The absent and the present

Nikki Petroni

Last month I wrote an article on the lack of cultural awareness in Malta, drawing parallels between the critical stance taken by Olof Gollcher in the 1930s and the contemporary situation. I was unfortunately reminded of Capt. Gollcher's comments last week when visiting the 56th edition of the Venice Biennale. It is rather disappointing that Malta makes no effort to participate in such a huge and important contemporary art event which will permit local artists to interact with a multitude of world-renowned artists, curators, critics, gallerists and academics. Moreover, the Venice Biennale is attended by half a million international visitors who travel to Venice specifically for the event.

The last time Malta participated in the Venice Biennale was in the year 1999. Three leading artists, Raymond Pitré, Vince Briffa and Norbert Francis Attard, were chosen to participate and their exhibition was curated by the late Adrian Bartolo. The only time Malta was represented at the Venice Biennale before 1999 was in 1958. A small group of artists who are all today considered as significant figures in Maltese modern art took part. These included Carmelo Mangion, Antoine Camilleri, Emvin Cremona, Frank Portelli and Josef Kalleya, who exposed their work at the prestigious event for the first time in Malta's history.

Culture cannot develop in isolation and inclusion in the global art scene cannot evolve and improve if efforts are sporadic. It is essential that artists and the public continuously engage with their culture and also with other cultures. This discussion arose during Dr. Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci's most recent lecture on 20th century Maltese art which forms part of the Department of History of Art's curriculum. The more profoundly we understand and interact with our culture, the more our awareness of ourselves, of our past and our present will mature. The pursuit for cultural maturity should be enduring. Singular episodes will amount to naught. Especially if a gap of 41 years separates one from another, as in the case of Malta's presence at the Venice Biennale.

Cultural awareness and appreciation are needed to challenge Malta's insular geographical position and insular mindset. This is another topic contentiously discussed every year during Dr. Schembri Bonaci's university lectures and also in his writings. To always consider Malta on relative terms, in other words, to accept particular situations due to the size and resources of the country is crippling. Our outlook has to be as wide and far-reaching as possible. If we place limitations on our own abilities then we would be debilitating our own capacity to develop. Every person struggles with their own particular circumstances, of course some more than others, but conceding to drawbacks is counterproductive and inertial.

Fr Zerafa's donations to the National Museum of Fine Arts - Sciortino and Cali

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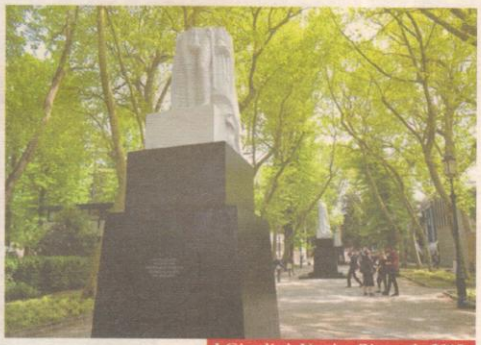
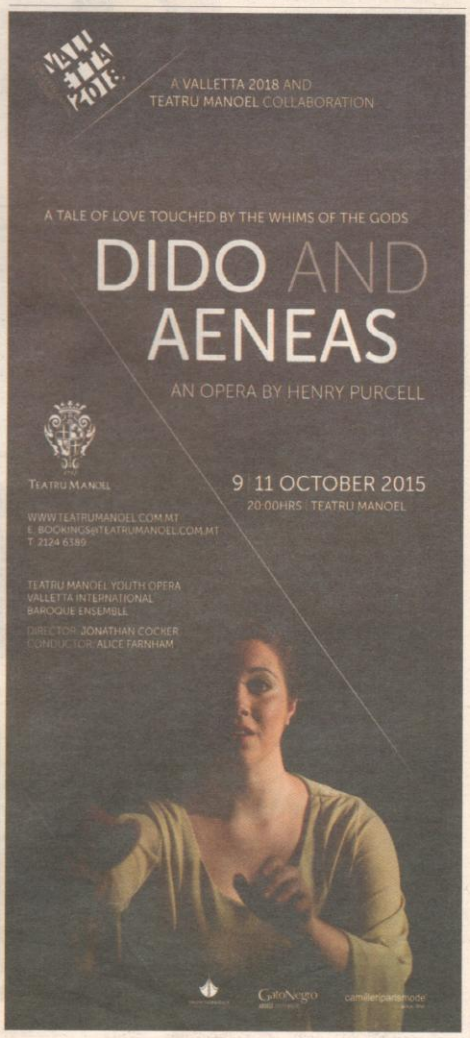
I do not only want to focus on the negative, because a lot is being done for contemporary Maltese art and also for its cultural heritage. I recently wrote about VIVA, the international arts festival held in Valletta, which has proved to be a successful project under the artistic direction of Dr. Raphael Vella. I always mention the Mdina Biennale and its artistic director Dr. Schembri Bonaci because the project is the first of its kind in Malta. The process of transforming Medieval and Baroque Mdina into a contemporary art city is something I am very excited to be witnessing. Moreover, the Mdina Biennale is structured as an alternative event to the large over-institutionalised art biennales wherein the artists and artistic director are constantly interacting, and thus projects are developing organically.

On a smaller scale, but no less significant, is Fr. Marius Zerafa's recent donation to the collection of the National Museum of Fine Arts. Fr. Zerafa, who used to be Director of Museums and curator of the National Museum of Fine Arts for two decades, has decided to share items from his personal collection with the public, a crucifix by Antonio Sciortino and a *bozzetto* by Giuseppe Cali . This open approach towards artistic heritage permits the growth of knowledge on local culture, and thus also to the appreciation of art. Contemporaneously, Fr. Zerafa also parted with another piece from his collection, yet unwillingly, as a sculpture went missing due to the neglect of those responsible, a modest but telling example of cultural disregard which I fear is a rather widespread attitude.

Malta cannot ignore its artistic and cultural heritage and all that is going on in the global art scene. We must be responsive to that which is occurring locally and beyond our shores. The more we withdraw ourselves from international activities, the greater will be the divide between our culture and that of other nations. I have no doubt that Malta is able to successfully take part in the Venice Biennale, no doubt that local artists have the ability to compete with artists who are granted more international opportunities and exposure. Yet without the cultivation of cultural awareness Malta will struggle to mature and compete on the international stage.



I Giardini, Venice Biennale 2015

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