Lifestyle & Culture

A simultaneous paradox

Nikki Petroni

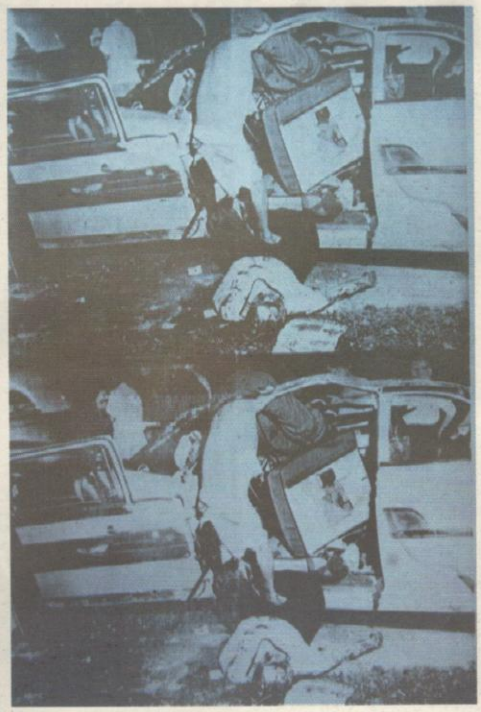
Last Friday 13 November was a more than eventful night in Malta. Within the bastions of Mdina occurred a celebration, the inauguration of a two-year international art project; the Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale. The music of the talented young composer Euchar Gravina filled the majestic Metropolitan Cathedral. Hundreds of people gathered within the cathedral to collectively experience the absolute beauty of Gravina's *Stabat Mater* and, of course, to applaud the work of the many artists and organisers who participated in this edition of the Mdina Biennale. Several artists attended the concert; artists from Malta, Italy, France, Hungary, Poland, Korea, UK, Portugal, Chile, Russia, amongst other countries.

Everyone was pleased and relaxed. After the persistent efforts of a good number of people who worked to produce such a large-scale event, all those involved could finally see the works installed in various spaces in Mdina, something which even a few months ago was quite hard to imagine. The launch of the Mdina Biennale was a celebration of creativity; of the human ability to create art, to manifest beauty.

Opening concert of the Mdina Biennale

In the midst of this joyful setting, one would never fathom that the direct opposite of such was simultaneously taking place elsewhere. At the exact same time that so many people from so many different backgrounds were joined together at such a wonderful event, the city of Paris was experiencing the antipode of creation: the destruction of humanity. People who were likewise enjoying an evening with friends, family and loved ones became the target of evil, non-human forces.

These events in Paris, together with those in Beirut, Baghdad and Kenya, to mention very recent examples, were, needless to say, horrific and abominable. Yet they served as a potent reminder as to why art, be it visual, literature, music or any other form, is important to the intellectual and spiritual enrichment of all cultures. Art is a form of knowledge, of universal knowledge, which reminds us of those values which make us human, and which also encapsulates the collective memory of a community.



Andy Warhol, from the Death and Disaster series

Last Thursday, the Department of History of Art, University of Malta, as part of the Mdina Biennale calendar of events, organised the fourth annual Symposium on the Visual Culture of Death which is coordinated by Prof. Conrad Thake. The theme of this year's symposium centred on the representation of death in the 20th and 21st centuries and the ways in which artists and architects visualise, memorialise and commemorate death. In his paper, Prof. Thake debated the contrast between individual and collective memorialisation and the tension between figuration and abstraction as languages for the transcending of memory across time, a point which also appeared in the talk delivered by Mrs. Irene Biolchini.

The opening paper delivered by Dr. Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci proposed a number of categories as to how one could analyse attitudes towards death as made visually tangible by modern and contemporary art. One of his arguments was synonymous with the discussion expounded by Prof. Thake, focusing on the struggle between the representations of death as an individual or a collective experience. Dr. Schembri Bonaci posited that a challenging paradox exists in the modern age, when the individual has come to be predominant in a period of mass genocides and global collective massacres. This gives rise to another problem, that of creating art which celebrates the collective without reducing quantities to mere numbers, something which Andy Warhol addressed in his repetitive *Death and Disaster* series.

I have here only elucidated a couple of points raised in the symposium, but I have chosen these points as they are extremely relevant to last weekend's horrendous worldwide tragedies. Both the symposium and the Mdina Biennale underlined one very important point which we cannot afford to forget; that art is a manner of universal communication. It transcends any territorial or intellectual boundaries which organise our ideas of ourselves and of others. Art is proof that humanity can overcome the divisive policies which all structures of power establish for means of social control. It is the materialisation of human memory and knowledge.

Nikki Petroni is a doctoral student in the History of Art Department, University of Malta. She is also a member of the organisational team of the Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale which will be held between 13 November 2015 and 7 January 2016. APS Bank is the main partner of the Mdina Biennale.

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