Debate & Analysis

What next for the Mdina Biennale?

Nikki Petroni

Last Thursday, 7 January, was the final day of the Mdina Biennale. After two challenging yet exciting years, the 2015/16 edition of the event came to an end, which incited myself and the rest of the organising team to reflect on the whole process, the aims and objectives, and the ultimate result of all our hard work.

Irene Biolchini, one of the curators and co-editor of the Mdina Biennale catalogue (Horizons Publications), wrote a very positive article last Sunday on the collaborative efforts of several artists and participants. This was one of the main aims of artistic director Dr. Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, for all those involved to work together throughout the entire process. The reason for this was to try to diminish institutional approaches which tend to bureaucratise creativity. Collective approaches in the arts are integral, but may also be rather problematic. The history of 20th and 21st century art movements and groups shows us how challenging it is to maintain such collective structures.

What I am most concerned about, especially at this final stage, are the long-term effects of such a project. Will people continue to debate the theme 'Christianity, Spirituality and the Other', a theme which is at the forefront of contemporary politics? The relevance of addressing such a contentious subject was emphasised by the abhorrent Paris attacks which took place during the opening concert of the Mdina Biennale, something which was pointed out by Dr. Schembri Bonaci during the Mdina Biennale events and also something which myself and Irene have both written about in this paper.

And what about the role of contemporary art within this political, economic and cultural struggle? One of the discussions which arose during the poetry event 'Stirred Words' organised by Karina Fiorini as part of the Mdina Biennale (28 December 2015) investigated the ability of the arts to fight violence, war, corruption. The debate was a polemical one, with people sharing opinions which opposed those of others quite vehemently.

Yet despite the disagreements, this happening proved one very important point; that art provokes thought and action – action in the form of speech but also in creation of more art, expressed in all disciplinary languages. It was moments like these which made me believe in the success of the Mdina Biennale, as well as of other cultural events which attempted to directly confront the realities of the world we live in today.

Art never stopped wars from occurring, and it never will. Ideological conflicts will always exist. However, art has something to say. It shows the need to communicate with an audience, to elicit ideas and feelings. Art is never silent. Silence is probably one of the most dangerous actions, or non-actions, as it promotes passivity. Silence is the language of acceptance, a will for things to remain as they are, for society to be unquestioned and unchallenged.

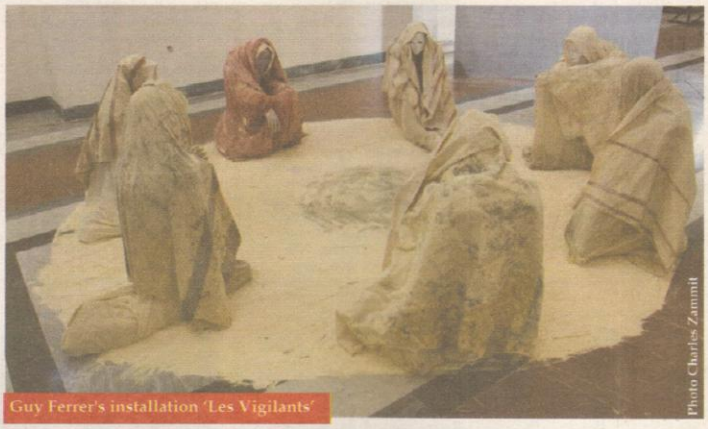
The Mdina Biennale brought together a plurality of artists from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds to explore the postulates of faith, of religious traditions and of ways to communicate spiritual perceptions of the world. Due to this, the dialogue incited by the theme of the Mdina Biennale was a very extensive one, which, just like the discussion at the poetry evening, posed conflicting positions, as well as complementary ideas.

The function of an exhibition, especially a collective one, is not to solely display works in a presentable manner. An art exhibition should be treated as book into which one may enter and walk around, a book which poses arguments and situations within a physical space. Thus, an exhibition is to be treated and analysed holistically. I am saying this because the Mdina Biennale was not conceived as a project to display works which are to be seen in isolation, but in relation to one another. Such an approach promotes debate on a number of levels.

So what next for the Mdina Biennale? Or rather, what may the Mdina Biennale do now that the works have been removed from the exhibition spaces? Whilst dismantling the work of Richard Shields in the Mdina Cathedral, Andrew Hancock, another participating artist and curator of the London-based organisation ARTNAKED, began to discuss his work with a visitor. He spoke of his approach to dealing with spirituality which made this visitor ask questions on the entire project, the purpose behind it and the modes in which artists tackled the meaning of faith and non-faith today.

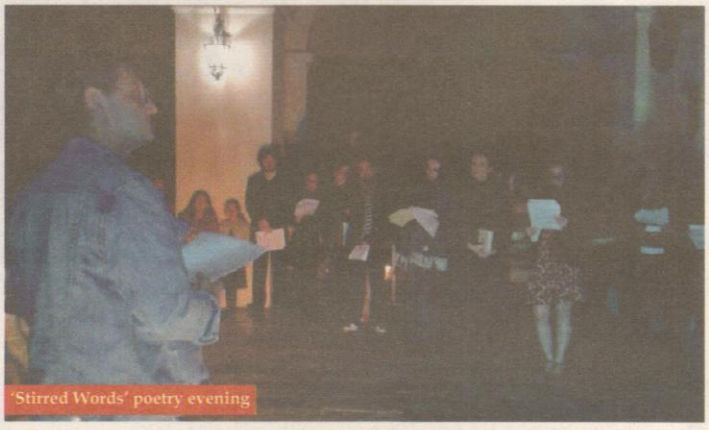
It is this sharing of ideas, of dialogue and conversation which underlines the importance of art. These dialogues must continue and develop into new projects, even if dealing with different themes. Socially-engaged cultural projects play this very important role.

Michael Sandles RA's 'War and Peace' series exhibited at the Mdina Biennale 2015-16



Guy Ferrer's installation 'Les Vigilants'

Photo Charles Zammit



'Stirred Words' poetry evening

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