

## **‘To challenge the perception of place’: An Interview with Adrian Abela**

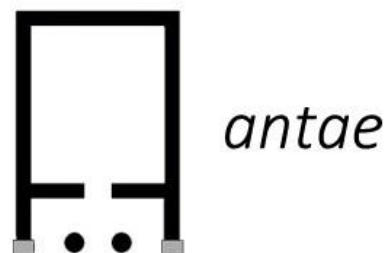
The *antae* Editorial Board

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*antae is an international refereed postgraduate journal aimed at exploring current issues and debates within English Studies, with a particular interest in literature, criticism and their various contemporary interfaces. Set up in 2013 by postgraduate students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, it welcomes submissions situated across the interdisciplinary spaces provided by diverse forms and expressions within narrative, poetry, theatre, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, digital cultures, philosophy and language studies. Creative writing and book reviews are also encouraged submissions.*

## **‘To challenge the perception of place’: An Interview with Adrian Abela**

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**ANTAE:** Your artistic output is perhaps best bound together by its interdisciplinary nature, as it is not limited to one medium, but spans across media such as paint, sculpture and video installations. How do these different trajectories bind together in one coherent form, if indeed they do so? Is there a unifying thread or are they different takes on different topics?

**ADRIAN ABELA:** I find myself using specific materials and methods that I find most apt for a project at that particular moment in time. Half of my works seem to develop from an interest in a particular material, such as napalm or sea urchin exoskeletons, around which a narrative is then constructed. The rest of my projects start from a story that I would want to share; in this case, I would actively search for the material(s) that best suits the plot. My work involves creating a coherent dialogue between these independent elements, and thus presenting them as a whole. This search for a coherent form is really a quest to find my own voice—using creation as a means of understanding the self and the world around me. I am not interested in mastering any particular narrative or medium; rather, I fluctuate between different realities—be they objects, states of minds, or relationships—in the hope of finding answers for mine.

My work also tends to involve people in its conception or production, as in my experience it is detrimental to work in isolation, both for the project and myself. Coming from an academic background in architecture, I have learnt the value of working in constant communication with others to create stronger works, and this has proved true in my artistic practice as well. Through searching for, and collaborating with, others for my projects, I have encountered unique individuals, many of whom have provided me with indispensable knowledge, and with whom I have fostered lasting relationships.

**A:** How do you define your artistic output? Does it form part of any contemporary artistic “movement”, if such a thing still exists?

**AA:** I do not think movements—at least obvious ones—are prevalent nowadays. I certainly notice a sort of harmony between different works being presented around the world, seemingly arising from the use of new technologies or common aesthetic influences. The increase in ease of travel and access to information has allowed people across the developed world to be aware of occurrences as soon as they happen; this has affected my artistic process and very nature of my work. Although I do not wish to define my work for fear of restricting myself, the past few years have mostly involved participatory and collaborative works, and I plan to continue working in this direction.



**Figure 1.** 'KATZE: the keepers of the in-between'. 2015.

**A: How far should the artist be immersed in the local political scene so as to let it inform their output? What boundaries are there, if at all, between your art and local / international political events?**

**AA:** History has shown that the artist has always assumed a political role, active or otherwise. Some of my work has been directly political, such as *Dark Sea* (2012), *KATZE: the keepers of the in-between* (2015), and other public artworks currently in development. In *Dark Sea*, I dealt with the duality of the Mediterranean Sea, in that it is used as a source of crude oil, and also acts as a passageway for refugees and immigrants from North Africa. Research for this project was based on Maltese newspaper articles, Italian media, and global reports of British Petroleum activity in the Gulf of Mexico. I found myself drawing parallels between these contemporary situations and past ones, such as the war in Vietnam and the infamous use of napalm. Ironically, the driving force for this project had actually been my interest in Petroleum as a material for sculpture; yet these political happenings informed the project, which then manifested itself as paintings, videos, and sculptures. Smaller projects of mine explored the building industry in Malta; others served to revive outdated political stances, such as that advocated by Adolf Loos, whom I referred to in my work *Adornment* (2014). My first encounter with a politically-active artist was Friedensreich Hundertwasser, an architect who inspired my early understanding of art and architecture, followed by Yakov Chernikov (also an architect and artist), whose work I discussed in my dissertation for the University of Malta.

**A: A cursory view of your artistic output confirms as much a fascination with the particular as with the more intangible matters such as ageing. I am referring here to the project funded by Valletta 2018 and Leeuwarden 18, entitled *The Culture of Ageing*, dealing with the concept of human temporality as understood by various cultures. What is your contribution to this project?**

**AA:** For the scope of this particular project, I was invited to a residency at the European Institute for Aging (ERIBA) in Groningen, the Netherlands. I was immediately drawn to the idea of studying the biological basis of ageing, and ways of slowing or even stopping it, and I sought to make something tangible out of the process of ageing. I started by exploring how a process can, through time, obtain the form of an object. Spending two weeks with scientists and researchers at ERIBA enabled me to collect extensive information and visual material for this project, and I learnt the crude basics of how living organisms age. In a nutshell, the effects of ageing occur because our cells are constantly producing new copies of themselves, and in this process of “copy-pasting”, cells start to lose genetic information, and hence acquire defects. This is similar to how a printed image acquires more and more artefacts and becomes less clear as it is photocopied over and over again. The same goes for sculpture: with wear and tear of a mould of a sculpture, casts produced from it become less and less similar to the original form.

I wanted to convey this through my work. I gathered a group of people from four different age groups, gave them a brief explanation of the biological aspect of ageing, and asked them to create a small clay sculpture inspired by this knowledge. Plaster copies of each sculpture were then made, in a number matching each individual’s age; as expected, the copies of the youngest individual were similar to each other, while those of elder participants acquired more numerous and varied differences. The final project was a collection of these sculptures, together with

videos of the process, which mirrored methods used by scientists in their research at ERIBA. The video footage was accompanied by a choir singing out the genetic sequence of a gene off the cuff; the mistakes made by choristers as they sang represented the actual missteps that occur during the transfer of information between our bodies' cells.

**A: Is your artwork contextualised by its surroundings, or does it seek to (re)define our interactions with it?**

**AA:** I aim for my work to be able to exist independently from the context in which it was created. Although some work is site-specific and, much like architecture, is derived from the site and needs of the “client”, it should also be read as an independent, universal work. Having said that, the primary function of my work is often to challenge the perception of place, specifically of the place it was meant to react to or exist within. Rather than (re)defining an interaction, I wish for my work to lead people to observe their own perception of a space and reflect upon that.

**A: How do you react to the statement that an artist is someone who offers a service to the public? How do you see the role of the artist?**

**AA:** Like in any other profession, or perhaps even more so, there is no single definition for an artist. There are artists that seek to satisfy their own needs and work outside of any system. Then there are those who work with the intent of using their work for financial gain, either by selling a piece, or renting out a show to museums or galleries. It is my firm belief that artistic work has to be made with the audience in mind, because even while the artist is serving their own need to create, the creation itself will send a message to anyone who views it—even the decision to not pass on a message ends up being a message in its own right. I feel that an artist is responsible for acknowledging this, and pay attention to their own feelings about the audience's reactions. This is especially true in the case of Malta, where our attempts to keep up with the rest of the artistic world are hindered by the need for state funding, in the absence of private galleries or patrons. Several artists—including myself—have made, or are making use of, public funds: this makes our work a direct public service, as the taxpayers are the ones paying for our work.

**A: How does globalisation—and I mean this term loosely, including new technologies such as social media and internet access—influence your work?**

**AA:** In terms of being aware of what is happening around you, globalisation is crucial for my artistic work. Although I still feel less informed about my contemporary art than my international counterparts, the internet and social media have provided me with unprecedented access to worldly knowledge. In my opinion, the best way to experience a work remains to be present in, or in front of, it. Yet when it comes to sourcing materials, fabricating a work, or learning skills such as video editing, the internet has given immense power to the creative individual. In my case, social media has enabled me to find potential collaborators for my projects, and gauge the audience's reception of an artistic intervention by reading individuals' comments on public platforms. Perhaps most importantly, being able to publish our work online, or creating specific online content, may help us shake off the insecurities that come from being on a tiny island, and bring us up to par with the rest of the global artistic community.



**Figure 2.** 'The Caster'. 2015.



**Figure 3.** Still from 'Nebula 001'. 2014-6.

**A: What current projects are you working on? What about your immediate and near-future plans?**

**AA:** My current project is actually observing how my work functions outside Malta. I moved to LA last September, having enrolled in a two-year MFA program in sculpture at UCLA. I have works still in progress in Malta, and am working on a large-scale public art proposal that explores the use of chance as a factor in artistic production. I have dedicated the coming two years to questioning my work, and am in fact already experiencing some strange or unexpected reactions to my own way of thinking. The US is starkly different from Europe, and LA, in particular, is quite the opposite of Malta in the majority of comparisons one would tend to make. The move has been a shock to my system, albeit one that I wished for. I have been offered the opportunity to teach at the same University; this is something I am keen to pursue.

I will complete the MFA program at UCLA and perhaps travel for a while on this continent before heading back to Malta and paying back my student loans. My one wish is really to find out what I actually want to do with my practice. Ultimately, I wish to have an architecture studio, together with a space in which to create, and share, my time between Malta and some other city in continental Europe.



**Figure 4.** 'Auto-Bio—Mural of 1998'. 2014-5.



**A: You mentioned the process of observing your own work outside the Maltese context. On these lines, how do you view the evolution of the local artistic scene, especially with the upcoming V18?**

**AA:** I think there are individuals doing great work, and I support certain initiatives, but we are certainly not where we should or could be yet. In my opinion, the worst problem is that the Maltese general public has not been given an education in the arts, and now we are trying to make up for lost time. But I do not think that showing substandard work on the basis of it being “what the people want” is the way to go. I believe that we must admit that there is a vacuum in the nation’s knowledge and understanding of what art entails, exhibit what we are capable of producing, and most importantly, bring works being created abroad to our shores. Valletta 2018 is contributing to this, and there are some very well-meaning individuals who are effectively managing certain aspects of the upcoming events; however, it is difficult to maintain a team of people who are fully-knowledgeable about what should be done to realise the nation’s full potential.

I have high hopes for our country, because I see it as being one big contemporary art gallery. It is immensely beautiful within all its ugliness; it charms us. Yet even this is being threatened by the blatant construction of tasteless “architecture”. We should all feel responsible for these changes, vocalise our concerns, and act upon them. My wish to relocate to Malta is fuelled by my need to give back to the island what the island gave to me.

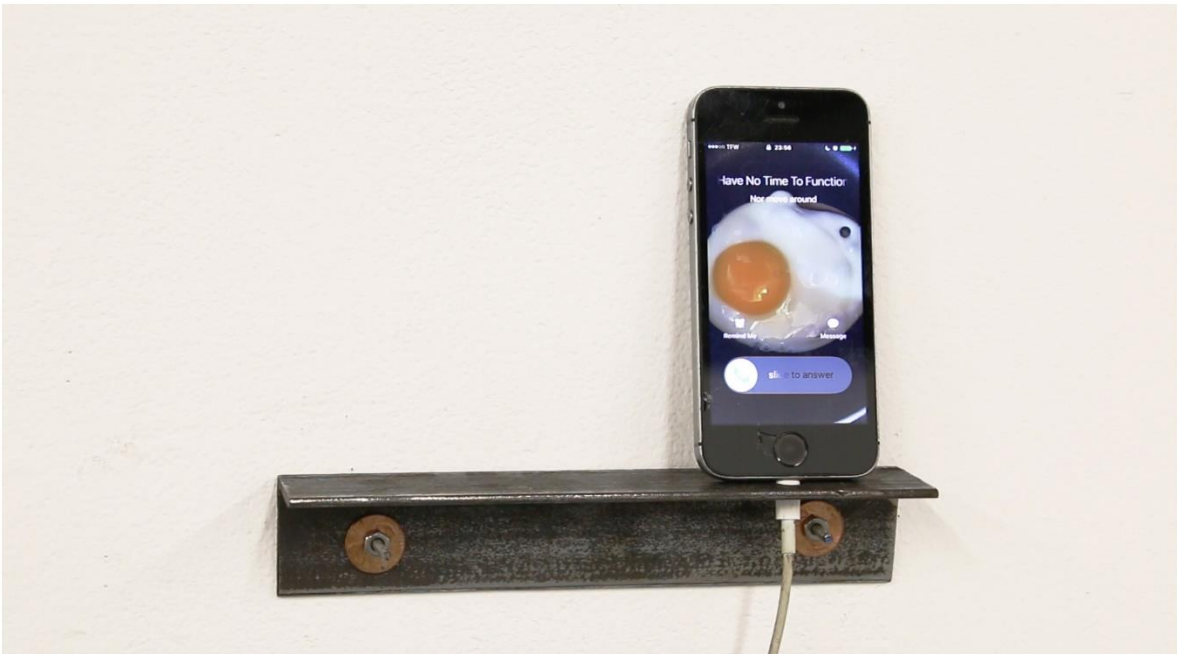
**A: In ‘The Death of the Author’, Roland Barthes argues against reading and interpreting a literary text with biographical notions of the author in mind, arguing that this distracts from the interpretation of the work at hand. How far do you agree with this and how far does it inform the nature of your output?**

**AA:** This is a very important question. I ask myself on a daily basis: why do I do this? My answer is always the same: I have to do this because otherwise I do not feel well. It is like being hungry and having to eat. I feel like I have a deficiency that is only alleviated by the attempt to create something or make art. At the same time, I question the relevance of my work and that of others, and admittedly I rarely encounter contemporary works of art that I actually like. In these instances, reading about the life of the person who created a particular work of art enables me to accept or even enjoy the final work, because I have a better understanding of what factors or experiences in the artist’s life moved them to create it. So while I do agree with Barthes in that one can have a more personal experience with a work, and am aware of how powerful it can be to experience something without ever being certain of its origin or future, I see nothing wrong or less spiritual in experiencing a work with the knowledge of aspects in the life of the author/artist; on the contrary, it becomes easier for one to digest the true essence of the work intended by the artist.

**A: I'd like to invert the previous question by asking you as to what extent do you want your art to be identifiably yours? Commercial considerations aside, what importance do you ascribe to authorship in general?**

**AA:** In a sense, the work is yours whether you made it yourself, copied it, or paid someone else to manufacture an idea for you, so authorship has become more of a question of artistic and moral stances. I believe my work to be my own, but that it should also act as a catalyst for new creations. For example, in my work on the culture of ageing, I encouraged people to make their own sculpture, and add one plaster copy on each birthday; in a public intervention I had carried out in Żabbar (*Sonus*, 2014) I had collected texts from villagers to be printed on slips of paper and scattered during the village feast; the ritual of the *Madonna of the Oil* (2013) was described at the gallery space, and the text I provided encouraged people to perform it.

I wish my project to function like a work of architecture, in that it can retain its form but acquire a different purpose. When it comes to art that is more graphic or product-centred, I do try to maintain authorship over it—but I never aim to make my work obviously “mine”, or develop a significant style. I have no ambition in that regard. I simply wish to live my life and keep informing my work as I tread across this planet.



**Figure 5.** ‘Function of x is equal to z squared plus c, where x is equal to z’. 2016-7.