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**Raphael Vella (Ed.), *Crosscurrents. Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta*. Allied Publishers, 2008, Malta, 319 pages.**

‘One can be for or against but not without the Church.’ This seems to be the leitmotif in many of the lengthy chapters of this book which traces the main developments in modern and contemporary art in Malta. The church, as a major patron of the arts and specifically painting and sculpture in Malta and Gozo throughout the ages, conditioned the development of the representational arts. For years artists had to balance their interest in cubism and abstract painting with the need for securing commissions in churches, as Kenneth Wain explains in his chapter, highlighting the tensions involved in this regard and broadening the discussion to include an analysis of such motifs as that of megalithic art (manifest in the work of Gabriel Caruana, Paul Haber, Neville Ferry and, I would add, Richard England and John Manduca) and the influence of hotels and commercial establishments in the 60s and 70s. Wain also traces the development of the modern art movement in Malta indicating its various waves throughout the 50s, 60s and 70s.

The Catholic Church remains an important source of reference in many chapters, including the one by Isabelle Borg and Paul Clough concerned with artistic renderings of the body. This largely sociological chapter discusses the various influences, throughout history, that conditioned the different artistic renderings of the body. Special attention is devoted to the Church, the Italianate influence, English colonialism, an elitist education system and contemporary preoccupations with issues of gender and sexuality in a period

when the influence of the Church declined considerably. It is argued, with respect to the contemporary period, that “Very seldom do Maltese artists experiment with a radical distortion of human anatomy,” since a “technically correct representation of the body remains the rule in contemporary Maltese art.” Quite intriguing, with respect to previous periods, is the statement that, despite the Italian renaissance and baroque influence, Maltese renderings of the body lacked the sensuality found in early 17<sup>th</sup> century Italian religious painting, owing to a largely powerless local aristocracy.

Given the social science approach developed throughout several parts of this chapter, I would have liked to see much longer excerpts from in depth interviews with the artists that would have conveyed some sense of their construction of the artistic world they inhabit and some inkling as to how they seek to circumvent the constraints imposed by the market and patronage. This would have rendered their article more grounded. I also feel that Kenneth Zammit Tabona’s work is out of place in this discussion.

Needless to say, the hegemonic presence of Catholicism across these islands leads to reactions among the most daring as evinced by a series of installations and other works, including photographic works, discussed by John Baldacchino and Raphael Vella in their chapters. Some consist of an attempt to knock dignity off its perch. Others are simply playful renderings of religious motifs in a postmodern idiom. Norbert Francis Attard is a most prolific artist, well remembered for, among other things, his labyrinth prints of the 70s. His works ranging from paintings to elaborate and eloquent installations, such as his wonderful ‘Palestrina and Hell’ juxtapositions, are given great prominence in this book. Quite amusing is his photographic depiction of himself as a

crucified smiling zealot which strikes me as being straight out of the Monty Python textbook.

However the Church motif leads to other considerations in this book, notably concerns regarding the wider issue of patronage, including that provided by hotels and other commercial outlets starting with the economic boom of the sixties. One aspect of patronage that is conspicuously missing from this text, which also includes a chapter, by Peter Brincat, on architecture, is the role of building contractors in conditioning the nature of very visible contemporary architecture, often resulting, as they appear to my untrained eye at least, in concrete monstrosities. This notwithstanding, Brincat focuses on a selection of works which highlight some very interesting architectural specimens across the islands that attest to attempts at what he calls an architectural ‘language’ rooted in context and therefore history but which develops a refreshingly postmodern architectural discourse. There seems to be a dialectical relationship between past and present, thus opening up “the historical to the contemporary” rather than engaging in an “imitative reconstruction.”

There is also an emphasis on the coming together of external as well as indigenous influences in a particular architectural work. “While it has always been deeply involved with a sense of being and place,” the language adopted by the Maltese architect “has somehow never been purely ‘regionalist’ ”. As with most of the essays in this volume, Brincat’s arguments in this essay are developed in a postmodern vein and focus, in this specific case, on Derrida’s concept of ‘differAnce’. Brincat applies this concept, referring to a number of heterogeneous characteristics governing the production of textual meaning, to various aspects of architecture. Furthermore he argues for developing

teams, engaged in this sector, comprising a variety of practitioners and professionals, not only architects and civil engineers.

This is perhaps one chapter in which the Church does not make its presence felt and it is interesting to note the absence, in this piece, of references to such a key figure in the contemporary Maltese architectural scene as that of Richard England who however is given due consideration, in other chapters, for his photographic works. The author however has the merit of foregrounding the work of lesser known but equally imaginative local architects. The writing in this chapter is not easy on the eye. It is turgid and the author reveals a preference for long and at times overly complex sentences.

This book is to be commended not only for its comprehensiveness (though it is in no way exhaustive, with a number of important local painters excluded from the discussions) and refreshingly unorthodox approach to a discussion of the subject and its portrayal of some daring works but also for the level of theoretical sophistication attained throughout the chapters. Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, and Merleau-Ponty are among the most cited authors. The chapter authors draw on philosophy, sociology (we also come across the odd reference to Marx and Weber), political theory, literature and anthropology in their discussions which are really multidisciplinary. Columbia University (Teachers' College) academic, John Baldacchino, authors one of the theoretically 'heavy' chapters in the volume. His readings of various specimens of Maltese contemporary artistic efforts are insightful and offer possibilities for further multiple interpretations. His caustic comments about the attack of 'caravaggio-itis' visible in Malta during the last couple of years (the adoption and appropriation of an icon who is anything but Maltese) immediately alert the reader to a chapter that is out of the ordinary. Of the many telling

points he makes I would refer to his comments on works providing important political statements. These include installations and montages providing dreaded echoes of the infamous gas chambers (Austin Camilleri) and which raise the still contemporary issue of ethnic cleansing, the highly revealing work of the book editor, Raphael Vella where religious and ideological overzealousness is conceived of as a 'war machine' and the theme of migration as developed by Ruth Bianco. Vella's own chapter takes up the issue of religion and religiosity. The author demonstrates the various attempts made by artists to subvert sacredness in the spirit of critique of some general cultural characteristics of the islands including "the authority of faith, rituals and prevalent, imagined national qualities as religiosity and Christian morality." Vella comes across as the postmodern artist par excellence. His representations concern such important themes, regarding the 'postmodern condition,' as the death of the grand narratives and also reveal his engagement with the issue of canon and canonicity. These interrelated themes are also well developed throughout a number of chapters in this volume.

The volume is replete with wonderful colour plates. It is a pity that no index is provided. The reader is however also provided with a timeline, by Katya Borg, indicating major events in the history of the islands from the 50s onward and corresponding landmarks in the development of Maltese art. This too is a significant contribution, albeit with a few minor slip ups. The reader would be amused to learn of the existence of a Fine Arts Museum in 1968 housing an exhibition by the recently deceased Anton Agius (Malta had a fine arts collection then but not a fine arts museum which came into being in 1974) and Dom Mintoff becoming President (sic.) of Malta in 1955. But perhaps this is just carping on my part.

This is a truly wonderful and refreshing volume that attests to the vibrancy of contemporary art in Malta. I wonder whether this volume, which alas is available only in hardcover, would rekindle debates regarding the ideal location for a much needed and long overdue contemporary art museum. It could spur on the government to take action in this regard. It might even encourage other important institutions, such as the University, to set up their own gallery (in the University's case, the gallery can be housed inside the old university building in Valletta). I would even dare propose, as a way of acknowledging and celebrating social difference, the setting up of a national-popular portrait gallery involving a variety of media, including photography. This idea derives from my fascination with various fine portraits (sculpture and painting) housed in public buildings besides the splendid photographs that currently overlook Freedom Square in Valletta. Such a gallery would attest to the ever changing nature of Maltese society characterized by social class, gender and ethnic difference.

The book should also serve to stimulate further debate about the various currents underlying contemporary art and other cultural production in this country. Indeed, its trans-disciplinary nature allows it to do more than this. It provides a valid Maltese contribution to the development of that area known as 'cultural studies,' an area that combines a variety of disciplines and approaches to analyse cultural phenomena in various societies.

**Peter Mayo**  
**University of Malta.**