Quotation edited for clarification purposes.

Casabene's statement on the palpable separation between art and everyday experience is important not for his mentioning of influential artists but for exposing the inability to recognise that modern art had inevitably become a tangible part of life, including in those quotidian settings where the Maltese overlooked the presence of art.

The distancing of art and art history from lived experience with the intention of creating art in the image of the other resulted in the subjugated culture unwittingly participating in its own subjugation. Identity-myths were created that were backward-looking and divorced from the exigencies of modern life.

Many artists, in fact, struggled with this fragmented experience which affected their behaviour, some at a loss with how to develop new aesthetic directions when encumbered by the weight of the past and the unintelligibility of modern art. This dichotomy is concretely manifest in the conscious choice, or censorship, enacted by artists over what they should or should not exhibit according to the specific location of where their works would be shown. Emvin Cremona's schizophrenic behaviour is the most exemplary; when showing pieces at the Commonwealth Art Institute in London in the 1960s, the artist sent a selection of abstract paintings which had never been shown to a local audience. In Malta, he monopolised the sphere of sacred art production, painting figurative, derivative, neo-Baroque spectacles that reinforced the Catholic traditional concept of Maltese subjectivity.

His actions were not only the ramification of colonial alienation from local traditions. Cremona was conforming to the conventions of the two canons that normalised his art practice; the young cosmopolitan notion of Western progress, and the seemingly eternal local vernacular. It is obvious that Cremona wanted to be accepted by both canons that acted as symbols of power in their specific contexts. He redeemed himself from the margins with his wilful choice to participate in dominant historical currents.

Different styles, however, must not simply be divided as into the neat and non-corresponding categories of 'public image' and 'private self', as Dominic Cutajar and others have in their analyses of Cremona's contrasting artistic trajectories.<sup>14</sup> Such historical practices serve to perpetuate a fragmented way of thinking that evades the contentious reality of multiplicity and conflict. Art historical discourse has thus far failed to question these obvious and disquieting disparities in temporal terms that conceive of artistic happenings as interconnected series of ideas and styles liberated from a singular idea of time.<sup>15</sup>

The subject matter itself eludes the historical circumstances to which it has been confined. When considered generally, Maltese modern art is inherently illogical and contends with a

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<sup>14</sup> Dominic Cutajar, 'Emvin Cremona', in *Malta: Six Modern Artists*, ed. by Dominic Cutajar, Emanuel Fiorentino and Kenneth Wain (Msida: Malta University Services, 1991), pp. 71-97, p. 81.

<sup>15</sup> The premise for this essay has been to study the development of art history in Malta from its beginnings, this in order to investigate concurrent interrelations between the evolution of both history and art. This genealogical reading of events contributes, I believe, to a deeper recognition of identity that penetrates through the surface of images and their corresponding textual narratives. In some instances, genealogy may appear as a "naturalisation" of identity to discard any notions of difference or plurality; genealogy needs to be studied critically to understand thought processes and ideological apparatuses. See Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca and New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 139-164.



number of issues of aesthetic and historical interest. Yet these problems are neither disengaged nor alienated from the historical experiences to which art history should attend. The cause for discontent is, arguably, that conventional standards of art historical writing are uncontested. Art historiography was inadvertently uprooted from local disciplinary practices in the study of art from the modern period. In the absence of a methodological direction or school of thought in the majority of pertinent literature, the historicising process sought the protection of the pale shadow of Western narrative measures and facile chronological underpinnings. Harping onto the biographical stories of artists' personal lives is also incommensurate to the aforementioned objective of sustaining a local modern identity, seeing as how this is minimised by the anti-bohemian values knowingly regaled by artists themselves; family life, respectability, regard for authority, self-guarding introversion. As Peter Serracino IngloTT inferred, these qualities were 'a counteracting force to their urge to develop a new language which challenged the established idiom and corresponding vision of society'.<sup>16</sup> These paradoxical problems are what constitute the actual history of modern art in Malta.

The enduring concern with piecing together a polarised and complex history without treating it dialectically is that meaningful experiences and actions are objectified for the aim of achieving an empirical precision that supports a suitable historical memory. Art history's canon is entirely built upon this ideological notion, making it anything but an endemic line of thought.<sup>17</sup> Historians and theorists have spent decades debating inclusive and democratic methods of writing history that could effectively replace the restrictions of Western determinations over what and how to study.<sup>18</sup> It is imperative to investigate the methodological and theoretical possibilities for liberating Maltese modern art and art historiography from 'the burden of history'.<sup>19</sup> This would involve a thorough rethinking of history and the relationship with the image within revised temporal parameters. Standard history must be displaced by the marginal happenings omitted or censored by the political dynamics of the former.

Marginalisation is not solely manifested within images, but also in the interpretative frameworks that transmit knowledge on a work of art and thus mould general public perception. Eliminative accounts that describe the facts without analysing the temporal and spatial politics of any given work of art exorcise them of their purpose. Negating the will of an artwork as a meaningful cultural object is a prohibitive gesture which treats the artwork as archaic, and places a wedge between art from any period and the people occupying the present.

### **History as irregular: non-linear considerations of Maltese art**

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Serracino IngloTT, 'Introduction', in Cutajar, Fiorentino and Wain, pp. 9-12, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> See Foteini Vlachou, 'Why Spatial? Time and the Periphery', *Visual Resources*, 32(1-2), (2016), 9-24, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> See the writings of Reinhart Koselleck, Hans Belting, Alexander Nagel, Christopher S. Wood, Terry Smith, and so on.

<sup>19</sup> White uses this term to refer to history as the practice of guarding the past due to nostalgic and/or political reasons. Hayden White, 'The Burden of History', *History and Theory*, 5 (1966), 111-134, p. 121.

Dominant ways of thinking about time within historical conceptions of the past and present have posited a singular line of development motivated by the non-peripheral Western metropolis, leaving everything in its wake to fall by the wayside. All other contexts have been purportedly “influenced” by that which emanates from the nuclei of power. When making unilateral chronological comparisons between Paris (the acknowledged centre of modernity and modernism) and Malta, the two contexts display radical incongruence which have consequently led to the framing of Maltese modern art history as backwards, sterile, or even solely mimetic of dominant artistic idioms. It is true that many of the artists did copy accepted styles or reject the innovative potential of their own work, preferring to suppress or moralise their intellectual and creative faculties. However, the widening of art history beyond its Eurocentric focal point has opened up numerous perspectives on the methodological processes of temporalisation and periodisation which have engendered a radical rethinking of the terms anachronism, marginalism, provincialism, and so forth. Under changing circumstances of studying the non-canonical, the particular and the peculiar have been granted agency by being regarded as a piece within a multiplicity of equally-valid cultural occurrences.

Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty identified modernity as having a ‘heterotemporal’ history which is linked to provincial traditions as well as to progressive global phenomena; in other words, modernity as historical experience is characterised by local experiences which intersect, at varying historical moments, with the grand narrative of European modernity.<sup>20</sup> In his writings on the global historicising of modernity, Okwui Enwezor posits modernity as a ‘travelling’ metalanguage which translates differently in each regional or national context, seeing in modernity ‘a continuous project’ which cannot be pinned down to one grand narrative determined by Western European thought.<sup>21</sup> Although these are only two positions amongst a palimpsest of scholarly understandings of modernity and modernist art production, they underline certain critical approaches to conceiving temporal and spatial art historical disjunctives which the universalising and linear chronological narrative can only polarise as a progressive-regressive comparative model, negating the spectrum of conflicts and paradoxes present within each major or minor context.

It is through dechronologised attempts at understanding history and grasping memory that the re-writing of our experiential knowledge would foundationally change time’s *form*. This was George Kubler’s premise in *The Shape of Time*, a critical study that replied to the plurality debate on numberless, non-chronological grounds. Kubler proposed the visualisation of time as an infinite number of interconnecting formal series out of which diverse contexts form sequences when responding to new problems that closed series could not resolve. In Kubler’s conception of the temporal unfolding of form, participation in a sequence is mobilised if and when a problem arises since ‘every object attests to the existence of a requirement for which

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<sup>20</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Post-colonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. xvii.

<sup>21</sup> Okwui Enwezor, ‘Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 109, (2010), 595-620, p. 599.

it is the solution'.<sup>22</sup> In the absence of anomalies, artistic behaviour carries on unperturbed but, once provoked by any kind of change, awakens the need, latent or conscious, to adapt. Adaptation is not necessarily forward-looking; it could easily result in reactionary responses to unwelcome change that conceals the newly-forming reality. Edward Caruana Dingli's genre watercolours, for example, presented Malta as a quaint, pre-modern idyll in images intended to be seen by prospective British tourists. The purposeful extraction and avoidance of modern life and technology contradicts the reality of the artist's present experience as well as the industry-driven motive that incited the production of such pictures. In Kublerian terms, Bonello designed time as an evolving series unobstructed by the appearance of radically new sequences but open to gradual and controlled modifications.

The implications of Kubler's methodology of morphological sequences for the study of Maltese modern art are quite revolutionary. Chronological ways of thinking through time and of comparing multiple contexts according to dates illogically pose non-corresponding events as empirical facts by quantifying data. If, on the other hand, it would be possible to recognise and discern when particular questions or problems were addressed by artists, and further identify the tools at their disposal to confront modernity's constant shifts, an entirely revised temporal paradigm could be employed for the study of modern art that withholds or negates hierarchical prejudice between old and new art.

Schembri Bonaci's analysis of Malta's 'Epicurean artistic leaps' from the traditional into the contemporary, accelerated in the post-WWII years, shows that it is futile to search for gradual or teleological happenings that could be systematically pieced together.<sup>23</sup> Schembri Bonaci has addressed this problem in all his studies on particular artists or historical situations, but he perceives it is a phenomenon, meaning an irregular series of occurrences that prove conventional linear histories to be misrepresentative as well as incorrect. These erratic occurrences defy any form of serial development even without considering positivist notions of progressive time. Maltese art oscillates across the tradition-modern spectrum of historical thinking, meaning that it simultaneously belongs to opposing series and sequences; 'the development of art in Malta is remarkably erratic, and erratically eclectic [...] determined by blocks of different artistic groups'.<sup>24</sup>

Kubler does provide an answer to this conundrum when proposing that inventions are often accidental:

The more common category of inventions embraces all discoveries arising from the intersection or confrontation of previously unrelated bodies of knowledge. The intersection may bring a principle together with traditional practices. Or the confrontation of several unrelated positions may evoke a new interpretation clarifying them singly and together.<sup>25</sup>

He compares this typology to what he terms 'radical' invention, wherein subjects long for the completely new and do not remix pre-existing options (Kubler uses the word 'readymade').

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<sup>22</sup> George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 31-34.

<sup>23</sup> Schembri Bonaci, 'Isla, Insula, Insularity and the arts', p. 271.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Kubler, p. 62.

Both instances are recognisable in Maltese art of the so-called modern period. There were artists who opted for a reworking of styles circulating in their mental collection of visual experiences and those who were compelled to create art that did not conform to available categorisations. It is the latter which suffers historical marginalisation at the beginning of its life, yet is eventually accepted and its radicalism dissolved; we only know it was once radical, although this is not felt as such from a distance.

Marginalisation suppresses memory, and if artworks become known years after their execution or public exhibition, their memory would be deprived of first-hand documents such as personal exchanges between artists and intellectuals, as well as newspaper reviews and articles. Hence, history is denied experiential memory and left with formal memory, one that allows the recognition of invention within an imagined scenario when a previously-established series is suddenly disrupted. Also, and quite worryingly, marginalisation bars further intersecting inventions from occurring since such knowledge is withheld. It is at this point that stagnation is reached, when propagation is halted or only partially enabled. Quoting the words of Eric Hobsbawm, Chakrabarty's analysis of 'minority' histories elicits that excluded narratives constitute the negative of memory, making the non-official dangerous to the stability of power relations.<sup>26</sup> The result of this is that implicit politics are neutralised and aesthetics treated with indifference, and contemporary scholarship has tackled this question in recent decades with the aim of deconstructing this 'marginalised minority'.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

The local, or national, artistic canon has its own implicit mechanism for the engineering of memory, as do all canons. The myth that art should look like canonical modern art in order to be modern has prevailed in Malta. Canonical presuppositions have established a regime of "truth" for the definition of modernism and its aesthetic idioms, a political act which essentially monopolises and alienates the memory of historical knowledge. This is palpable in Maltese art historical literature which uses the language of others to talk about and conceptualise Maltese art.<sup>28</sup>

What is needed is a critical stance towards the authority of the past and both the national and modernist canon. Artworks may be perceived within an expanded and unbounded view of time that, as argued by Foteini Vlachou, implicates spatial dimensions which are likewise

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<sup>26</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Minority histories, subaltern pasts', *Postcolonial Studies*, 1, (1998), 15-29, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> Alternative and inclusive claims for art history were made in David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003); Hans Belting, *Art History After Modernism*, trans. by Caroline Saltzweid, Mitch Cohen and Kenneth J. Northcott (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Some have attempted to provide conceptual answers to the troubled development of Maltese modern art, namely Dominic Cutajar, Kenneth Wain, and Joseph Paul Cassar, although rather underdeveloped. See Dominic Cutajar, 'A Travailed Ascent to modernity', in *The British Colonial Experience, 1800-1964: The Impact on Maltese Society*, ed. Victor Mallia-Milanes (Msida: Mireva, 1988), pp. 269-281; Kenneth Wain, 'On Art, Spirituality, and the Search for the Inner Self: Reflections on Abstract Art in Malta from the 1960s to the 2000s', in *Cross-Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta*, ed. by Raphael Vella (Malta: Allied Publishers, 2008), pp. 26-81; Joseph Paul Cassar, *Pioneers of Modern Art in Malta* (Pieta: PIN, 2010).

denoted by temporal constructs of progress and delay.<sup>29</sup> Malta's art historical eclecticism and irregularity must be transformed into a topography of formal explorations with and without precedent, explorations that simultaneously respond to new questions and old concerns, many that intersect and few that stand apart and gradually reach towards other sequences and series.

That which makes Maltese modern art modern *per se* is precisely this clash between temporal dimensions and the systemic necessities that activate their existence. The dialectics of old and new conceptions of art in their entirety; ideology, technique, form, exhibition, dissemination, patronage, and other factors coexisted in civil discord without ever arriving at a synthesis. The persistence of the tension between traditional and modern value systems in the contemporary context attests to the unaccomplished aim so deeply coveted by the advocates of the modernist project. If the categories of modern art are laid out according to the temporal notions of transition, experience and expectation, together with the dynamics of interweaving objective and subjective views of history's role in the present, it would be possible to show the history of Maltese modern art as a simultaneity of plural convergent and conflicting experiences.

The fundamental problem is, arguably, that self-reflexivity of art historical writing is not a topic of discussion. What is seen and how it is being seen are mute questions, indicating that art history has been pushed to the extreme of objectivity, alienating the author, and consequently the reader, from the *prime facie* subject matter. Those objects which are not of moral or scientific interest get caught in limbo, an unnecessary marginal middle-ground. It is at this point that history fails to translate itself into literary form. Something not talked about is, for the period of silence, a non-entity, hidden deep within the coffers of our memory. It becomes an insular memory. Can it be plucked out and rendered truly cosmopolitan by means of discursive revisions and interpretations? If we understand spatial and temporal binaries to be malleable, the identities of objects are likewise reassessed and opened up to a diversity of meanings.

Contemporary art in Malta is inevitably developing within today's globalised context, responding to the current political scenario and appropriating artworld aesthetics with ease. Once the 'umbilical connection' to the Italian cultural past was weakened in the post-WWII decades, so was the anchor grounding art to historical schema of production.<sup>30</sup> Historical writing has imperceptibly disengaged its epistemological grounding from the changing artistic climate. Critical discourse largely reiterates standards of analysis and writing that circumvent the endless complex challenges artists affronted, the main exception being the writings of Schembri Bonaci that purposefully investigate such intricacies and paradoxes. History's regularity is counteracted by the unsettling detachment from historical knowledge prevalent in a substantial amount of art from this century. In pursuing the global, Maltese art has alienated itself from the traditional past, understandably a method for liberation from the omnipotence of history, but this is arguably the result of a lack of knowledge on local modern and contemporary art on a national level. The trouble with this is that the potential for long-term innovation and artistic agency are being undermined. Malta's marginal history is, hence,

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<sup>29</sup> See Vlachou, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Schembri Bonaci, 'The Live Tradition of Maltese Baroque', p. 499.

further marginalised in contemporary times.<sup>31</sup> Historical empowerment is required for the realisation that a place like Malta cannot be a major centre of economic power, but it can be a player within a constellation of power structures, as it in fact is.

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<sup>31</sup> Schembri Bonaci advocates for the necessity of history and theory in fine arts education for the cultivation of thinking artist. Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, 'The Intellect of Art: Post-Auschwitz MA (Fine or Ugly Arts) or We Should Talk Less and Draw More (Goethe), Should We? Wozu Dichter, What for Indeed (Hölderlin), Nur Lallen und Lallen, immer-, immer-zuzu (Celan)', *Malta Review of Educational Research*, 8(2), (2014), 276-292.

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