Life is a Play and the Museum is its Stage:  
Contemporary Immersive Performance in the Baroque Palace

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Romina Delia  
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Romina Delia

This thesis investigates artistic and poetic interventions within historic buildings in Malta and elsewhere, exploring notions of subversion of the institutional messages and the ways history can be reconceptualised and questioned within the frameworks of established and authoritarian structures, using concepts of theatricality and performativity.

The interpretation inside the Baroque Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta is revisited as a route into exploring the tensions as well as the collaborations that emerge when the performative worlds of the Baroque and the post-modern collide. The study highlights Baroque ephemeral ceremonies, when Valletta was transformed from a war machine into a spectacular theatre by the ruling Order of the Knights of St. John. It examines how Valletta developed into a performative European Baroque city, interpreting a macro-cosmos in a choreographed micro-cosmos. This provides a backdrop to the subsequent study of performance projects that have tried to inhabit, subvert and reframe theatrical statements of power.

This thesis draws on theories of liminality and the liminoid, building upon recent research on immersion. It offers a discussion of the potential dual role of artists as political collaborators and producers of powerful images, as well as their role as drivers of institutional critiques and social actors capable of negotiating and creating critical spaces. In particular, it offers an in depth analysis of the poetic interventions of the Malta and UK based artist and theatre collectives: START, The Rubberbodies Collective, Theatre Anon, WildWorks and Punchdrunk.

Ultimately this thesis contributes to a new historiography, one which highlights the significance of contemporary performances responding to historic sites. It concludes that Malta was and still is conforming to a wider European performance, and argues that the “Baroque” should be understood as a transhistorical state that has extended beyond its historical confines, taking on hybrid forms. It demonstrates that Baroque theories concerning the “concetto” have resonance in 21st century conceptual art, demanding a more active response from the viewer. This thesis contends that through performative fusions, liminal and liminoid realms are created, which produce dream-like experiences, stirring the emotions, and arguably provoking unconscious associations within the participant, potentially creating reflexivity, agency and change.
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Introduction

The writing of history is always in motion because the relationship between past and present is never still. As our world changes, we see something “new” in the past, though this is often something that had been known earlier, then forgotten and subsequently recovered. The recent academic interest in performance, for example, is in a sense a return to concerns that were central in the so-called “age of the Baroque.”

This research aims to unlock the construction of meaning of the Baroque Palace and its contemporary re-interpretation via a new framework of analyses. It looks at the history of the Baroque Palace as a performance, utilising this to shed light on, and assess the significance of contemporary performance as a route into unlocking the interpretive potential of the palace for contemporary audiences. The study began with an exploration of the history of the Baroque Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta, interrogating its national narratives and contemporary interpretation. This led to an investigation of the use of theatre in the period of the Palace’s invention, with a view to considering whether looking at the Baroque Palace as a stage might act as a useful medium through which to consider the use of contemporary performance in telling stories and in offering critical responses.

Knell, writing how nations are performed in national museums, has observed that “museums are never what they seem to be; never merely buildings and collections. They are places where professional and public performances are scripted or staged.” He also argued that we might imagine “national museums as providing the scenography and stage for the performance of myths of nationhood.” Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, similarly states that exhibitions are fundamentally theatrical, for they are how museums perform the knowledge they create. Building upon similar observations, the function of the

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3 Ibid.
Grand Master’s Palace as a national historic house museum, and as a symbol of power, is being re-visioned in this research.

Like the theatre, the palace can also be a space where the boundaries between fiction and reality are blurred through the fusion of the arts to create a total work of art, creating alternative worlds, engaging the viewers through their senses. Theatre arguably can manipulate and control, but it can also empower, engage and transform. If national museums want to have a greater respect for the intellect of their audiences they need to understand and be open about their performances. The focus of this research began with a study of the complex historical Baroque aesthetic, social and political performances of the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta and its surroundings, and then it ventured into analysing the future potential of the palace becoming a space of critical engagement, performing dialogues with the contemporary.

The processes and the experiences of Malta and UK based contemporary installation artists and performers, which in various ways conceptually resonate, parallel, mirror or respond to the Baroque have been analysed. The research gives voice to their responses and the dialogues they are having with the theatrical Baroque world, with the aim of deconstructing, enhancing or critiquing national myths and grand narratives, and also involving the voices of the community in the creation of multi-narratives. It explores key elements that exist in both the Baroque world and the Contemporary world, periods in cultural history situated respectively before and after the enlightenment in the nineteenth century. It analyses the potential of the liminal⁵ and the liminoid in engaging participants to reach higher states of consciousness. It explores the creative potential of poetic performances appealing to the emotions and creating agency.

⁵ As will be further discussed below and in Chapter Two, the term liminality, from the Latin word limen, means “a threshold” (an in-between space); a mode of consciousness developed in the middle stage of rituals. It was originally developed by the Belgian folklorist Arnold van Gennep in the early 20th century and then it was taken up and developed by anthropologist Victor Turner (1920-1983). During liminal periods, social hierarchies may be reversed or temporarily dissolved, potentially creating change for future outcomes.
Introducing the Baroque Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta

The Grand Master’s Palace, also known as Malta’s Presidential Palace, was originally built in the late sixteenth century in Valletta by the Catholic Crusading Knights of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. It is today open to the public as a national museum (Figure 1). It has been the seat of government for over four hundred years, and until 2015 the Maltese Parliament met there. It is a space were the rulers consecrated their power over the rest of the people, surrounded by public spectacles propagating the powerful image of those in rule.

The Italian Grand Master Fra Pietro del Monte (1568-1572) commissioned the building of the Palace in the centre of the city soon after Valletta was built, and it was later enlarged, progressively undergoing organic growth with many additions and modifications until it reached its present form, serving as the Grand Master’s official residence until 1798.

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The Baroque style flourished in Malta during the rule of the Order of St. John, during a time when Europe was under the threat of the Ottoman Empire. Malta’s location at the centre of the Mediterranean Sea determined much of its destiny, boasting a harbour so large it could host any fleet. The Knights arrived in Malta in 1530 and by the 1760’s the available facilities could assist both in commerce and corsairing. The early years of the Order’s stay in Malta can be considered as the golden age of corsairing. When North Africa and the Ottoman Empire boasted of Barbarossa, Dragut and Occhiali, Malta countered their bluff with De Vallette (at a time before he became Grand Master), Fra Mathurin Lescaut (Romegas) and Paolo Micchio. The sixteenth century was marked by continuous religious wars. Spain and the Ottoman Empire had become the dominant powers in the Mediterranean, fighting in the name of the Christian and Muslim faiths.

In the meantime, Valletta became a melting pot of different cultures and styles, absorbing influences but also projecting them back out. It arguably also represented a microcosm of Catholic Europe, fused with Semitic and North African influences. Baroque culture prevailing in European courts were brought to the Maltese islands through the European Knights, the foreign nobility and merchants who settled on the islands and theatrical events were staged to create an intercultural dialogue. For example, the archives of the Order in Malta describe in detail how the marriage of the French Dauphin with Marie Antoinette was celebrated also with great pomp in Malta; banquets and balls were organised and parties dragged on till 5am. Internationally, historians tend to often overlook Valletta as a hub of diplomatic intelligence and exchange, fuelled by the Order’s ambassadors at the Catholic courts of Europe.

The Knights of St. John had to be of noble birth, and many of them were related to royalty across Europe, thus maintaining their previous lifestyles and standards of decorum and etiquette even after coming to Malta. They hailed mainly from modern day England, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, and Portugal. In the early 17th century, the traveller Hieronymus Welsch, the later treasurer of the Duke of Wurrtemburg Germany,
described Malta as one of the most international places he had visited in the entire Mediterranean. Various cultural exchanges took place with the rest of the world.

Following the rule of the Knights of St John, there was a brief interlude by General Napoleon Bonaparte and his French troops in Malta between 1798 and 1800. Following the arrival of Lord Horatio Nelson at the turn of the century, the Palace eventually became the official residence of the British Colonial Governor of Malta and it was also the seat of Malta’s first constitutional parliament in 1921. While it was mostly through the embellishments of the various Grand Masters that the Palace reached its current appearance and dimensions, the British Governors also contributed to architectural elements (See Appendix). Masquerades and festivals were still held inside the palace (Figure 2).

![Image](image-url)

**Figure 2: Ball at the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta, early nineteenth century. Image courtesy of the Malta National Museum of Fine Arts**

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11 One such example was Lope de Vega (1562-1635), a Knight of Malta, who is considered as one of Spain’s most important playwrights, credited of having written twelve hundred plays dealing with religious, historical and social issues. Hartnoll, P. (1998) *The Theatre. A Concise History*, Thames and Hudson World of Art, London, p. 91-95; Freller, T. (2013) *Lope de Vega and Malta: Some visual and poetical reflections*, Treasures of Malta, Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta
The Armoury was officially opened to the public on a regular basis in 1860 (Figures 102 and 103).\textsuperscript{12} It was one of the first official public museums in Malta, along with a small museum inside the National Library in Valletta. In the nineteenth century, the British focused on the Order of St. John’s military role to emphasize Malta as a military base. In this period some of the rooms had their Baroque interiors and frescos painted over in white in the neo-classical style favoured by the British. Many of these rooms in recent years have been re-furbished to their Baroque appearance, arguably conveying the idea that Malta was and still is a Catholic Baroque island.

The damage suffered by the Grand Master’s Palace as a result of the Second World War was considerable, but it was subsequently rebuilt. Malta gained its independence from the British in 1964. By 1975 the Armoury was transferred to the ground floor of the palace, where originally the stables were situated, so as to make way for the House of Representatives. The office of Malta’s President and the Parliament where housed in the Palace until 2015, when the Parliament was transferred to a specifically designed building by the Italian architect Renzo Piano at the entrance of Valletta.

The Grand Master’s Palace is arguably still a symbol of European bourgeois culture, a national symbol of Malta’s political administration and a symbol of Catholicism set in the heart of the island’s capital. It is an icon of power and politics, symbolically representing a relic of Malta’s colonial past, the site where decisions were taken for the administration of the maritime military base in the Mediterranean, as well as a symbol of Malta’s independence and democratic Parliament.

Today the site is open to the public as a museum and its collections constitute fragments of what was once an immersive theatre. This research seeks to re-open a historical and museological debate on the nature of performances surrounding the Baroque palace to offer reflections upon the nature of its resonance in, as well as its resistance to contemporary performances.

\textsuperscript{12} In 1894, a government notice was published laying down rules for licensed guides, who were not to exceed fifty in number. They were to be furnished with a ribbon band, to be worn on the cap bearing the words “Guide No…” the licences being issued only to men of good character, who could speak and read English or Italian. The entrance charge was fixed depending on the length of the visit. Spiteri, S. C. (2003) Armoury of the Knights. A Study of the Palace Armoury, its Collection and the Military Storehouses of the Hospitaller Knights of the Order of St. John, Midsea Books, Valletta, p. 210.
Research Aim

Little research has examined the performances that occurred inside and around the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta or unravelling its symbolic and scenographic depictions as they relate to the Baroque social life in Malta. No research has considered how this aspect of Malta’s past can be interpreted for contemporary audiences. This set of circumstances prompted the research questions of this project in 2011 and eventually led to my exploration of the liminal and the liminoid in Maltese Baroque and Contemporary performances. This research aims to close this academic gap, which has not been thus far addressed.

There has been a considerable amount written on the military might and spectacular history of the Crusading Catholic Knights of the Order of St. John, on the Baroque, on contemporary performances and conceptual art. However, the work currently being produced by contemporary performers and conceptual artists in response to Baroque spaces and museum collections in Malta has not been critically analyzed within its wider European or Mediterranean contexts. There has also been no academic study on the contemporary interpretation of the Baroque Presidential Palace in Valletta as a historic house museum.

This research aims to understand how Baroque concepts are being translated into contemporary visual performances and artistic installations that have the power to create atmospheric experiences which provoke participants to contemplate and question. My interest is in how these performances can lead to the creation of an open, reflective and critical imagination rather than one that is narrow-minded, pre-formed or inflexible.

Much of the scenography adorning palaces and churches, as well as the many religious processions, spectacles, theatrical events and religious feasts celebrated during the Baroque age have come down to contemporary times through traditions. This has provided the Maltese islands with rich tangible and intangible heritage and culture which reflect particularly the Catholic religious calendar. This research aims to further understand how the Baroque past has taken on hybrid forms, keeping its Mediterranean context as its main focus.
Maltese contemporary site-specific performers and artists have been searching for their identity through the island’s history, constantly building up relationships with the past. This study aims to explore their processes, journeys and experiences. It also explores the works of immersive site-specific artists based in the England. This research aims to give them a voice to and to expose their work which is performatively responding to the past in historic spaces.

**Research Questions**

1. The palace, like the theatre, deployed the extraordinary visual impact of Baroque art and design to create a subliminal effect on audiences. In its contemporary displays how can the Baroque palace, through its liminal potential, enlighten its audience to re-think its heritage?

2. How can the Grand Master’s Palace present multi-narratives and a critical production of knowledge? Is there enough critical dialogue and debate on the visual interpretations of the Baroque and its effects on its contemporary audiences?

3. How do Baroque performances resonate in Malta’s contemporary art and performances, and how have they taken on hybrid forms? Are contemporary performances responding to those of the Baroque?

4. Are contemporary performances that respond to historic sites in Malta being sufficiently experimental, progressive and transformative? Or do they perpetuate the existence of an unquestioned past?

5. What are the processes and the experiences of contemporary artists and performers responding to historic sites?

6. Do contemporary artists and performers in Malta have a voice and a space in the local and international artistic and political scenes? Can historic sites, such as the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta, act as a forum for critical contemporary artistic dialogues?
**From the Baroque to the Neo-Baroque**

In an attempt to further explore the Baroque stories of the Grand Master’s Palace and their contemporary interpretation, it is useful for this research to provide some previous definitions of the Baroque, as well as a brief literature review on its performative elements, to further analyse how aspects of it are reflected in the contemporary world. The style is commonly known to have begun around 1600, encouraged by the Catholic Church in Rome, Italy and it spread to most of Europe and beyond. There is no doubt that the Baroque was a stylistically complex age, often contradictory and multifaceted. The period is nowadays also often referred to as “early modern”, however, this thesis opts for the term “Baroque.” As a term it has often been defined as “bizarre,” with implications of immodesty. One theory of the etymology of “Baroque” has it also derive from the word for an irregularly shaped pearl, called *barocco* in Portuguese. In France these pearls were called *perles baroques*, and the word “baroque” appeared in use at court in the eighteenth century, meaning “strange, unusual and irregular.”

To understand the Baroque one has to peel off its ornament, pomp and ceremony to reveal something more complex. Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) marked a change in attitudes to the Baroque. He regarded every style as having a late, florid, decadent age and argued both that the Baroque is a style worthy of study and that it is important to distinguish the good from the bad in it. Following Burckhardt, the art critic Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945) in 1888 provided an analytical insight into the Baroque style in his study *Renaissance und Barock*. His work provided a framework with which to analyse the Baroque more deeply, identifying a number of principles with which to compare and contrast the art with that of the preceding Renaissance. During the Renaissance there was a return to classical antiquity and the ideal was one of classical proportion, restraint and balance, with the rise to prominence of humanism and the power of man at the centre of the world. For the Baroque generation this ideal evolved into emotional resonance, heightened effect and theatricality, effectively working

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15 Ibid., p. 56
through empathetic affect. Most of the arts appealed to the emotions - a notion initially supported and encouraged by the Catholic Church in Rome. Royalty and aristocracy eventually also grasped and expanded on the dramatic style in their palaces. Baroque artists and architects used theatrical pathos, illusionist devices and the interplay of different forms to impress, convince and arouse an internal response.

The humanists during the Renaissance were inspired by the texts of ancient Greece and Rome, such as Aristotle’s *Poetics*, focusing on dramatic theory and rhetoric in aesthetics: the art of persuasion. These texts exerted a big influence on the Baroque age. In John Varriano’s 1986 survey of Italian Baroque architecture, he writes that the Catholic Church produced a rhetorical foundation:

> It has been said that above all, Baroque architecture is rhetorical, and there is little doubt that the primary intent of many buildings was to persuade. Churches constructed in the post-Counter-Reformation era were intended to overpower all who entered with a dramatic spectacle that, in Bernini’s own words, ‘would reach out to Catholics in order to reaffirm their faith, to heretics to reunite them with the Church, and to agnostics to enlighten them with the true faith.’

A hallmark of the art historian Rudolf Wittkower’s interpretation of the Baroque was in fact his insistence on the emotionally involved spectator. Artists created theatrical works in which the observer became an active participant, unconsciously absorbed into the spectacle through the emotions. The naturalism of Baroque art was bound up with a metaphysical view of the world.

Thus, the Baroque cannot be understood without touching upon the essential ingredient of the role played by theatre. The idea of life as theatre and the world as a stage goes back to classical antiquity, which saw a revival in the Renaissance and an “explosion” of it in the Baroque. “All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely

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19 For example, the Hellenistic Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata in his work Necromancy writes about an imaginary visit to the underworld by the philosopher Menippus who thought that human life was like a play. Scrine, P. (1987) “The Baroque. An Age of exuberance, drama and disenchantment” in *The Courier*, UNESCO, Paris, p. 3
players; They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts…” wrote William Shakespeare (1564-1616) in his comedy entitled *As you Like it*, which was performed and published in early 17th century England. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) wrote that the Baroque was the “…age of the play that duplicates itself by representing another play, of the *quid pro quo*, of dreams and visions; … the age of the deceiving senses; it is the stage in which the poetic dimension of language is defined by metaphor, simile and allegory.”

Skrine in his essay entitled “The Baroque. An Age of exuberance, drama and disenchantment,” convincingly argued how the term *Theatrum Mundi*, the metaphor of the world stage, of the universal theatre of mankind, remained dominant throughout the Baroque age across Europe, which witnessed elaborate scenery, the rise of purpose built stages, and theatres. Skrine cites various playwrights across Europe demonstrating how the world was viewed as a stage. For example, Amsterdam opened its municipal playhouse in 1638; and over its door could be read a couplet by Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679), which proclaimed “The world’s a stage: each plays his role and gets his just reward.” Meanwhile in Spain, Pedro Calderon de la Barca (1600-1681) was writing his allegorical masterpiece entitled *El Gran Teatro del Mundo*, the play which gives the image of the world as a stage: where God is himself the author of the play, which is produced on the stage of our human world. In Italy and beyond, the *Commedia dell’Arte* troupes ventured across courts and piazzas of several cities staging their improvisations based on the politics of their time. In Paris, the playwright Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, known as Moliere (1621-1673), was also writing his comedies and political satires.

Roy Strong, similarly, discussing court festivals from the sixteenth till the mid seventeenth centuries, analyses the twelve volumes of text and illuminations of the Savoy Court fetes, which provide an insight into the lost world of Baroque spectacles. He writes, “looking into the drawings, engravings and illuminations of these endless

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festivities, we enter a world of fantastic allegory, for these fetes were not only for enjoyment but were meant to be read, in the words of the Jesuit Claude-Francois Menestrier (1631-1705), the seventeenth century theorist of the court fetes, as *Allegories de l'Estat des Temps.* He shows that these spectacles were crammed with contemporary comment, but in a language that is today virtually incomprehensible as a means of presenting a programme of political ideas. The *court fete* was a ritual in which society affirmed its wisdom and asserted its control over the world and its destiny, argues Strong.

Aercke, in his writing, emphasizes the total rhetorical scheme of Baroque performances and his main emphasis is placed on decoding and deciphering the political messages behind the performances. Through his analyses of spectacular plays and operas given at absolutist courts in Rome, Madrid, Paris, Versailles, and Vienna between 1631 and 1668, Aercke demonstrates that such performances were not just frivolous entertainment for the courtly class but were serious activities with far-ranging political consequences. Court festivals stemmed from a philosophy which believed that truth could be apprehended in images, speaking to the visual sense in a lost vocabulary of strange attributes which we can no longer easily read. Central to the onlookers experience was a series of visual images based on the microcosm - macrocosm principle.

In Malta, lavish entertainments featuring fireworks and sensational effects as well as instrumental music, singing, dances, and speeches were staged to welcome regal guests and ambassadors to Malta. Entrances, elections and anniversaries of Grand Master’s were pompously celebrated, as will be observed and analysed in Chapter One. Religious sermons, processions and celebrations in the churches and in the streets were held regularly for the local inhabitants. Palaces, which were arguably set up as “stages,” were decorated with scenographies recounting narratives promoting the Catholic faith and the history of the Knights of the Order of St. John. These complex cultural forms were arguably linked to the states’ political strategies and directly related to the exercise of

power, arguably ultimately becoming an exercise in propaganda, composed of a wealth of ceremonial acts which were, for the most part, already well codified in the age of the Baroque.

Hill in *Rethinking the Baroque* cites various authors who tried to describe the “Baroque.” She cites the philosopher and critical theorist Walter Benjamin who had written that allegory which is widely used in the Baroque is “the language of a torn and broken world, the representation of the representable, allegory fixes dreams by laying bare reality: The function of Baroque iconography is not so much to unveil material objects as to strip them naked.”27 She also cites Gilles Deleuze and his idea of the Baroque: “the essence of the Baroque entails neither falling into nor emerging from illusion, but rather realizing something in illusion itself, or of tying it to a spiritual presence that endows its spaces and fragments with a collective unity.”28 Geoffrey Scott wrote that the Baroque “intellectualised the picturesque.”29 The arts were manipulated in such a way as to convey a sense of what was beyond.

Montagu argued that a constituent element of the Baroque work of art was “the route from the object to its significance” defined as *concetti* - the transformation of a thought through several stages.30 Concepts such as grandeur, power, time, death, judgement, heaven and hell were concepts which occupied the Baroque age and arguably are still subjects of contemporary conceptual artists today. Such concepts were and still are represented by artists through allegories, supplying the *concetto* for their moving works of art.31 There is an idea behind the work, but the work is left intentionally open for multiple interpretations. Ross also cites the seventeenth century French painter Poussin who wrote in one of his letters that art “...should appeal to the mind and not to the eye…”32 Ross discusses in length the *Treatise on the Passions of the Soul* published in

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28 Ibid.
30 Montagu, J. was building upon the earlier work by Ross (1984) which discusses in length the “Treatise on the Passions of the Soul” published in 1649 by the philosopher Rene Descartes. Montagu J. (1994), *The Expression of the Passions*, Yale University Press, New Haven
1649 by the philosopher René Descartes, in France. Descartes’ theory of the passions described how “both the body and soul are susceptible to both actions and passions... The passions of the soul are distinguished according to whether their cause is the soul or the body... thus love, hate, anger and so on are perceptions of the soul, relate especially to it and caused by the body...” This shows how influential the idea of persuasion by expressing emotions as well as appealing to them through the arts was during the Baroque period, and arguably still is today.

Showing an interest in the theatrical, the hybrid and the resonance of Baroque performance in contemporary practice, several cultural and art historians have linked past cultures to the present day. Burke, for example, had once written: “What interests me in historical writing is above all the task of mediating between two cultures, the past and present, of setting up a dialogue between the two systems of concepts, of translating from one language into the other...” Burke emphasizes the relevance of social and cultural history and he sets up a dialogue between the seventeenth and the twentieth century. For example, he compares and contrasts Louis’ public triumphant image with that of other rulers, ranging from the emperors of ancient Rome such as Augustus and Alexander to other rulers during his time such as King Philip IV of Spain and Leopold I of Vienna and contemporary American presidents. Burke discusses how the public image of Louis XIV was built up in the collective imagination. He analyses the mechanics behind government visual propaganda and manipulation and he presents the “cynical view” which explains the representatives of the King as deceptive flatteries and the “innocent view” - which interprets the ritualisation of power as a collective need. He also writes that this “reminds us not only of the importance of ritual, myth and symbols in politics at all times, but also of the continuity of particular myths and symbols in Western societies.”

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33 Ross, S. (1984) argues how Descartes was a big influence on the French artist Charles Le Brun (1619-1690). The first and foremost task which was ascribed to the art of painting in 17th century France was a political one: glorifying the reign of Louis XIV. He insisted that the arts could leave eternal marks of his power and teach posterity the history of his grand actions.


36 Ibid.
Omar Calabrese in his book *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times* refers to Neo-Baroque artifacts as texts with specific underlying morphologies, aiming to describe a Baroque of the 20th century.\(^{37}\) The international conference “Baroque Re-visions” held in Vienna in October 1996 stated that its purpose was to “conduct a critical reappraisal of the Baroque, mainly as a historical and as a transhistorical phenomenon.” Robert Harbison in his *Reflections on the Baroque* offers reinterpretations of the Baroque style and its influences and echoes into the twentieth century.\(^{38}\) Similarly, Gregg Lambert in *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture*, also explores the re-invention of the early European Baroque within the philosophical, cultural and literary thought of postmodernism.\(^{39}\)

Mieke Bal in *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* analyses the work of Caravaggio and its resonance in contemporary art practice. Bal argues that one has to reflect on the meta-historical relationship between past and present.\(^{40}\) She also argues that “style” cannot be an aesthetic concept but it refers to cultural attitudes and states of consciousness which encompass intellectual and aesthetic, political and scientific, assumptions and thoughts.\(^{41}\) Instead of seeing the Baroque as a style it could also be seen as a way of thinking through the appeal of the emotions.

In the search of the true meaning of the “Baroque” it is necessary to search for its context, scratch beneath the surface and delve into the mentality of the society which created it, which is why Chapter One will be travelling back in time to Valletta, when the Palace was inhabited by the Grand Masters. For the purpose of this research, which is revisioning the contemporary interpretation of the Palace, instead of seeing the Baroque as a style, it will also dig for the “Baroque” in its hybrid forms in contemporary times. It is thus being suggested, as Mieke Bal and others have suggested, that the term Baroque can arguably also be seen as a way of thinking or as a way of living. The definition which could be used for the term “Baroque” in this context, is not the “Catholic Baroque” using rhetorical and manipulative means to attract the faithful.

\(^{41}\) *Ibid.* p. 16.
but a Baroque which could be defined as an immersive fusion of the arts, having a performative and transformative potential; a theatrical style which is open for different narratives and interpretations and which could have the potential to enhance critical thinking, and to embrace diversity in unity.

Both academics and professionals are observing how the use of contemporary performance in museums often has value and resonance, how it can enhance the visitor’s sensory experience, and engage them in a stimulating and dynamic experience. Jackson and Kidd argue that “there is ample evidence of not just participation but a kind of negotiated agency- reflective, critical, questioning, looking for connections - there is a negotiation of meaning.”42 Jackson also argues that performance can be “powerful, moving and educationally provocative.”43 Visitors can achieve a critical understanding of the heritage in question; however, he also argues that research on this topic is still rather in its infancy. The field may be expanding, but until recently has been relatively under-researched. This study shall be building upon this, with a focus on the Baroque and its resonance in contemporary performance in historic sites.

**Emotions, Empathy and the Understanding of the Past**

Kirshenblatt Gimblett argues that for an “exhibition to be memorable, the experience must be emotional, but to be worth remembering, it must be thought provoking.”44 This research starts off by looking at how Baroque artists seduced the senses of their audiences to tell stories inside palaces. Early modern philosophy in Europe was awash with discussions of the emotions, like for example Descartes’ “Passions of the Soul” mentioned above, (1649) and Spinoza’s writing on the *affetti* (human passion and feelings expressed through gestures).45 The research has then moved on to examine how the engagement of emotions in the cultural productions of the Baroque have taken on hybrid forms in the neo-Baroque. The Baroque scenography fused with poetic

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contemporary multi-narratives, performances and installations in historic sites can arguably produce affective responses, stimulating visitors to feel and also to think.

The research looks specifically at how artists are not only performing the stories from the archives, but also digging into their own memories of past emotions, as well as into the memories of communities to help understand and reconstruct past narratives. Sensorial experiences during interventions in historic sites may encourage emotional responses that can be culturally and historically situated, but can also be personal and individual.

History is understood in this thesis from a post-modern perspective and is seen as subjective, rather than objective, a representation or construction of reality, rather than reality itself. As Peter Burke argues, history is socially conditioned to be, consciously or unconsciously, selected, interpreted and distorted.46 Berger points out, the past is constantly being reinterpreted in retrospect and that past events only become significant after being reconstructed in the present. Watson similarly argues that the past will be reworked as the needs of the present dictate, with heroes and heroines, lives and deaths of the general populace, victories and defeats, along with technological change, notions of good and evil, all being reinterpreted according to contemporary emotional political and cultural contexts.47 Most visitors arguably also explore exhibition narratives from their own personal and social understanding and predetermined ideas. Hein writes that according to constructivist learning theory, museums need to enable visitors to apply their own pre-existing knowledge to a new learning situation within exhibitions.48

Research into the emotional impact in museums, within museum studies and heritage literature is still in its infancy. Among those who have written about emotions in the museum was Kavanagh who argued that visitors bring with them personal memories into the museum that result in a more poetic or emotional engagement, one that relies less on the curatorial interpretation than on individual responses to stimuli based on

memories and previous experiences. Bagnall provided evidence as to how visitors perform an emotional engagement with heritage when they visit historic sites.

Watson in her essay entitled “Emotions in the History Museum” argues that our current emotional repertoires are a product of human consciousness and the cultures such consciousness produces. Watson cites Pekarik, who pointed out that visitors are more likely to remember what they felt, rather than what they have learnt in a museum. She argues that even though we cannot enter the emotional mind-set of another person we may still be able to understand their state of mind or to think about their emotions through what can be described as “cognitive empathy” or “affective empathy”, where we experience similar emotions to those of people of the past, even if these will not be the same, for we do not have their backgrounds, experiences, and attitudes. She also writes that the “use of the senses to evoke emotional responses in museums will provoke a reaction that illustrates contemporary readings of an event rather than historic ones, albeit ones that encourage an empathetic response that can be affective and cognitive.”

While Watson discusses some theoretical ways to understand emotional affects within the gallery space in history museums, she recognizes that further research is still needed. She argues that research into communication strategies in museums and galleries has focused mainly on visitors’ learning and their cognitive responses. However, she argues that our thoughts and ideas are mediated through our emotions, which are historically and culturally situated. Focusing in particular on the discipline of history and history museums, she suggests that we need to pay more attention to affect and the emotions generated by the museum visit. She argues that emotions have been strangely neglected in the theory and practice of museums and galleries. Curators, designers, academics, and museum education staff have spent considerable time attending to the aesthetics of both the object and the display but little to the emotions

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52 Ibid., p. 290
53 Ibid., p. 290
54 Ibid., p. 283
beyond the aesthetic experience which the galleries engender. This study investigates further the use of emotions in museums through the performances and interventions by the artists interviewed for this research.

**Research Journey**

This study is built upon previous fieldwork conducted by the researcher for a Master’s dissertation in History of Art, at the University of Malta, which focused on Baroque Art Collecting. Research was also conducted on Malta’s national art collection at the Malta National Museum of Fine Arts and at the Malta Maritime Museum, in the years before the commencement of this PhD in 2011. Research on the history of Malta’s National Museums for the EU funded project EUNAMUS (European National Museums) is what also led to this research and to the quest of exploring sensory, poetic atmospheres for interpreting stories. This research thus builds upon previous research undertaken in the past.

Initially the research focused mainly on the history and the interpretation of the Baroque Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta. During the first year of the PhD journey, extensive literature reviews, as well as archival research at the Malta National Library in Valletta focusing on the Baroque period of the Grand Master’s Palace were conducted. Early descriptions of the palace dating to the 17th and 18th centuries were consulted. These at times also included the list of people working in the palace.

To understand the Baroque palace it was vital to also consider the cultural milieu in which it operated, thus the Baroque world was further investigated in order to understand its historical and social context. This led to an investigation into Baroque courtly life, ceremonies, processions, theatre and performances. The archives at the National Library in Valletta were once again consulted and some of the questions regarding performances in the palace were answered, however, more remains to be uncovered. The research, in the meantime, also started to draw extensively on

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55 Ibid., p. 286
performance and museum theorists alike and started to make great play of multi-disciplinary approaches to explore the notion of the “museum as theatre.”

The focus of the research gradually shifted and narrowed down to the specific area of enquiry which investigated performances, rituals and the liminal surrounding the Baroque Grand Master’s Palace, and the liminoid in contemporary art practices responding to historic sites. As a comparative history, the thesis started to seek the hybrid forms taken by the Baroque style, while at the same time exploring notions of subversion of the institutional message and the ways history could be reconceptualised and questioned. The research eventually focused on the experiences and processes of contemporary artists and performers based in Malta and the UK responding to historic sites.

In-depth, open-ended interviews were held with ten contemporary artists and performers active in Malta who were responding to the stories in historic sites through their interventions. Their answers were recorded, transcribed and analysed. The list of interviewees (see Appendix) was originally much longer, however it was decided with my supervisor Prof. Simon Knell, and my second supervisor Dr. Suzanne MacLeod that the list should be focussed and narrowed down to ten. It was also decided that the main focus should be the Malta based artists, members of art collectives START and the Rubberbodies. Mercedes Kemp, who is based in Cornwall, England, a core member of WildWorks was also interviewed because she worked in Malta for the site-specific interventions Island of Dreams (2001) and the Three Islands Project (2003), which were a great inspiration for their future promenade immersive community works and for the works by the Malta based collectives The Rubberbodies Collective and Theatre Anon, some of whose members worked directly with her.

In the later stages of the PhD journey, even though the main focus was on interventions held in Malta, I also decided to include the works of the theatre collectives WildWorks and Punchdrunk, held in England and in Belgium. The reasons why I wanted to observe and experience their immersive, experimental works were various. The more I read about the Baroque the more it became clear to me that the spectacles and ceremonies held inside and around palaces during the 17th century were immersive. I became even more interested in the potential of contemporary immersive interventions inside historic
spaces, so the works by WildWorks and Punchdrunk were important for the further embodied understanding of this experience. The lines between actors and audiences, theatre spaces and public spaces were erased in their shows, and their was a fusion of the arts. This to me seemed like it could be something similar to what could have been experienced in Baroque times, when all the world was a stage.

I experienced Punchdrunk’s show *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable*, held in an old Paddington sorting station in London in December 2013. Even though the theatre collective did not work like WildWorks or the Rubberbodies Collective, with regards to looking for historical clues from the archives of the space or collecting memories from the communities, I still decided to include their work in this research. The reason is that I believe their techniques of bringing spaces back to life, by transforming them into immersive alternative worlds, having fragmented multi-narratives can have great potential in museums, especially if the stories they tell are those of the spaces they intervene in. One of their enrichment projects called *Against Captains Order’s* (2015), in fact was held at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London, so they are also recently experimenting with historic narratives inside museums. Their shows were a great inspiration in the writing up of this thesis.

I attended several public talks and interviews with the director, the choreographers and the performers of Punchdrunk during their show in London, in 2013. I also attended a conference in London entitled “The Roar of the Crowd” at the University of London in May 2014 were Punchdrunk members described their techniques. They explained how they translate scripts into physical and visual language, fusing it with sounds. Like the Rubberbodies Collective they also work with storyboards, creating worlds with sound designers and performers, filling up buildings, with what each individual character brings in to the show, being individuals with their own characters and memories.

In April 2014 I attended a workshop which focussed on emotional mapping in museums, at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts in London, during the conference entitled *Chaos at the Museum: Designing for Audience Participation*. Architect Noel McCauley conducted a workshop, in which I was a participant, entitled “Staging Emotional Environments” which investigated how a museum gallery can be designed from an emotional perspective. The goal of the workshop was to understand
how emotional sequences can respond to exhibition themes and be translated into spatial narrative compositions. These experiences helped me further shape and focus my research questions.

The research does not focus on the use of re-enactments or live interpretation and it also does not focus on audiences. It focuses on immersive, critical site-specific interventions responding to the Baroque, with the potential to provoke engagement and activate audiences.

**Methodology**

This research is predominantly interdisciplinary, qualitative and theoretical in nature and it draws upon a diverse range of historical and contemporary sources. It is a study that uses archival research to gain an understanding of the Baroque historical context, as well as ethnographic approaches such as oral history interviews and observation to gain an in-depth understanding of contemporary interventions in historic sites.

According to Manathunga, research which crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries arguably lends itself to an analysis of complex practices about which knowledge is seen to be “partial, transient, multi-layered and coming from many perspectives.”

Conducting an analysis and a discussion on the contemporary interpretation of the Baroque palace is complex and has required a methodological approach which is capable of handling diverse and interconnected elements. Cultural history in fact often combines the approaches of anthropology and history to look at popular cultural traditions and cultural interpretations of historical experience.

**Ethnographic Approaches**

Ethnographic approaches were used for this research as a method of discovery, to obtain an insight and a better understanding of the site-specific performances and installations by contemporary artists under study.\(^{58}\) Over the years, classical ethnography, in practice has evolved into reflexive ethnography, where the background of the researcher is included as an integral element of the ethnographic undertaking.\(^{59}\)

Social scientist researchers argue that the social world consists of multiple realities, rather than one single objective one. The possibility of any ethnographer being able to give one “true” objective picture of their study is hotly contested among present day academics. What this research presents is my interpretation of what I have observed and of what I have been told during the interviews. This interpretation is also based on my personal life experiences, my beliefs and my background. Emerson et al wrote that “the task of the ethnographer is not to determine the truth but to reveal multiple truths apparent in other’s lives.”\(^{60}\) It is about conducting an immersive approach at studying a group of people. Fetterman described the ethnographer as:

..interested in understanding and describing a social and cultural scene from the emic, or insider’s perspective. The ethnographer is both the storyteller and scientist; the closer the reader of an ethnography comes to understanding the native’s point of view, the better the story and the better the science.\(^{61}\)

I undertook an exploratory approach, also, comparing the Baroque setting to the neo-Baroque, researching the way artists interpret the world. Some of the questions asked

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\(^{58}\) This research acknowledges that there are limitations in ethnographic approaches. Crowley-Henry writes that critics of ethnography argue that because it usually involves a relatively small sample size, the findings cannot be generalized to the wider population. In response to such critics, however, she argues that this limitation is shared by all qualitative research, with qualitative researchers reasoning that the depth and richness of qualitative findings outweigh the constraints of trying to generalize across time and context, which in any case, qualitative researchers would argue is not reliable, given the proposition that all research (quantitative or qualitative) is context-, researcher-, and temporally specific. Crowley-Henry, M. (2011) “Ethnography: Vision and Versions” in *Approaches to Qualitative Research: Theory and its Practical Application* - *A Guide for Dissertation Students*, Oak Tree Press, p.51


were: why are contemporary artists and performances different from those of the Baroque? Why are they similar? What is behind their conceptual installations? Why did they use and still use metaphors, allegories and concepts in their artworks? Why did they fuse the arts back then and why are they doing it again now? What do their symbols mean? How do they create the liminal and the liminoid? What is the role of contemporary artists to facilitate storytelling in historic sites? How are they subverting the institutional message and why?

The reason I used an ethnography approach was to try to get a kind of empathetic understanding of how the world is for them. Trying to understand the symbolic world of these artists- the meanings they imbue the world with. Interviews were conducted with artists, I analysed documents and conducted direct observation of their processes and of their interventions. I built a rapport with them and developed a good personal relationship to get access and information. I attended exhibitions and artistic events in Malta, England and Belgium and I had various conversations with them, to gain trust. Even after interviewing them sometimes I continued the conversations with them over lunch or dinner or at social events.

I conducted a focused insight into their processes, into why they do what they do and how, finding what things mean for them, like what their values and their beliefs are. I questioned them on issues such as space, identity, history, emotions, memory, and religion, to gather rich, qualitative data. Being part of their community enabled me access to the sample, and allowed me to amass a wealth of contextual information concerning the political, social and cultural conditions prevalent at the particular point in time the research took place. Field research was carried out at in mainly three stages during the PhD journey, which is also reflected in the structure of the thesis itself:

1. **Field Research focusing on the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta as the Instrumental Case Study**

This research started off by questioning the interpretation inside the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta. Secondary data analysis on the existing literature on the Palace was initially conducted to find out the gaps in the data. The focus of the research was narrowed down from an analysis of the grand historical narratives of the site to an
analysis of Baroque court theatre, performance and ceremonies surrounding the Palace in Valletta in order to focus on performative interpretation tools. The site raised new questions about Baroque palaces and their interpretation, particularly seen from a performative and experiential way. Secondary data was collected and existing research by, for example, Vicki Ann Cremona on Baroque ceremonies, spectacles and rituals in Malta was built up on with new data and placed within a wider spectrum linking it with contemporary immersive performance in historic sites.

The archives of the Knights of the Order of St. John, focusing on ceremonies, etiquette and palace descriptions, dating from the sixteenth to the late eighteenth centuries, held at the National Library in Valletta, were consulted in the early stages of this research, as will be discussed in Chapter One. Plans, drawings, as well as photos of the palace, held at the Malta National Library and at the National Museum of Archaeology were also consulted (See Appendix).

2. Field Research observing interpretation practices at Baroque Palaces and active membership with ICOM DEMHIST and HRP, London

In the first and second years of this research in 2011 and in 2012, Baroque palaces across Europe were visited and so were Ottoman Palaces in Istanbul, Turkey, observing and documenting museological interpretation practices focusing on narrative and storytelling. The interpretation inside various Baroque Palaces in Valletta, Malta, and in Venice, Rome and Naples in Italy, in Paris and Versailles in France, and in Madrid, Spain was observed and documented during the fieldwork in order to observe if there were any similarities with interpretation practices in Baroque Palaces in Malta. It was observed that conservation and preservation of the sites and their contents, as well as authenticity issues, were among the main priorities of most of these historic palaces turned into museums. Audioguides and information panels were the main tools used for interpreting the stories of these sites.

This study decided not take conservation issues into consideration and has also not undertaken any visitor studies. It has, however, documented through field notes the researcher’s experiences during and after these visits. During this stage of the fieldwork, the study focussed mainly on the contemporary interpretations of the historic sites.
Visits were also undertaken to sites where stories were told in a theatrical manner and in which the house was treated as a stage, such as the Dennis Severs House Museum in London.

In 2011, I also became a member of ICOM DEMHIST, the international committee for historic house museums debating problems and solutions particular to the management, conservation and interpretation of historic house museums. I participated in various international forums, meetings and conferences held by ICOM DEMHIST from 2011 till the present day. From the 10 till 17 August 2013, I participated in the ICOM 23rd General Conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and presented a paper entitled “Reaching a reflective state in the museum through atmospheric site specific performances and art installations: Connecting past with present and artists with objects and audiences,” accompanied by a visual presentation. This gave me the opportunity to discuss my study with international curators of palaces and historic sites worldwide. Various contacts were made and many of the curators who commissioned or hosted contemporary artists or performers to respond to the sites and collections they curated shared their experiences with me during informal conversations. For example, Marcio Doctors, the curator of the Eva Klabin Foundation in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, explained the processes and experiences of working with contemporary artists who were commissioned various conceptual installations at the historic house museum, setting up dialogues with the past, for the “Breathing Project.”

In 2011, I also became a member of the Historic Royal Palaces UK, responsible of the following palaces and their collections: The Tower of London (including the Crown Jewels), Hampton Court Palace, Kensington Palace, the Banqueting House in Whitehall and Kew Palace. Various temporary exhibitions and special events organized by HRP were attended, observed and documented. The interventions undertaken by WildWorks at Kensington Palace in London were closely observed and documented. Various informal conversations and discussions were also held with John Barnes, conservation and learning director of Historic Royal Palaces in London and chairperson of ICOM DEMHIST. He shared his experiences and his knowledge on the history of interpretation and the use of theatre in HRP’s Palaces.
3. Field Research focussing on contemporary artistic interventions and performances

Together with the instrumental case study, conceptual site-specific artists and theatre collectives based in the UK and in Malta were also studied in order to investigate the potential of contemporary interventions in palaces creating liminal experiences. The research focused on the installations and performances by the art collectives START, Theatre Anon and the Rubberbodies Collective in Malta, and the performances and installations by Punchdrunk in London and by WildWorks in Malta, London and Belgium. Key elements were examined and explored such as: the use of the space as a stage, movement, light and darkness, metaphors and allegories, scenography, music, props and script, memories, emotions, and ritualistic processes reaching liminal states.

Secondary data analysis included the reviewing of their exhibition catalogues, newspaper articles, websites, photos, videos, storyboards and other primary source material given to me by a number of my interviewees. Ethnography, similar to any other type of research usually begins with the researcher availing herself of the range of information that already exists on the topic, helping in identifying gaps.

Their exhibitions and performances were attended and they were also observed and documented through photography and filming during the fieldwork. The objective of these visits was to broaden my understanding and to experience a personal embodied encounter, which could arguably be understood as phenomenological and ethnographic in nature. Their works are performative, and immersive and they fuse the arts to create a total work of art, using allegories and metaphors to create fragmented multi-narratives, which in various ways might resonate with the Baroque. The artist’s interventions were personally experienced to be able to reflect and to arrive to the selected theoretical underpinnings. Field notes have been taken to document interaction and experiences after the interventions. This helped to develop a rich understanding of the immersive, ritualistic, multi-narrative, fragmented and open nature of their works. It also helped in highlighting the key preoccupations of contemporary performances and installations with the transient and the ephemeral.
The works by these collectives were also analysed through qualitative open-ended interviews, which were structured on an individually tailored list of questions, which were recorded and analysed, as will be discussed in Chapter Four and in Chapter Five. These offered invaluable insights into the exploration of the processes undertaken before and during their interventions in historic sites. David Silverman, writing on qualitative research stressed that this kind of research should understand human experience and realise that to truly capture the experience one needs to embrace the subjective and along with it the humanity of social science. He also argued that the authenticity of human experience is a strong feature of qualitative research and that this kind of ‘emotionalist’ model is one of the research model’s dominant paradigms. “If you are concerned with exploring people’s life histories or everyday behaviors, then qualitative methods may be favoured,” Silverman argued.

Steiner Kvale also argued that the knowledge that springs from interviews is related to a post modern construction of knowledge. According to him, “with qualitative interviews you try to understand something from the subject’s point of view, and to uncover the meaning of their experiences. Interviews allow people to convey to others a situation from their own perspective and in their own words.”

The research methodology was approved through the University’s Ethics Committee, before interviews were held. Consent forms and information sheets were signed by the interviewed artists and performers. Open-ended interviews were conducted, with the interviewees selecting for themselves where they wished to go and what to comment on. Prompts were only given as a way of encouraging the interviewees to expand on what they are saying, rather than suggesting a direction for the conversation.

From the interviews conducted, the following initial observations and questions emerged: Malta still lacks a National Museum for Modern and Contemporary Art, thus the contemporary site specific performers and conceptual artists in Malta said that they were in search of spaces. The use of “alternative” spaces, the majority including historic sites for contemporary art events in Malta, a practice that picked up somewhat around

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the year 2000, seems to have been the outcome of a scarcity of spaces. Artists had no choice but to voice their responses and dialogues in historic spaces around the islands. The Maltese artist collective START which formed round 2002 were dissatisfied with the existing conditions for artists in Malta, but also hoped that these conditions could be changed. They also commented that a comprehensive history of contemporary art in Malta has still to be written, as will be discussed in Chapter Four. Most artists claimed they were exploring the human condition within its social, political and religious context. The interviews questioned how artists and performers use historic sites as a laboratory for experimentation, constantly asking provocative and challenging questions rather than seeking answers. It asked interviewees to elaborate on their experience of building up stories and sharing their experiences with communities surrounding them. The artists commented on how they transformed ideas, concepts, narratives and storytelling into sensory atmospheres using storyboards and scripts to arrive to the final performance. They discussed how they challenged the concept of the space, its sensibility and how they used the energy of the space to create their works.

The researcher asked the interviewees how they engaged with the past through their contemporary dialogues. They explained how they challenged the concept of time: fusing memories, identity, the influence of traditions, politics and religion with the imagination. They were asked to talk about their experience of working in a historic site and its collections in comparison to working in a traditional theatre. They were asked to talk about their processes in involving and collaborating with the local communities in the process of meaning making. They were asked how they drew upon their own knowledge, values, upbringing and experience in the creation of their works. They discussed how they allow multiple layers of understanding and how they create their multi narratives. They were asked about the concepts behind their works, and their philosophy in creating their conceptual interventions. They commented about their constant process of negotiation and collaboration with curators and audiences, but how they also at times critiqued institutions. Their answers were recorded, transcribed and analysed.
Theoretical Underpinnings

Theories around the role of performance were reviewed in order to explore how both the Baroque palace environment, as well as contemporary performances could be structured around specific ritual scenarios. Rituals arguably provide internal changes, they travel through centuries and transform and change their meaning, producing effects on psychological states and behaviours. As will be discussed in Chapter Two, this research places a particular emphasis on the anthropological writings of Victor Turner (1920-1983), which focus on “liminality,” experienced during rituals. In his view, rituals reflect society and its particular arrangements, constituting society’s commentary on itself. This could be fruitfully linked to rituals in both Baroque and contemporary interventions and performances. Victor Turner, who in later years also worked with performance theorist Richard Schechner, argued that aspects of liminality can be recognised in modern activities such as attending the theatre, seeing a film, or visiting an art exhibition. 64 This has been termed as “the liminoid”. Turner observed that such cultural situations could open up spaces in which individuals may step back from the practical concerns and social relations of everyday life and look at themselves and their world with different thoughts and feelings.

The art historian Carol Duncan, building upon the writings of Turner in her 1995 publication entitled Civilising Rituals inside Public Art Museums, compares house museums to memorials and mausoleums seeking immortality, a space set apart from the mundane concerns for the contemplation of timeless values. 65 The Baroque Palace in Valletta is especially rich in symbolism and can also be seen as a ritual setting, a ceremonial monument in its own right. Just like the Catholic Baroque church, the palace in Valletta must have had similar intentions - to promote Catholicism, and exert its grandeur and power through its rituals and visual representations of the real and the surreal, reminding its audiences of time, death and the afterlife. The ceiling frescos in the corridors of the palace, for example, provide an illusion of an open ceiling and the skies above depict a different world, with staircases leading up towards the heavens constantly reminding audiences of alternative universes.

Post-modern and post-structuralist theories as well as literature on immersive, site-specific and conceptual artworks were also reviewed to further understand the interventions by contemporary artists in historic sites.

**Thesis Structure**

This thesis is divided into three main sections, which constitute the following: Part One. The Baroque Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta as a subject – as place and performance; Part Two. Theory: Liminality and the Liminoid; Part Three. Contemporary performance as a response to the past.

Chapter One journeys into the past, examining the literature on the theatricality of the Baroque period, focusing on the rituals and ceremonies inside and surrounding the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta. The first chapter is large in word count in comparison to the other chapters. It has been deemed useful to have enough data in this section for the sake of the thesis’s argument to show how the palace was seen as a stage and to show how rituals and ceremonies spilt out of the palace and into the streets, theatres, harbours and villages around the Maltese islands.

Chapter Two draws upon the theoretical underpinnings of this research, focusing on Victor Turner’s anthropological writings on liminality and the liminoid in relation to performance studies and its potential for further use in museum studies. Chapter Three serves as a contextual chapter exploring and examining the literature on theatrical techniques and interpretations used in historic house museums and museum displays and narratives. It also reviews the work of ICOM DEMHIST as well as the latest literature on “immersive theatre,” looking mainly at promenade immersive performances, which have gained popularity in recent years both in Malta and in England.

Chapter Four examines and analyses the processes of the contemporary site specific conceptual installation group of artists based in Malta called START, who are continuously in search for spaces. The neo-baroque qualities in their work, as well as
their inspiration from postmodern and post-structuralist theoretical underpinnings are discussed, as well as the manner they critique institutions and question national narratives in Malta. Chapter Five analyses the site-specific immersive performances of the theatrical groups WildWorks and Punchdrunk based in the UK, and The Rubberbodies Collective and Theatre Anon based in Malta. The chapter focuses on their processes, and on the collaborations they have undertaken with communities and with curators of historic sites and museums. It also explores how they create their immersive performances, consisting of multi narratives, fragmentation and journeys to the inner self and to alternative worlds. The Conclusion offers a summary of the research findings and concluding remarks upon the significance and the contribution of the research project. It also offers implications for the future interpretation of Baroque palaces and offers proposals for further research. The Appendix offers images of the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta, mainly dating to the 19th century to show the changes undertaken along the years, as well as maps, archival material and images showcasing traditional and religious rituals in Malta as well as further images of the interventions by the Rubberbodies Collective and WildWorks.

Questions on Malta’s national identity persist, as do questions on the contemporary interpretation of the Grand Master’s Palace, on which stories to tell and how to tell them. The following chapters will be searching for a new way of interpreting the Grand Master’s Palace by travelling through the ages, searching for the liminal in both the Baroque and the contemporary, analysing the potential of artists and performers in the critical engagement of the past.
Part One

Looking Backwards to Move Forward
Chapter One

Revisiting Baroque Performances in Valletta

It is some measure of how far we have lost this way of thinking that politics is the last aspect that would cross our minds when examining these glittering performances three hundred years later.66

In developing an interpretation of the Baroque age in Malta, this first chapter begins by looking backwards in an attempt to locate the Baroque performances and underlying ideologies surrounding the Grand Masters Palace in Valletta. From the late 16th century till the end of the 18th century, the Grand Masters conducted great transformations of urban fabric which in time transformed Valletta into an immersive theatre. During public celebrations, the entire city, including the palaces, the auberges, the churches, the streets and squares, were temporarily metamorphosed into a theatrical space, mainly centred around the body of the Grand Master and the Catholic Church. Such spaces served as a frame to contain and structure information and arguably, there were strategies at organising thought and knowledge as well as memory. Playing on the appeal of human emotions, these spectacles had great rhetorical communicative potential.67

Parry writes that one reason why early modern culture “arranged and presented knowledge as physical building space was to do with memory - or mnemonics,” using “the shape of a building (or a series of buildings) as a structure within which to arrange and store the thoughts to be remembered.”68 Parry says that the systematic construction of knowledge through space was exhibited within the fabric and sometimes ephemeral contents of early modern spaces. Basing his thesis on Henri Lefebvre’s theory on the production of space, Parry concluded that a 17th century space could be “seen to be both

67 On the analyses of emotions in terms of performativity see:
part of - and yet removed - from its contemporary world. “The idea of being divided from the world allowed the space to have a sense of “liminality” and detachment from the everyday.

This chapter, building upon Parry’s argument, as well as on the theoretical writings of the social anthropologist Victor Turner on rituals, will argue that the Grand Masters Palace and its surroundings in Valletta also acted as a liminal realm (on the threshold of reality and the imaginary) - a non-place, at once a eu-tropia and ou-topia. It will be argued that Valletta’s complex early modern history also consisted of dynamic and subtle interplays of different spatial realms. The ceremonies and festivities conducted throughout the year show how the city’s image of itself was dramatized and key aspects of the social calendar were ritualized and performed in significantly defined places.

The chapter seeks to expose the spectacles and the relationships, the dynamics, as well as their purpose. It questions how the palace and its surroundings were theatrically set up and how the European Knights were acting out their roles with each other and with the local community. It questions: What kind of rituals did they have at court and outside of court and what were their underlying ideologies? It will explore what the significance and the relationship between the palace and the theatre in terms of politics, court behaviour and city/island geography were.

Very little has been written and analysed on Valletta’s Baroque spectacles and not much has surfaced on the rituals held at the palace, however, it is known that some of the performances were given in honour of foreign sovereigns. For example, on the occasion when Philip II acceded the throne of Spain, the Spanish Knights organized comedies at the Palace for the Spanish Grand Master. An other example is the 1729 journal entry of Fra Capitano De Reboul which describes the celebrations for the Dauphin’s birth that included spectacular mock battles in Valletta’s Grand Harbour. There were illuminated boats accompanied by fireworks in the evening, as well as a ball, a musical concert and

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70 Ibid.

71 For a similar study on the performative aspect of Baroque Rome see: Gillgren, P. and Snickare, M. (eds.) (2012) Performativity and Performance in Baroque Rome, Ashgate, Surray and Burlington

72 The Archives of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta, Libr. 291, f.211, National Library, Valletta
a banquet in the garden of the marina, with the presence of the Portuguese Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena (1663-1736). This shows how Baroque spectacles in Valletta were not restricted to the interior of palaces and churches but were also held out in the streets and harbours, arguably because of the warm climate of the islands all year round which permits outdoor events.

As will be described and analysed in the rest of this chapter, Valletta encouraged a culture of performance, with key institutions and ceremonies defining a ritualized landscape populated by actors and spectators. The French soldier Casari in the late 18th century argued that the Knights of Malta “spend their time with sumptuous dinners, festivities and in the theatre.” He writes of the Portuguese Grand Master Emmanuel Pinto de Fonseca (1681-1773) that “...All the term of government of this frivolous Portuguese was a chain of spectacles, festivities and events of loose morality.” Strong argued that “Flattery these spectacles may seem to us, but that would be to misread them entirely; for they were expressions of a political reality that recognized monarchs and princes as a semi-divine race set apart from the ordinary mortals.”

The Scottish traveller Patrick Brydone in his travel account of 1773, provides a vivid account of his personal encounter with the Portuguese Grand Master Pinto during the last years of his reign. He wrote that “his household attendance and court are all very princely; and as Grand Master of Malta, he is more absolute, and possesses more power than most sovereign princes. His titles are Serene Highness and Eminence...” He described “Malta as an epitome of Europe, and an assemblage of the younger brothers, which are commonly the best of its first families... This institution...”, he writes, “possesses great riches in most of the Catholic countries... their valour had been of great service to Europe, in their wars against the infidels.” He also describes a show of great

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73 The Archives of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta, Libr. MS 20, National Library, Valletta
74 Frelter, T. (2010) The Order of Malta exposed; or a voyage to Malta, containing historical, philosophical, and critical observations on the actual situation of the State of the Knights of Malta and their morals; also containing descriptions of the nature, products of the island, and the customs of its inhabitants, Gutenberg Press, Malta. Casari reputedly spent two years serving with the Regiment of Malta between 1780 and 1782. He embraced the ideals of the French Revolution and disliked the frivolity and pomp of the late 18th century.
76 Brydone, P. (1773) A Tour through Sicily and Malta: In a Series of Letters to William Beckford, Esq of Sommerly on Suffolk, London., p.328
77 Ibid, p..340
entertainment held at the Grand Harbour before a Maltese squadron departed to assist the French against the Bey of Tunis.\textsuperscript{78} He describes a celebration of a church service he attended which “seems to be overcharged with parade and ceremony than what I have ever observed even in any other Catholic country.”\textsuperscript{79}

The Grand Master also had a European network of diplomats and priors who answered to the Order’s headquarters in Malta. In fact, Allen writing about Charles II, Louis XIV and the Order of Malta argues that historians of early modern Europe continue to overlook Valletta as an exchange of diplomatic intelligence which was provided by the Order’s ambassadors at the Catholic courts of Europe.\textsuperscript{80} He argues how the Order had its Knights trained in the courtly art of diplomacy.\textsuperscript{81} Gomez Lopez writes that European courts were the ideal stage on which to implement strategies, plotting routes loaded with significance during the rituals at courts.\textsuperscript{82} During their deployment would come into play all those communicative codes associated with art and culture which would be employed to achieve a victory quite apart from the war, that is, in a political and social arena where the battle was fought through ceremonial, festivals and “rituals of the court.”

Unfortunately, we do not know what these spectacles looked like through lack of visual records, however, written documents testify that grand spectacles were indeed held. Polidoro da Caravaggio in 1589 also depicted a mock naval battle scene of the Crusader Knights attacking the Turks which was performed in the specially flooded courtyard at the Pitti Palace in Florence, Italy (Figure 3). Aercke writes that almost always the “fighting” on these occasions was prearranged and staged according to elaborate allegorical scenarios, designed to grant the ultimate victory to the prince.\textsuperscript{83} Was this also the case in Malta? What from the theatre bleeds into or reflects contemporary life? What was pure fantasy and entertainment, and what reflected truth and authenticity?

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid. p.313  
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid. p.319  
The Baroque age was a highly complex one and as Deleuze argues it was also multi-layered with various folds, that unfolding only serves to open another fold into infinity, “like a cavern in a cavern”.  

The cavern Deleuze says “is not a chaos, but a series whose elements remain caverns filled with an increasingly rarefied matter, each of which is extended over the following ones.”

Thus, what the following attempts to do, is to mainly present a few examples in a rather descriptive manner to demonstrate the ways in which theatre indicated that Malta was conforming to a wider European complex performance. In particular it will attempt to reveal some of the various layers of performances, both in their literal as well as in their metaphorical states. It will explore the liminal, intangible heritage of Baroque Malta and its context as a route into exploring the tensions as well as the collaborations and relationships that emerge when the worlds of the Baroque and the post-modern collide.

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Ceremonial Entrances

All the world’s a stage; And all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances... 86

By the end of the 16th century the ruler’s official arrival and possession of a city had developed into a public ritual. This public celebration directly involved the ruler as an actor, in a ritualized setting.

The arrival of the French Grand Master Phillipe de l’Isle Adam (1464-1534) into Malta was marked by public spectacle, writes Cremona. 87 The Grand Master arrived in Malta from Syracuse on Wednesday 26 October 1530 and a bridge was made of boats tied to each other and covered with rich hangings.

![Figure 4: Antoine de Favray, Grand Master L’Isle Adam’s Entry into Mdina in 1530 (18th century), Grand Master’s Palace, Valletta](image)

The Knights then proceeded to a solemn function in the Church of St. Lawrence in Birgu close by the harbour where they landed, prayers were recited and the Te Deum was sung. 88 A few weeks later, on 16 November 1530 the Grand Master renewed the oath “to observe the privileges and usages” granted by the King of Aragon and Sicily.

He took formal possession of Malta in the medieval city of Mdina, at a ceremony where the governor and the jurats of the Mdina Università also symbolically presented the

86 Shakespeare, W. (1623) As You Like It, London
88 The Archives of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta, MS. 2, f.274, National Library, Valletta
Grand Master with the silver keys (Figure 4). This ceremony, called the *possesso*, took the form of an elaborate ceremonial procession, theatrically staged and re-enacted every year until the departure of the Knights of the Order of St. John from Malta in the late 18th century. Roy Strong writes that the entrance of European princes at different courts always functioned in a similar manner with the handing over of the keys, complemented by the exchange of gifts and a ceremony at the Cathedral. The onlookers saw before them in microcosm the whole of society as they knew it, in a processional form with its concern for rank.

Aercke writes that these entries were modelled after antique models combining public entertainments with the serious business of the state, such as the triumphal processions of Roman generals or emperors.\(^9\) He also argues that these events were a ritualistic symbolic formulation by a community of its identity as *polis*. A privileged moment for the court to express itself in its hierarchically articulated entirety and with all the material and symbolic means it had at its disposal.\(^9\) Similarly, Boiteux, studying the processions in early modern Rome and their meaning concludes that “rituals, understood as a symbolic production, create social and political identity, and represent it.”\(^9\) Olin, in his analyses of the “performative meaning of a procession” also argues that it would be interesting to confront the entrance ritual with the concept of “liminality”, as discussed by Turner, which arguably has some parallels to the initiation rites and installation ceremonies.\(^9\)

Cremona describes the staging of the *possesso*, which transformed the streets of the city of Mdina as a public stage.\(^9\) She argues that the *possesso* was an accomplishment of a journey through different spaces, each one becoming the focal point for a specific part of the ceremony and bearing a particular distribution of actors and spectators, all adhering to an imposed choreography, creating a rich tapestry of juxtaposed spaces and

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\(^9\) Ibid.


meanings. With every subsequent election of a Grand Master, the formal entry into Mdina entailed more elaborate ceremonial rituals and ornate scenography, bearing more pomp and pageantry following European trends. The cortege to Mdina rode on horseback, and was composed of the highest ranking Knights of the Order, known as the Grand Crosses. The Maltese nobility also wearing velvet and silk, rode with them, creating an illusion of equality of rank. When the Grand Master arrived in Mdina, he found four important officials of the city waiting for him holding up the canopy under which he was to proceed.  

A series of objects acting as props to the staged event in Mdina were also set up along the ritualised journey. A prie-dieu upon which a treasured manuscript was placed, attributed to St. Luke was one of the props. Another prop was the cross brought over by the Knights from Rhodes, which the Grand Master had to swear on, promising to uphold the rights and privileges of the Maltese population. Strong argues that the canopy carried over the ruler was a reference to the ritual used in honour of the Sacrament in the Corpus Christi procession, thus in this way the entry evolved out of liturgy and the Grand Master was acting out the role of Christ. Strong writes that ecclesiastical pomp in its new counter-reformation guise was to be complimented by what can only be called a liturgy of state, which centred on the ruler.  

Cremona writes that the Grand Master’s solemn pledge was framed by further theatrical effects: the doors of the city were flung open to the sound of bells and cannons and the whole procession went to hear high mass at the Cathedral and gifts were also given to the Grand Master. By the eighteenth century the rise of the wealthier classes in Malta corresponded to an upsurge in the lavish quality of Baroque public spectacle. Triumphal arches were erected and verses in praise of the Grand Master where put up in the roads. For example, descriptions of the ceremony for Grand Master Perellos (1697-1720) also describe how silver coins were thrown to the local Maltese and Gozitans who went to watch and participate in the spectacle. The setting for the races in the evening were also described as very theatrical. A temporary structure resembling a theatre was erected in

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the Boschetto near the countryside hunting lodge known as Verdala Palace where races
were held: un nobilissimo teatro d’ingegnosa architettura nuovamente fabbricato da
quell Universita per quest’effetto.\textsuperscript{97}

The Spanish Grand Master Ramon Perellos de Rocaful (1697-1720) is known to have
staged other theatrical entries such as that into the harbour town of Vittoriosa across
Valletta, where many people flocked to the city to watch. Quantities of silver coins were
also thrown to the people. The means of transport for the Grand Master from Valletta to
Vittoriosa was a richly decorated barge covered in red damask and gold lace and the
decor was of a theatrical quality; militiamen lined the quays, wearing full dress with
breastplates and pikes. On landing the Grand Master stepped on to a bridge richly
covered in carpets, tapestries and damasks were hanging in the streets and paintings of
the Grand Master were hanging from the windows and balconies with inscriptions
bearing words of welcome.

The Grand Master was escorted under a canopy. After a church ceremony the function
ended with a food reception.\textsuperscript{98} Writing about ceremonial entries, Strong again suggests
that these acts were closely allied to the act of coronation and with the pre-
enlightenment ideas that rulers were a race set apart from the rest with the key reference
being the ruler acting as Christ entering his Holy City of Jerusalem, in which the earthly
state is directly presented as a mirror of the heavenly. This play of reflections and of
ego-images and narcissism was arguably constantly in use during the Baroque age.\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{97} The translation is as follows: “A noble Theatre, of an ingenious structure, had been newly built by the
Universita (the governing body of Malta)” cited in Cremona, V.A. (1999) “Spectacles and ‘Civil
Liturgies’ in Malta during the time of the Knights of St. John” in Cairns, C. (ed.) The Renaissance
Theatre: Texts, Performance, Design Vol. 2: Design, Image and Acting, Ashgate, Aldershot, Hants,
England and Brooksfield, p. 46
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., p. 48
\textsuperscript{99} King Louis XIV in France, for example, was mirrored as Caesar or the God Apollo, connected with the
sun as the centre of the universe, following an idea of government inspired by Macchiavelli.
The *Theatrum Mundi* and its Scripts

The Grand Master in Valletta, as it has been observed above and as will be further explored below, acted out his role as Christ who healed the sick, and the Knights acted the roles of warriors and martyrs like St. John the Baptist did, defending the Catholic faith and projecting an image of triumph and of the good victorious over evil.

The Grand Master mirroring Christ was enacted on various occasions. For example, the travelling accounts of the Count of Erbach in 1601 recounts the staging of banquets for the poor at the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta. The French Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt would publicly feed a chosen number of poor men in his palace before sitting down for dinner. The poor men always numbered twelve like the apostles and were waited upon by the Grand Master himself, who would divide the bread and ensure that the men had enough wine to drink, reminiscent of Christ providing wine for the marriage of Cana. The tables were laid with silver dishes and the Knights played the part of the servants bowing to the wishes of the poor men. The Count of Erbach also recounts how Grand Master Wignacourt staged his public banquets and his description provides details concerning the rigid codes used to stage this, with sixty knights waiting at table, and the Grand Master washing his hands publicly using a silver ewer and basin, and eventually drinking from gold cups studded with rubies and eating his multiple courses out of silver dishes.

Burke discussing the image of the “theatre state” at a time when the world was seen as a stage, argues how the public images of royalty were transformed by the government into myths, using ritual and representation in what Burke says we might think of as “multi-media” events. Burke stresses that the performed, written and commemorative works of this period were interlocking systems of royal imagery. Burke also asks the questions: “Who wrote the script for the royal drama?” and “who was directing the production?”

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100 Bonello, G. (1995) “Feasting and Fasting in Malta at the time of the Knights” in Micallef M.(ed.) *Silver and Banqueting in Malta*, Progress Press Ltd, Mriehel, p. 46
101 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
Etiquette, which can also be defined as the “the code of behavior” or script, distinguished the nobility from the lower classes in the Baroque age. It was modeled on the Italian Renaissance courts and later on the French and their concept of the perfect courtier. The chief virtues of the noble man included eloquent speech, skill at dance, refined manners, and appreciation of the arts, intellectual curiosity, wit, and the ability to write poetry. In the sixteenth century, the Italian Knight Fra Sabba Castiglione wrote a book on the specific norms of Hospitaller Knights behaviours, titled *Ricordi ovvero Ammaestramenti* (Memoirs or truly Teachings). His book was one of the several sixteenth century publications which sought to instruct the desirable behaviour in public life, just like a script for a performance, aimed at addressing the requirements of the Knights in service at battles at sea and in hospital. He compiled brief chapters of teachings on ethics, court life, governance and private entertainments.

The Grand Master’s Palace came to be, in the context of this ceremonial world, a means of expression which would effectively integrate itself into the traditions of ceremonial and etiquette, generating spaces designed to serve the Order’s exaltation through a propagandist exercise built upon culture and art. The Knights had various “scripts” for their every day life performances. For example, they had a document, which when translated reads: “The manner of acting and etiquette between the Inquisitor, the Grand Master and members of the Order.”

In another document, entitled *Detail des Etiquettes du Palais* (details of the Etiquettes of the Palace) dating to the 1760’s, a list of people working in the Grand Master’s Palace and a description of their roles were mentioned. The Palace was inhabited by over one hundred people, all acting out their particular roles. The “actors” inside the palace, for example, included the Seneschal, whose role was that of the official Lieutenant, appointed for life by the Order’s Council or directly by the Pope. There was also *Le Maitre d’Hotel*, whose role was that of major-domo, *Le Cavalerizze ou sous Cavalerizze*, who was in charge of the Grand

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105 Contemporary literary sources such as *il Cortegiano* (1528) by Baldassere Castiglione a relative of Fra Sabba and *Education of a Christian Prince* (1516) by Erasmus were similar scripts which shed light on the norms of behavior of courtiers and nobles, living within a hierarchical community.


Master’s carriages, *Le Fauconier*, in charge of the Magisterial hunting reserves and of the falcons, which were sent as presents to the Spanish King annually in recognition of his feudal overlordship of the Maltese islands. The Grand Master was served by nine coachmen and eight footmen who preceded him when he travelled. There was also *Le Capitan des Gardes* and three official secretaries for France, Italy and Spain: *Le Secrétaire de France*, *Le Secrétaire d’Italie* and *Le Secrétaire d’Espagne*.\(^\text{109}\) The palace kitchens were staffed by three cooks, a pantry-man and sixty slaves chosen for their culinary experience.

The slave trade and corsairing activities became thriving businesses throughout the Knights of the Order of St. John’s rule in Malta, and these brought in with them slaves of different religious beliefs and customs.\(^\text{110}\) The various cultures influenced each other, and left their mark on all levels of everyday life. The Knights as well as the Roman Inquisition (1575-1798) made sure that Catholic traditions were observed. Cremona argues that public performance in the time of the Knights was a visual manifestation of political balance in the country. She also argues that even though the Knights and the local inhabitants spoke different languages they must have all participated together in rituals which provided a rallying ground as well as an instrument for domination.\(^\text{111}\)


Scenography: The Total Work of Art

The scenographer visually liberates the text and the story behind it, by creating a world in which the eye sees what the ears do not hear. Resonances of the text are visualised through fragments and memories that reverberate in the spectator’s subconscious, suggesting rather than illustrating the words.\(^{112}\)

The above seems to summarise the visuals which still survive in the Grand Master’s palace in Valletta; fragments of the poetic scenography orchestrating the visual and sensory environments for the framing of ideas and bodies in space. Travelers’ journals described the palace in Valletta as having a fusion of the arts inside: damask hung on walls, illusionistic and scenographic frescos covered ceilings, various portraits, battle scenes and religious scenes hung over the damasks, there were maps, tapestries, a collection of arms and even a collection of “strange birds.”\(^{113}\) To quote Hooper-Greenhill, the collection inside the palace had the purpose “to recreate the world in miniature around the central figure of the prince who thus claimed dominion over the world symbolically as he did in reality.”\(^{114}\) The Palace became the Grand Master’s stage where he acted out his role in society.

In the 19\(^{th}\) century Wagner had popularized the Baroque idea of “the total work of art”; the Gesamtkunstwerk in his so-called Zürich writings of 1849, most notably in his essays “The Artwork of the Future” and “Art and Revolution.”\(^{115}\) In both cases he spoke of his ideal to unify the arts. As Wagner stresses throughout the Zürich writings, the Gesamtkunstwerk is a social and not simply an artistic dream, and the social dream is essentially a communitarian one. Just as the Gesamtkunstwerk would unite a variety of art forms and blur artistic categories, so too he argued, would individual spectators be brought together to become a unified audience through their shared aesthetic experience. In the same way theatre was concerned with all aspects of the spectacle, the Baroque palace was concerned with rendering the whole of the urban experience as a dynamic experience. In the case of the Grand Master’s palace it could be argued that the

unified cause was that of uniting against the Muslim Turks and the hope of conquering new exotic lands full of natural resources, such as those in South America. From a rhetorical viewpoint “total works of art” which use all artistic media available are more effective to persuade, dissuade or praise than any single medium itself, as they address all the senses at once and penetrate the intellect more efficiently. “The fusion of all the arts enhances the beholders’ emotional participation: when all the barriers are down, life and art, real existence and apparition melt into one... the beholder finds himself in a world shared with saints and angels... What is image, what is reality?,” argues Wittkower.\textsuperscript{116}

The collection which embellished the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta probably followed the Burgundian model as Vella concludes in her thesis.\textsuperscript{117} The Grand Masters commissioned artworks for the palace, they diplomatically exchanged artworks as gifts with other courts as well as bequeathed objects to the palace in their wills after they died. For example, the will of the French Grand Master Alod de Wignacourt bequeathed to the Palace wall hangings of red and green damask, several chairs in red velvet with gold trimmings and matching canopies. The will of the Portuguese Grand Master Jean Louis Mendes di Vasconcelos mentions forty-two paintings bequeathed to the Palace.\textsuperscript{118} The will of the Portuguese Grand Master Emmanueal Pinto de Fonseca (1741-1773), mentions 138 paintings.\textsuperscript{119} The Order also had ambassadors living in Rome and in other European courts, who ordered various works of art for Malta. One such example was the French Knight Fra Jacques-Laure Le Tonellier, Baille de Breteuil, Ambassador of the Order in Rome, between 1758 and 1778, who is known to have owned a large art collection in Palazzo Malta in Via dei Condotti in Rome.\textsuperscript{120}

Several portraits of royalty and of Grand Masters hang on the corridor walls of the palace, projecting an image of the network which the Grand Masters had with other

\textsuperscript{118} The Archives of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta, AOM 924, f.30 v., National Library, Valletta
\textsuperscript{119} The Archives of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta, AOM 925, f.155 v., National Library, Valletta
\textsuperscript{120} Delia, R. (2008) Art Collecting in Malta (1600-1850), Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Malta
courts. In 1617, the nobleman George Albert, Count of Erbach, paid a visit to the French Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt (1601-1622) and he described the palace as having a broad staircase which led up into an audience chamber whose decoration consisted chiefly of portraits of the then reigning Catholic Kings. A few years later in 1632 another traveler, Johann Friedrich Breithaupt also mentions in his travel journal the portraits of the Kings inside the Palace as well as the frescos depicting the history of the Knights, and the armoury. Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt was portrayed several times wearing antique suits of armour from the collection inside the palace, one of which was painted by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, now hanging at the Louvre Museum in Paris (Figure 5). Historians have turned to several kinds of primary sources among them pictorial representations, to understand society of the time. These portraits were carefully planned out and composed, and as Barthes noted they were constructions of reality, embedded with value choices. Such analyses draw on the field of semiotics, considering how meanings inhere in all kinds of human endeavour.

Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt was known to go about his daily business partially clad in armour, even at times of peace, suggesting the conscious symbolic use of costumes. In 1604 the Grand Master also set up a collection of weapons and armoury which he had transferred from the Sovereign Military Order of St. John’s arsenal to the Palace. The collection was not only intended for use in battle but was also a highly important status symbol demonstrating the Knights’ reputation of ferocity in battle and Malta as a Catholic military base. This collection was an instrument of Catholic propaganda exalting the Order’s heroic past and the Knight’s military role as the shield of Christendom. It was a showpiece conspicuously displayed to travellers, ambassadors and potential future Knights.

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121 Galea, 2001
123 For more information on the artist’s stay in Malta see: Sciberras, K. (2009) Baroque Art in Malta, Midsea Books, Valletta
The French portrait painter Pierre Bernard was commissioned by the Langue of Castille, Leon and Portugal to paint a portrait of the Portuguese Grand Master Emmanuel Pinto de Fonseca in a style which has been described by Buhagiar as “theatrically rhetorical,” resplended in his shining armour and holding his baton of office. Antoine de Favray was the court painter in the palace during the 18th century and he also painted the portrait of Grand Master Emmanuel Pinto several times. Antoine de Favray depicted him dressed up in expensive robes in the flamboyant ancienne regime style of the French King Louis XIV. Standing at his desk, the Grand Master points out to his royal crown to indicate that he was the sovereign of the Order and his cape is lined with ermine, a fur worn by royalty (Figure 6). Artifice was considered necessary to civilised social intercourse and public life was seen as frankly theatrical; costumes, powdered face and wigs ruled their fashion by the 18th century, and they made it absolutely clear the artificiality of a man’s public persona.

The French Grand Master Emmanuel de Rohan Polduc (1775-1797) was also a continuous patron of painter Favray. It has been recorded that he even portrayed the Grand Master during Friday and Saturday lunches: Decembre 1 [1775] Comme S E [xcellence] mange seul les Vendrelis e Samadis, Favray profite de moment au quel elle est a table pour prende son portrait.129

Lavin writes that Panofsky regarded the Baroque as the first modern era, which he defined in terms of a new psychological awareness and self-consciousness. For him, it was not an era of decadence but a new synthesis based on a knowing grasp of the significance of consciousness itself and a concomitant capacity deliberately to embrace, rather than suppress or despise, both the fables and the foibles of our kind.130 In his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, John Locke in 1690 identified the self with memory, and he found identity in the extension of consciousness backward in time. In Locke’s view a person’s identity extends to whatever of his or her past he or she can remember. Thus, a person who remembers nothing of her past literally has no identity.

129 The Archives of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta, Libr. Ms. 137, f. 147 v, National Library, Valletta
Henri Lefebvre appropriating the Nietzschean notion of power in space argues that “Castles, palaces, cathedrals, fortresses, all speak in their various ways of the greatness and the strength of the people who built them and against whom they were built.”¹³¹ Political, propagandistic and triumphal military overtones run through the scenography inside the Palace in Valletta.¹³² The visuals clearly project the image that the Knights were the “elite of Christianity”. One of the historians of the Knights, the Abbe Vertot, referred to them as the “fighting force composed of the most noble blood of the Christian world.”¹³³ Reputedly the Order of St. John had the best navy in the Mediterranean,¹³⁴ known as the navy of the Catholic religion, “who succeeded in crippling the maritime development of North Africa.”¹³⁵ Grand Master Perellos had also built a triumphal arch on the outskirts of Valletta called Portes des Bombes with the Latin inscription “Safety I am at home, while I fight the Turks everywhere.”¹³⁶ Similary,
Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) had called for the destruction of the Turks by a unified Europe. The scenography inside the Palace reflected this and reflected the complex network of spatial and temporal elements.

Between c.1576 - 1581 the Italian painter Matteo Perez D’Aleccio was also commissioned by the French Grand Master Jean Levasque de la Cassiere (1572-1581) to paint twelve scenes of the 1565 Great Siege of Malta in the Great Council Chamber inside the Palace (Figures 7-11). The frescos recount the story of when the Turkish Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent launched an attack on Malta. The iconographic programme combines bird’s eye views of crowded scenes with armed figures engaged in fighting. The Turkish army dwarfs the Christian defenders and impresses upon the beholder the Order’s resilience in the defence of Christendom. The scenes arguably provoke emotions of fear and anger in the viewer. For example, in the first scene the locals run for refuge in fear while the fourth scene shows the capture of Fort St. Elmo by the Turks and the mutilated corpses of the Knights floating into the Grand Harbour. The intention of the Turks, as an eyewitness, Francesco Balbi di Correggio (1567) noted, was to terrify the Knights. However, the Knights were arguably also trained to become martyrs of the Catholic faith, just like their patron St. John the Baptist was beheaded, they were also ready to die for their faith. It was a demonstration of the Knights’ sacrifice and martyrdom which was also described by the Order’s official chronicler Giacomo Bosio who in 1602 wrote:

All the cadavers which by their clothing could be recognised as knights or men of importance were gathered up; and it was ordered that they be stripped nude, decapitated, and that their hands be severed. Then, out of disrespect for the Holy Cross and to make sport of the knights military overgarments, on each corpse four huge incisions were made with scimitars, making the sign of the Cross on both the fronts and the backs …and after having had them lashed to various pieces of wood

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138 Matteo Perez D’Aleccio studied under the painter Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) and also worked in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican in Rome.
140 For the Turkish point of view see: Cassola, A. (1988) The 1565 Ottoman Malta Campaign Register, PEG Publications, San Gwann
with their arms spread apart so as to form, similarly the sign of the Cross, and bound in such a manner as to make one body touch the other in a kind of long chain, they were then tossed into the sea...\textsuperscript{142}

The frieze arranged in a chronological order is set in between fourteen allegorical figures of good government, which complement the episodes represented, for example Justice and Fortitude accompany the Siege on Fort St. Elmo whilst Virtue, Victory and Fame accompany the final scene, the victory by the Knights.\textsuperscript{143} Central to Walter Benjamin’s Baroque idea was the allegory, as the principal element in the aesthetic of modernity. In his analyses, allegory is pre-eminently a kind of experience, arising from an apprehension of the world as no longer permanent, as passing out of being, a sense of its transitoriness. The form, such an experience takes, is fragmentary and enigmatic, where the world ceases to be purely physical and becomes an aggregation of signs, sometimes also manipulative.\textsuperscript{144}

Buci-Gluckmann similarly argues that allegory always governs within the Baroque. She writes that allegory “has a sensous character. It is grounded in a realism of pathos and passion that fragments reality, exasperates it and mortifies it by staging - in painting as in theatre or opera - a veritable dramaturgy of passions.”\textsuperscript{145} According to Benjamin’s analyses, the two contrasting figures of the tyrant and the martyr represent history. This was also the history represented inside the palace. The wall became a martyrology dedicated to the Knights who sacrificed their lives at the Siege. The Order’s raison d’être and justification of its existence was to defend Europe from its Muslim foe.

\textsuperscript{142} Bosio, G. (1684) Del’Istoria della Sacra Religione, Giovanni di Santo dell’illustrissima Milizia Gierosolimitano, 3 Vols., Rome 2nd ed., Naples. Bosio completed the history between 1594-1601. There are forty books grouped into three volumes and printed in folio in Rome in 1621, in 1629/30, in 1678 and in Naples in 1684.


Figure 7: Matteo Perez D'Aleccio, *Assault on the Post of Castile* (c.1576 – 1581) Grand Master’s Palace, Valletta

Figure 8: Matteo Perez D’Aleccio, *The Great Siege* (c.1576 – 1581) Grand Master’s Palace, Valletta
Figure 9: Matteo Perez D’Aleccio, *The Bombardment of the Post of Castile* (c.1576 – 1581) Grand Master’s Palace, Valletta

Figure 10: Matteo Perez D’Aleccio, *The Siege of Fort St. Elmo* (c.1576 – 1581) Grand Master’s Palace, Valletta
Scenes from the life of St. John the Baptist, the patron saint of the Order, were popular in the Palace’s scenography. The decapitation of this early Catholic saint would have been regarded as the first fallen Knight. Sometime after 1589 the French Grand Master Hugues Loubenx de Verdalle (1531-1595) had the Florentine artist Filippo Paladini (1544-1614)\(^{146}\) paint the fresco cycle narrating four large scenes from the life of St. John the Baptist, from his birth till his death. These were painted inside the main Magisterial Chapel situated in the Summer Apartment in the Palace’s private quarters connected to the Grand Master’s bedroom.\(^{147}\) The four scenes depict *St. John Preaching in the Wilderness; The Nativity and Naming of John; The Baptism of Christ and Salome Presenting the Head of the Baptist at Herod’s Banquet*.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio in 1608 also painted the *Beheading of St. John the Baptist* for the oratory inside the Cathedral of St. John in Valletta, the site of which was not far from the Palace (Figure 12).\(^{148}\) The oratory was a martyrium and it was designed to give the Knights memorable and even mnemonic form. “One can well imagine the youths of the Order contemplating... about how their ancestors earned ‘crowns of

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\(^{147}\) The frescos were badly damaged and have been recently restored. See: Kakoulli, I. (2000) *Grandmaster’s Chapel, Magisterial Palace, Valletta, Malta: Paladini’s Life of the Baptist: A Scientific Examination*, Courtauld Institute of Art, London

\(^{148}\) The painting was likely Caravaggio’s customary gift a novice gave to the Order of St. John on being officially installed as a Knight.
immortality,’ with their heads” writes Stone.149 The Knights had to walk over the bones of the martyrs of the 1565 Siege before each lesson in the oratory, as the crypt below the hall was a burial ground for the martyred Knights, and masses were frequently devoted to them. The oratory was founded by Knights belonging to the *Confraternita della Misericordia*, which accompanied condemned prisoners to the gallows.

The painting depicts the beheading of the saint taking place in a dark prison yard. The picture’s audience is stranded between two violent moments - the killing and the beheading. Suspended, as it were, left in a kind of limbo - an inbetween state.. Caravaggio signed his name “f.[ra] MichelAng[elo]” in the “blood” oozing from the Baptist’s severed neck. Stone argues that both politics and poetics, played an important role in Caravaggio’s inscription in the blood, because it makes an important contribution to the idea of *concettismo*, the witty, metaphoric language of Baroque poetry.150 Symbolically showing how the Knights of the Order of St. John were also ready to become martyrs to defend their faith.151

As Buci-Glucksmann put it, “how can one express the real and the unreal? If not by a fragmentation of vision - that which Caravaggio would bring to seventeenth century Neapolitan Baroque culture and would then become the unconscious of vision... the sublime unreal raptures a traumatizing and unsublimed real... using the rhetoric of the theatre and an embodied dramaturgy, bodies emerge onto the light from a dark background.”152 Scholars have also often described his paintings as inspired by scenes from popular dramas such as the *Commedia dell’Arte*, because they were proven to engage the emotions and make imagery memorable.153 He must have frequently observed torch-lit processions, as well as public executions. Burke writes that executions and other public punishments have often been analysed as performances of justice. Trials too were performances of memory by the witnesses.154

After the departure of Caravaggio from Malta, the Bolognese painter Leonello Spada (1576-1622) was commissioned to continue the major cycle of historical fresco friezes in the three rooms to the left of the Grand Master’s bedroom, in the Committee’s Room, the Pages Room and in the Ambassadors Room. There are eight scenes in each room painted in the classical Bolognese tradition. They show scenes of the history of the Order of St. John from its earliest days in Jerusalem up to its expulsion in Rhodes in 1522 and the decision to move to Viterbo in 1524. The pictures feature the actions and leadership of the Grand Masters, probably based on the Order’s chronicler Giacomo Bosio. Allegorical figures representing virtue, charity and perseverance, obedience, zeal, war, and valour stand between the scenes. Allegorical figures showing the good conquering evil, between the Knights and the Ottoman Turks, was a common feature (Figure 13). White stucco angels hold up cartouches with either Grand Master Wignacourt’s coat of arms or identifying the allegory above it. In the Ambassadors

Room statues of Old Testament prophets alternate in between the eight historical scenes. The artist painted numerous figures to narrate the history of the Order, setting them in vast architectural spaces animating them with gestures. The concept of *affetti* was used in paintings to express human passions and feelings through gestures, derived from ancient rhetoric and poetic theory - to move the soul. These frescos served political and didactic purposes and the inscriptions helped to press home the rhetorical messages.

Figure 13: Leonello Spada, Allegorical figure between the Knights and the Ottoman Turks, showing good conquering evil, Grand Master’s Palace, Valletta, c.1609-1610
The corridors inside the palace are also decorated with lunettes depicting heroic naval battle scenes of the Knights winning battles against the Turks, bearing inscriptions. For example, the caption above one of these 18th century battlescenes translates to: “Capture of the Sultana Benghen, by the Bali Spinola, 8 October 1700” (Figure 14). An other translation of the caption above an other similar battle scene reads: “Capture of the two Algerian caravels in the seas of Sardinia by the San Giovanni, commanded by the Commander d’Allogny de la Grois, under the orders of the Commander de Marquin, commanding the squadron, 31 March 1720.”

Similar to these battle scenes in the Grand Master’s Palace in Malta are various other battle scenes in palaces across Europe. For example, the Knights of St. John were also depicted fighting in the Battle of Lepanto of 1571 in paintings by Paolo Veronese (1528-1588) and Andrea Vicentino (1542-1617) on the walls of the Doge’s Palace in Venice. Such battle scenes were assigned great symbolic importance by the Christian West who feared that the Ottoman Muslim Turks would take over Western Europe. If the West is engaged in a “clash of civilizations” then, according to Crowley, that clash occurred in the sixteenth century, when Islam, under the leadership of the Ottoman Turks, seemed
poised to dominate most of Europe. The question that comes to mind after viewing these scenes is: What kind of emotions do these images engender within their spectators? As Febvre argued “reconstructing the emotional life of a given era is a task that is both extremely seductive and terribly difficult, but one that the historian has no right to desert.” The Ottoman Turks are most often depicted during battles in larger sea vessels and bigger in numbers. Arguably the main aim of these images was to induce fear in the minds of the population of the West.

Fear has been described as an emotion induced by a threat or a risk to life, and it is a response arising from the perception of danger, closely related to the emotion of anxiety, which occurs as the results of threats. Scholars along the years and in many fields have addressed the question of fear. For example, John Locke (1632-1704) believed that fear pushes people more powerfully than desire. Edmund Burke (1729-1797) similarly wrote that “when we imagine the prospect of “pain and terror”, we experience a “delightful horror.” Without fear we are passive; with it, we are roused to “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.” More recently Corey in Fear: The History of a Political Idea argued that:

though fear has a politics, we often ignore or misconstrue it, making it difficult to understand how and why fear is used… Convinced that we lack moral or political principles to bind us together, we savor the experience of being afraid… for only fear, we believe can turn us from isolated men and women into a united people… We blind ourselves to the real-world conflicts that make fear an instrument of political rule and advance… fear arouses a heightened state of experience. It quickens our perceptions as no other emotion can, forcing us to see and act in the world in new and more interesting ways, with greater moral discrimination and a more acute consciousness of our surroundings and ourselves.

Edward Said, fascinated by how the people of the Western World perceive the East, had analysed the subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture. Such perceptions have served as implicit justifications for the colonial and imperialist ambitions of the West. “Moslems and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists….What we have… is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make the world vulnerable to military aggression.”\textsuperscript{162}

In light of the writings by Edward Said, and on the paradigm of domination by the North of the South, Chambers, focusing from the early 16\textsuperscript{th} century to the present, argues that the Mediterranean is “imaginatively constructed.”\textsuperscript{163} He argues that this period marks the emergence and development of cartographies of power and knowledge that charted European expansion on a planetary scale. In this respect the Mediterranean exemplifies global patterns of shared encounter, colonialism, trade and imperial ambition. Adding to this, Xuereb argues that “A key concept in the construction of the Mediterranean reality is that of agenda - driven and competing interpretations of this space, with the aim of skewing a narrative in a particular way and therefore purposely not in another, with the ultimate goal of drawing advantage from it.”\textsuperscript{164}

In order to reconstruct social and cultural theory, a group of sociologists has also recently published a collective volume in an attempt to further understand contemporary events as performances.\textsuperscript{165} The works by these authors escape the narrow and restrictive identity politics of modern nationalism and attempt to provide a different narrative to the media we are accustomed to.

By the early 18\textsuperscript{th} century, the new scenographic commissions inside the Grand Master’s palace in Valletta shifted from military, fearful and triumphal propagandistic views of the Mediterranean, to exotic views of South America and heavenly illusionistic ceiling paintings. The Spanish Grand Master Ramon Perellos (1697-1720) commissioned a set of ten tapestries from the Gobelin workshop in Paris, representing the newly Portuguese conquered land of Brazilian Amazonia, to serve as scenography in the Grand Council Hall.\textsuperscript{166} The chamber was where the Order’s deliberations were discussed, and the tapestries were designed to its exact dimensions and installed there by the summer of 1710. They were copies from hangings at Versailles Palace in France,\textsuperscript{167} thus the Grand Master was probably paying homage to the French King Louis XIV, who had earlier on commissioned the hangings for his royal collection in Versailles.

The tapestries were not mythical or biblical in theme but the type of art that the Protestant Dutch produced in the seventeenth century, images of the New World.\textsuperscript{168} The Order of St. John is known to have owned land in the Caribbean and the tapestries could have been symbolic of their colonial power to reach and conquer also such far lands.

The choice for this exotic cycle of tapestries as scenography to their Council meetings must have stimulated their imagination, triggered provocative conversations and speculation regarding the potential riches available in South America (Figure 15).

\textsuperscript{166} The Knight Fra Jean Jacques des Mesmes (1674-1741) ordered the tapestries from the Royal Factory of Tapestries and Carpet Weavers in Paris. He was the Order’s Ambassador in Versailles between 1715 and 1741. See: Buhagiar, M. (2009) Essays on the Knights and Art and Architecture in Malta 1500-1798, Midsea Books, Valletta, p. 136

\textsuperscript{167} Count Johan Mauritus of Nassau-Siegen (1604-1679), Governor General of colonial Dutch Brazil brought these visual depictions which were then transformed into the scenography. See: Bremer-David, C. (1994), “Le Chaval Reye: A French Tapestry Portraying Dutch Brazil”, in The J. Paul Getty Journal, xxii, p. 23

In 1723 the Sienese artist Nicolo Nasoni (1691-1773)\textsuperscript{169} was commissioned by the Portuguese Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena, to paint the main corridors of the palace with illusionistic architecture, “opening the corridors to the skies and extending them vertically in a concerto of theatrical virtuosism” (Figure 16).\textsuperscript{170} He created space as an architectural fantasy with balconies, domes, columns, arches, grand staircases, windows and floral designs and coat of arms. Religious scenes, weapons, flags and musical instruments were also depicted. Nasoni used illusionism to articulate a dynamic visual

\textsuperscript{169} In 1725 the artist left for Porto in Portugal and became during the 18th century one of the most influential figures in Portuguese Baroque architecture, known for introducing his original and vigorous, theatrical style of Baroque and Rococo architecture.

\textsuperscript{170} Sciberras, K. (2009) \textit{Baroque Art in Malta}, Midsea Books, Valletta
relationship between the viewer and the decorative programme, opening up the ceiling to the heavens into an infinite space, with a fusion of architectural, sculptural, and pictorial elements provoking deceptive and ambiguous perceptions. A painted column could not be easily distinguished from a real one, and an angel made of stucco from one that was painted.

Most ceilings of Baroque palaces were often painted in a similar manner with the illusions of another world, merging the pictorial space and real space, constantly reminding the viewers of the passing of time. The aim arguably was to enter the minds of a population with the promise of a spiritual fulfillment in the afterlife for the small price of identifying with the interests of powerful elites in this one. The painted ceiling also created an illusion that the space was bigger than it was, following the typical Baroque use of movement, concave and convex forms to create folds.

Deleuze had argued that the fold is far more than an element of decoration, but defines a specific way of thinking. The Baroque twists and turns its folds, pushing them to infinity. The Baroque differentiates its folds in two ways “by moving along two infinities, as if infinity were composed of two stages or floors: the pleats of matter and the folds of the soul.” Deleuze’s theory of the fold in architectural discourse was not used as a technical device, but an ontology of becoming, of multiplicity, of a differentiation while maintaining a continuity.

Figure 16: Nicolo Nasoni, Tromp l’oeil (18th century), Grand Master’s Palace, Valletta
Public Stages

The building of the Magisterial Palace in Valletta was commissioned in the centre of the city and theatrical events spilt out into the public squares, streets and public theatres surrounding it. Of Valletta’s public squares, the Palace square in front of the Grand Master’s Palace is the biggest, adding to its monumental stature and providing a civic belvedere, hosting various celebrations (Figure 17). The square was where the public gathered, one of the few points of contact between classes in a society which believed in a very rigid class system.\textsuperscript{172}

The square has theatrical elements: the large palace balconies running along the façade, overlooking the square joined public and private, constituting an intermediary between one type of existence or reality and another. From here, the Grand Master would follow ceremonies taking place in the square below or address the people in a message of superiority and power from above. Spectators could observe public functions taking place within the city, even city life itself. In function and in design the balconies could be linked with theatre boxes. The city and the ceremonies that took place brought the

social classes together in an arena of conflict which architecture and urban planning helped to reduce. The pomp and artifice of the feast proved the power and importance of the institution organizing it, an arrangement that had to take place in a well-populated area.

Scenography in public spectacles were especially popular. The elements of scenography included temporary triumphal arches, festoons, damasks, street decorations, movable altars of repose and religious statuary. Thake writes that although the custom of erecting ceremonial triumphal arches is frequently cited in archival documents, only a few designs of these triumphal arches have survived.\(^{173}\) He describes the lavishly decorated triumphal arch designed by Pietro Paolo Troisi, for Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736) for his formal entry into Mdina in 1722.\(^{174}\)

Festivals such as anniversaries, carnival celebrations, village feasts dedicated to the Catholic patron saints and ceremonial pageants took place in the palace square. Vella Bondin and Bonello also both write about the *Calendimaggio* held during the 17th and 18th centuries which consisted of musical *cantatas* on public stages or triumphal cars, mostly in praise of the Grand Master, with mythological and allegorical subjects set to music, sometimes commissioned from acknowledged Italian maestri. In addition to scripted comedies and tragedies, the Italian acting troupes who performed their *Commedia dell’arte* were also popular. Malta had a strong connection with Naples, since they both made part of the Kingdom of Two Sicilies and there were many theatrical groups from Italy who came to Malta to perform in front of the Grand Master. Bonnello argues that in 1605, a large *Commedia dell’ Arte* troupe was giving performances on the island, under the patronage of the Langue of Italy. A continuous flow of comedies, drama, opera and stage *trattenimenti* paid for by the Knights has left traces in the records.\(^{175}\)

The annual carnival celebrations, a Catholic festival which is celebrated before Lent was and still is a highly popular celebration held outside, in the streets and the squares

\(^{175}\) Bonello, G. (2008) “Patronage by the Knights of Malta” in *Between the Battlesword and the Cross. Masterpieces from the Armoury of Malta*, Musee de l’Armee and Heritage Malta
in Valletta. Sweet vendors erected their stalls around the Grand Master’s Palace, and
decorated floats, which were drawn by horses, went round the principal streets of
Valletta. The carnival in Valletta is valued through tradition and always follows a set
form, starting with a carnival dance known as the *parata*, which dates back to the time
of the Knights and representing the 1565 Great Siege by the Turks against the Knights.
This is still held until this very day. Competitions of best dances, costumes and best
floats follow.

In 1741, the best float was that of the Grand Master’s pages who were dressed as
mythological figures. Their float was usually one of the principal attractions: “the
parade on a carriage, magnificently decorated and drawn by many mules; they
themselves are bedecked in gay costume, play many musical instruments and their
carriage is preceded by two trumpeteers and cymbalists, all on horseback, the whole
creating a very beautiful spectacle and fully meriting the applause of the people.”
Each float used to halt underneath the balcony of the Grand Master’s Palace and
laudatory poems to the accompaniment of musical instruments in praise of the Grand
Master were sung, the effort being rewarded by gifts of silver coins showered on them
from above.

The carnival of 1759 was long remembered for the variety of floats. The most
conspicuous were a huge dragon; a cavalry squadron beating the retreat; Charon’s boat;
and the most spectacular of all, a walking hospital that included six patients in bed,
surrounded by doctors and other hospital attendants. The ‘operations’ were performed
below the Palace balconies in front of all those present, including Grand Master
Emmanuel Pinto and his guests. The *cuccagna* at carnival was another tradition: a long
greasy pole set up in the main square in front of the palace, decorated with flowers and
large quantities of meat and paper crosses of the Knights. People competed to reach the
end of the pole in order to attain prizes presented by the Grand Master.

Rituals which reverse roles and suspend normal rules of conduct have attracted the attention of various
anthropologists and historians. As perceived by Gluckman, the major paradox of rituals of status-reversal

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177 Ibid., p. 78
178 The Archives of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta, Libr. *Ms.9, f. 380*,
National Library, Valletta
is that while they appear to enact rebellion, they in fact reproduce and even strengthen the established social order. The ritualisation of existing social roles and relationships through symbolic reversal attempts to show that harmony among people can be achieved despite conflicts.179 Gash argues that two points are elided in this argument: one, that the ritual enactment of opposites provides a mirror or map of the true order of things. The second point is psychological: to allow inferiors to abuse or command superiors is an attempt to exorcise aggressive impulses which might otherwise jeopardise the smooth running of a hierarchical society.180

Cremona writes that Maltese carnival has two types of carnivals: the highly regulated carnival of Valletta and the less regulated carnival of smaller villages in Malta and Gozo, using terms which were applied by Victor Turner. The stress in this context, she argues, is upon the cultural and societal aspects, looking at the theatrical event through the perspective of the relations with the environment in which it takes place, showing how political interference has influenced both the structured and unstructured types of carnival in Malta.181 Cremona argues that the collective social space of the street becomes the stage for theatrical expressions which manifest man’s need to indulge in play. Schechner had argued that when people go out into the streets to make theatre and put on masks and costumes they are not only mirroring life, but also enacting out the mutliplicity each human life is.182

The Manoel Theatre in Valletta: Mirroring the Imagined World

In this age of theatre, the stage became the favoured vehicle for imaging the world. Quite apart form its position in the understanding of representation, the Baroque theatre played a central role in the understanding of social intercourse, human action and even the nature of the self.183

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181 According to Iacomo Bosio (Dell’Istoria della Sacra Religione et Ill.ma Militia di S. Gio. Gierosolimitano), carnival was first celebrated by the Knights in Birgu in 1535, but research by Fiorini shows that its roots go back much earlier. See: Cassar Pullicino, J. (1992) Studies in Maltese Folklore, Malta University Press, Malta, footnotes 25 and 48.
By the 18th century theatre was transformed into an intellectual and imaginative model for understanding the world, as well as persuading it. The emergence of the illusionistic stage was one of the most important developments of Baroque Europe, and the “preference became more and more for indoor spectacles where visual effects could be controlled and where the eyes of the spectators could almost look in a certain way.”

Visual rhetoric as has been discussed above was also a central concern. Spectacles at the theatre mirrored contemporary life in its allegorical forms, based on Aristotle’s “Poetics”, to evoke wonder in the minds of the onlookers and appeal to the emotions. Erika Fischer-Lichte writes that the Baroque theatre was based on the principles of effect, through which performances were expected to arouse passion in the spectators. The three main means by which this goal was to be accomplished, writes Fischer-Lichte was by the use of actors, music and the use of machines of different kinds.

Theatre evolved in the Baroque era and became a multimedia experience; starting with the actual architectural space, the stage could change its setting in a matter of seconds.

Valletta’s Baroque public theatre, now known as the “Manoel Theatre”, was built close to the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta, and was inaugurated in January 1732 by the Portuguese Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena. Built all' Italiana with boxes reaching from the ground floor to the third floor, the design of the theatre has been attributed to Romano Carapecchia, who was not only an architect of the Order but had also acquired considerable theatrical experience by working at the Tor de Nona in Rome and had written a treatise about scenography between 1689-91. The theatre in Valletta was most probably designed from the inspiration of the Santa Cecilia and the Santa Lucia theatres in Palermo. The Grand Master occupied a Royal box on the first floor and like other European Theatres the parterre floor could be winched up to the level of the stage platform when balls or masked balls were held, thus increasing the general space. During or after many of the performances the audience was also often

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invited for banquets and fancy receptions, some also held at the Grand Masters Palace.\textsuperscript{188}

Most of the \textit{impressari} who managed the Manoel Theatre in Valletta in the 18th century were from Naples, which explains the main reason why so many actors, and musicians who performed in Naples also performed in Malta.\textsuperscript{189} Operas written by the major composers of the century are also known to have been performed at the Manoel Theatre. Works by the German composer Johann Adolf Hasse (1689-1783), and by the Italian composers Baldassere Galuppi (1706-1785), Nicolo Piccini (1728- 1800), Domenico Cimarosa (1749-1801) and Giovanni Paisello (1740- 1816) among many others, had their works performed at the Manoel Theatre.\textsuperscript{190}

The Operas which were staged were largely based on mythological themes and peopled with noble characters, promoting aristocratic ideals, most of them involving heroes fighting off the vices and the evil. For example, the Manoel Theatre was inaugurated on 19th January 1732 with a tragedy called “Merope,” by the Italian dramatist Marchese Francesco Scipione Maffei (1675-1775). The work was inspired by the classical Greek tragedy \textit{Cresofonte}, by Euripides. Aristotle in his \textit{Poetica} and also Plato had referred to it. The play deals with subjects like the fight against tyranny. At the centre of the play there is \textit{Merope}, the emblematic figure of maternity, who saves her child from the tyrant Polifonte.\textsuperscript{191} In Greek mythology, \textit{Merope} was also the daughter of Pleione, the protector of sailors, and she married a mortal who lived on the island Chios. The references to sailors, islands and the fight against tyranny once again shows how theatre mirrored contemporary life in its allegorical forms.

William Shakespeare back in the late 16th century in London had also used ancient Greek and Roman performances to question the nature of power, setting politically sensitive issues in the classical past, allowing them to be aired inside the theatre. Exploring the past in the theatre provided a key to the present. Most of the conspiracies,

\textsuperscript{188} Xuereb, P. (2012) \textit{The Manoel Theatre: A short history}, Midsea Books, Valletta
\textsuperscript{190} Xuereb, C. (ed.) (1997) “Opera in Malta in the 18th century”, in \textit{The Theatre in Malta}, Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Valletta
assassinations, intricate affairs, rebellions which happened in the past could be mirrored with current affairs - what we might call “temporal syncretism.” The topics would have been censored, but setting them in the classical past allowed them to be aired in the public theatre.\footnote{Bate, J. and Thornton, D. (2012) \textit{Shakespeare. Staging the World}, The British Museum Press, London}

Baroque art is “inextricably bound up with a metaphysical view of the world”, argues Martin, “familiar objects of visible reality may be looked on as emblems of a higher invisible reality.”\footnote{Martin, J.P. (1977) “The Transcendental View of Reality and the Allegorical Tradition” in \textit{Art and Theory in Baroque Europe}, Harper and Row} Neoplatonic interpretive principles structured the creative imagination and helped found the ceremonial festive expression of mythic-political values in symbolic patterns. At the heart of this Neoplatonic philosophy was the notion that an inner reality is half concealed and half revealed by the outer reality, veiled by means of allegory and symbolism. The Neoplatonic emphasis on images and on the interpretation of visual forms probably originated in Plato’s argument that language is an inferior tool for the revelation of truth. Visually represented images can lead to higher knowledge than truth.\footnote{Gombrich, E. (1972) \textit{Symbolic Images. Studies in the art of the Renaissance}, Phaidon, London, p. 147} With the Neoplatonic philosophy came also the notion that an image can at the same time represent, symbolize and express.\footnote{Ibid., p. 123-124}

In 1742, on the first anniversary of the election of the Portuguese Grand Master Pinto, the event was celebrated with the production at the Manoel Theatre of \textit{L’Arminio}, an opera written by German born composer George Frederic Handel (1685-1759), based on the Roman invasion of Germany in AD9, and it deals with the Germanic prince Arminius, who defeated the Romans. Testa described how:

For this occasion the theatre was packed with Knights, senior members of the Order and those Maltese nobleman who could acquire a seat in the last five rows of the parquet, the only place reserved for the local gentry. The play finished at 8pm and was followed by a musical and vocal concert, with copious refreshments between intervals, which dragged on till nearly midnight. Pinto remained to the very end and then returned on foot to the Palace.\footnote{Testa, C. (1989) \textit{The Life and Times of Grand Master Pinto 1741-1773}, Midsea Books, Valletta, p. 48}
The anniversaries of his election as Grand Master were yearly celebrated in a similar manner with the productions of heroic mythological spectacles, arguably mirroring the triumphal adventures of the Grand Master and his Knights. For example, the 27th anniversary was celebrated with the production at the Theatre of *Ulisse in Faecia - festa teatrale per musica*. Ulysses was the Greek King of Ithaca and hero of Homer’s Odyssey and the Iliad, famous for his adventurous journeys by sea back home after the Trojan War. On 18\(^{th}\) January 1769, to celebrate Grand Master Pinto’s birthday, *Il Trionfo De Minerva* was performed. Minerva is known for expelling the Vices from the Garden of Virtue, the vices arguably mirroring the Ottoman Turks and the garden mirroring the Christian West.

Performances mirroring in a satirical and allegorical manner the role of the Knights as monks and as hospitaliers were also popular. For example, the satirical and anti-clerical play called *Don Pilone, overro, Il Bacchettone falso* by Girolamo Gigli was performed on the 26th January 1732.\(^{197}\) This seems to have been inspired by the play called *Tartuffe*, by the French play-wright Moliere, which had a strong satire on priests. The play also satirized the hypocrisies of French aristocratic society, but it also engaged a more serious tone when pointing out the flaws which all humans possess, playing upon empathy and human emotion. Bonello cites the diary of Reverend Giuseppe Agius who relates an evening at the Manoel when *Don Pilone* was being performed again on 8th January, 1738. He wrote that the evening reached its climax with a farce.

An other play performed at the Manoel Theatre which mirrored the role of the Knights as hospitaliers was *Il Redicoloso Laureato*, which dealt with the conferment of a Doctor’s degree on a new physician. The cast included eighteen pompous medics wearing solemn robes and with laureate birettas and eight surgeons brandishing enemas - in those days huge syringes. All had to bend and pass under a corridor of enemas.\(^{198}\) Again, this shows how theatre reflected contemporary life.

Thake, writing about the architectural legacy of Grand Master Pinto argues that “.. the preoccupation with rituals and grand ceremonies was highly representative of the Order


of St. John’s lifestyle during the mid-eighteenth century, where scenographic imagery assumed a heightened significance.”

In his old age, Grand Master Pinto celebrated the 31st anniversary of his election to rule the Order of the Knights of St. John and the Maltese islands in the following manner, shedding light on the importance theatre had in the lives of those living in the 18th century:

Notwithstanding that he was then 92 years old, Pinto went as usual at the Manoel Theatre on the evening of 18 January 1772 for the annual reception and musical programme which his friends and many hangers-on staged to mark the anniversary of his election to the grandmastership. It was a rough wintry day but at 7 pm, dressed in rich clothes (costing 80 scudi per yard), the nonagenerian Grand Master emerged from his Palace, escorted by six soldiers of his bodyguard dressed alla Muscovita to go on foot to the theater; he stayed to the very end of the reception which was destined to be his last.

Aercke, following the writings by Turner on rituals, argues that a splendid festive performance cannot be studied in isolation from its context. As a ritual it consisted of a set of phases which had to be gone through completely. The words “perform” and performance are derived from the Old French *parfornier*: to carry through completely, “to accomplish entirely, complete, achieve. Attending a performance, mirroring contemporary times meant making the ephemeral permanent, by means of material records. The splendid performance was only a part of a series of connected events, all of which were incorporated into a total rhetorical scheme”, argues Aercke. All these events were intricately connected in time and space, by the presence of the participants, as well as by the deployment of related symbolical-allegorical schemata. The entire event was, indeed a “performance”: the completion of an elaborate set of rituals.

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202 Ibid. P. 35.
Conclusion: Baroque Ephemeral Performance as Transhistorical

“When the play is over, however, what then?” asks Skrine in his essay on the Baroque. Caravaggio’s painting of “St. Jerome” in St. John’s Co-Cathedral in Valletta, Malta, shows the barely-clothed priest writing away on his desk, with only a skull to keep him company. The skull, served as a memento mori - a constant reminder of death and divine judgement to the viewer.

De Lucca writing about the festa funebra of Baroque Europe describes the elaborate death rituals and ceremonies of the Grand Masters culminating in the design of theatrically designed tombstones or even monumental tombs such as that designed by the Florentine artist Soldani Benzi for the Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena who had died in his palace in Valletta on 12 December 1736. De Lucca writes that the corpse of the Grand Master was transported in a splendid cortege according to custom, from the Palace to the Conventual Church in Valletta and his body placed in a Chapelle Ardente, a contraption made of wood surrounded by innumorous candles designed ten years earlier by Romano Carapecchia. The deceased ruler was undeniably the chief actor in the spectacle.

The marble tomb stoned floor and monuments inside the Cathedral of St. John in Valletta testify to this, showing in a performative manner how the Knights wanted future generations to perceive them. Over four hundred Knights are buried in the Cathedral. Each tombstone is decorated with the coat of arms of the Knights and symbols of triumph or the angel of fame blowing a trumpet and angels holding laurel wreaths as symbols of victory. Several tombstones also depict weapons and battle scenes and their epitaphs describe their virtues and achievements.

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Skrine, however, argues that it was not of death, which Baroque writers most complained:

…but of ‘Time’, under the fatal shadow of whose wings all things decay and wither. The century which saw the invention of the pendulum clock and the balance - spring mechanism in watches, was growing more and more aware of the passing of time - measured not just in seasons, months and days, but in hours, minutes and even seconds. The pressure which all modern people know came as something of a shock to the seventeenth century. To own an hour-glass or pocket-watch was a first step towards the acute consciousness of fleeting time which quickly became a major preoccupation of the period.\(^{205}\)

Mindful of the importance of the wave of scientific research which was sweeping the European continent at the end of the eighteenth century, the Grand Master’s Palace also had a clock tower built in 1745 and an astronomical tower was set up in 1783.\(^{206}\) The Baroque is distinguished precisely by its infinite production of images and appearances, and it emerges at the moment when the Counter Reformation and modern science intersect.

The Baroque age understood the concepts of transience and ephemerality, the wish for immortality, the need to mirror time, to repeat time - to stop time, to be in between time (liminality) through spectacle and art. It is as if they were saying “We do not accept the ephemerality of this moment, we want to extend it, or at least we will try…” Time was mirrored through rituals, spectacles and scenographies. The Grand Master mirroring Christ, the Knights mirroring St. John the Baptist, spreading the Catholic faith, the palace ceiling mirroring the heavens with all its folds and labyrinths, the tapestries mirroring the conquest of the new world, and the spreading of the Catholic faith.

In order to further understand the responses of contemporary artists to Baroque Malta, it has been deemed useful to journey back in time to revisit the age which has been defined as the *Theatrum Mundi*. While this chapter attempted to explore in greater depth the role of these Baroque performances, the following chapters will look at how these


\(^{206}\) Ganado, A. (ed.) *Palace of the Grand Masters in Valletta*, Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Valletta
multifaceted spectacles have taken a hybrid form across time and spaces. As Ndalianis argues:

a central characteristic of the Baroque is its lack of respect for the limits of the frame. Closed forms are replaced by open structures that favour a dynamic and expanding polycentrism. Time as well as stories refuse to be contained within a single structure, expanding their narrative universes into further sequels and serials. Distinct media cross over into other media, merging with, influencing or being influenced by other media forms - blurring the spaces of fiction and reality...\(^\text{207}\)

Part Two

Theoretical Underpinnings
Chapter Two

Liminality and the Liminoid

[...] life discloses itself at a depth inaccessible to observation, reflection and theory.\textsuperscript{208}

The theoretical approach in this research will be focused around liminality and the liminoid, as they can be fruitfully linked to the human experience in Baroque performances, as well as to contemporary experimental performances in historic house museums, which this thesis is exploring. The chapter will be building upon the work of mainly anthropological and performance scholars, to explore in greater depth the potential of using performance in the museum to reach a reflective and a reflexive state. Museums can arguably provoke profound personal and collective recollections. However, there is a gap in the scholarly literature regarding the processes in reaching the “liminal” or the “liminoid” in such spaces, thus this chapter acts as a literature review and provides a theoretical contextual background to the rest of the thesis.

Inspired by Carol Duncan’s writing entitled \textit{Civilizing Rituals Inside Public Art Museums},\textsuperscript{209} this chapter builds up on her writing on museums as ritual settings, by reviewing performance and anthropological theories focussing on rituals. This chapter bridges the Baroque rituals described and analysed in the previous chapter with the contemporary performances and interventions inside historic spaces and museums discussed in the following chapters. While Duncan illuminates the ways in which museums engage their visitors in the performance of ritual scenarios and through them, communicate and affirm ideas, values and social identities, this chapter will be further exploring the theoretical underpinnings of performances. It specifically reviews Victor Turner’s notions of ritual, social drama, liminality and the liminoid which were highly influential for the study of performance by Richard Schechner et al. Arguably their studies could be also helpful for the study of conceptual art and performance in museums and palaces.

Defining “Liminality”

In anthropology, “liminality,” from the Latin word *līmen*, meaning “a threshold,” an in between state of mind, is the middle stage of rituals when participants stand between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and a new way which the ritual establishes. During the liminal stage of the ritual, those undergoing the ritual find themselves in a state of extreme vulnerability, where they are open to change. Persons enter a time-place were they are not this not that, neither here nor there, in the midst of a journey from one social self to another.210

The term “liminality” was first coined by the Dutch anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in *Rites of Passage* (1960 [1908]).211 The term was eventually developed by the social anthropological writings of Victor Turner (1920-1983),212 indicating a mode of consciousness “betwixt and between the normal day to day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending.” Turner explains that “…Van Gennep defined *rites de passage* as rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age.”213 Turner focused on how people experience the ritual. With his wife Edith Turner, they emphasised that anthropology should be a study of human experience, not just behaviour, and that researchers should be openly reflexive about their own experiences.214

Turner argued that certain cultural situations could open up spaces in which individuals may step back from the practical concerns and social relations of everyday life and look at themselves and their world with different thoughts and feelings.215 Turner regarded “transition (the middle stage) as a process, a becoming, and in the case of *rites de passage* even a transformation.” Turner also suggested that “during the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual ‘passenger’ or [liminar] is ambiguous, neither here

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nor there, not described by the usual points of social classification, devoid of the status insignia of both the old state and the not yet-acquired new state.” Turner focused on how people experienced ritual. He inquired how thresholds were and are experienced during social dramas and how people cope with them.216 He described social dramas as having four main dynamic sequences: breach, crisis, redressive action and integration. He was interested mainly in redressive action and in a ritual way of dealing with crisis as he believed that rituals had a way of bringing communities in crisis back to harmony. Ritual as social drama provides it with a significant social function, to dispel conflict and schism and to mend quarrels. He applied it to the developed society in the West to explore how conflict is resolved and what replaces ritual in a secular context. He argued that aspects of liminality are also recognised in modern activities such as attending the theatre, seeing a film, or visiting an art exhibition.217 His arguments for a positive liminal state of mind, which he called “communitas” also has potential for inspiring creative out of the box approaches. Modern societies which use liminality for recreation he called “liminoid.”

Defining the Liminal

Turner, building up on Van Gennep’s theory on the liminal state wanted to apply it to modern societies. In his essay on comparative symbology entitled “Liminal to Liminaloid, in Play, Flow, Ritual”, Turner admitted that he was still in his exploratory phase of these two terms and their meanings.218 He decided to call modern liminality, generated by and following the industrial revolution as “liminoid,” which is like liminal, but not exactly the same. Arguably, it is a development of it, taking on hybrid forms as it develops across time. Turner argued that while liminal states are created by traditional societies, liminoid states are invented by modern societies. He called liminoid, those liminal states with technical innovation, usually assigned to “leisure” activities, which are experimental in nature. Turner wrote that the “-oid” derives from Greek – *eidos*, a form, shape; and means “like”, resembling; liminoid resembles without being identical.

with “liminal.” Turner also suggested that to distinguish the liminoid from the liminal one needs to examine the notion of play - also conceived as betwixt-and-between, a neither-this-nor-that. Modern play is arguably much more complicated than the limited symbolic genres of tribal society. Turner argues that the liminal phases of tribal society invert but do not usually subvert the status quo, the structural form, of society. The “entertainment” of modern societies are often subversive argued Turner. Liminoid phenomena are often parts of social critiques or even revolutionary manifestos, exposing the injustices, inefficiencies and immoralities of the mainstream economic and political structures and organisations. He also argued, though, that some performances, even in modern society, still possess something of the sacred seriousness, even the _rites des passage_ structure of their antecedents. In complex, modern societies both the liminal and the liminoid can co-exist, with the liminoid being freer then the liminal, argued Turner. Both the liminal and the liminoid mean studying symbols in social action. He also wrote that while “one works at the liminal, one plays with the liminoid.” Turner wrote that even though Schechner had tried to move to a general theory of performance as a “binary”: one term of which is “efficacy-ritual” (liminal) and the other being “entertainment theatre” (liminoid), he argued that “in actuality, they interpenetrate...”

If “universals” are wanted, they might be found in processual models explaining how one set of genres, ritual performances, for example, become other sets, Schechner argued. “Do rituals “evolve” into dance and theatre and sports and if so how?”, questioned Schechner, who worked with Turner a lot on this. This search for universals occupied Turner during much of his life. In one of his last essays entitled “Are there Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual and Drama?” Turner wrote that “Theatre is one of the many inheritors of that multifaceted system of pre-industrial ritual which embraces ideas and images of cosmos and chaos...” Turner’s theory on liminality and the liminoid and the transformation which occurs during these states has brought much criticism, however, many are also those who have embraced them, who have been

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219 Ibid. p.32  
220 Ibid. p.41  
221 Ibid. p.55  
222 Ibid. p. 122  
224 Ibid. p.19
inspired by him and who have tried to review his theories, as they open up a lot of questions.

I will argue in this thesis that if the first part of the research deals with the liminal because, as Turner explained, it deals with historical rituals, then the following sections deal with a hybrid form of these rituals and liminal states, sometimes inverting and at time also subverting the status quo. I will also argue that transformation can occur when a contemporary intervention in a historic site activates the audience. Transformation can occur when audiences are transformed from passive to active participants. The immersive game like, at times repetitive, ritualistic, fragmented, multi-layered narratives arguably have the potential to provoke participants to react, to enhance a higher state of consciousness, to question, to look for more clues. This can make them further aware that the past does not simply have one grand narrative but multiple, much more complex ones. This is where I believe the transformation can take place. As Claire Bishop points out, and as will be discussed later on in this research: decentring and activation, are what site-specific conceptual interventions are best capable of doing. The interventions chosen to be analysed in this thesis do not constitute mere “entertainment” - but they have something of a historical, ritualistic, metaphorical, inquisitive nature, offering material for reflection and contemplation. Arguably artists during the rehearsals and preparatory processes, and participants during the performances, dig deeper into themselves, questioning and looking for answers through their own past memories, knowledge and emotions, going through a metaphorical journey or pilgrimage.

In the last few years before his death, Victor Turner became even more interested in processes and rehearsals by contemporary, experimental performers. This thesis to a certain extent attempts to build up on this with a focus on museum studies. Further research is definitely required for a fuller understanding of rituals, the liminal and the liminoid in historic sites. It is not the scope of this thesis to focus on definitions, but to further understand human experiences and their relationship with the past and historic sites. It aims to further understand artists processes, responses, and dialogues through their interventions with the past.

The Human Experience

The work of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), especially his concept of “experience,” greatly influenced Turner, whose work in turn was a great inspiration for performance studies. Behind Dilthey’s world picture was the human being at grips with his environment, perceiving, thinking, feeling and desiring. He revived the discipline of hermeneutics (the philosophical study of meaning-making) and he suggested that great art is that which points both to the artist’s life and to the general historical conditions in which it was created, and which aspires to form an expressive, transcendent unity of the two.226 Dilthey liked to use the German term “erlebnis” meaning “what has been lived through,” for his theory of experience. He wanted “erlebnis” to designate the self perception of our inner life, as opposed to experience in general.227 He argued that one cannot understand oneself through reflection and introspection, but only through “what history can tell him [her]… never in objective concepts but always in the living experience which springs up, out of the depths of his [her] own being.” He believed that one’s understanding is dependent on past worldviews and interpretations.228 For Dilthey, history is composed of different “erlebnisse”.229 The totality of these individual experiences is equal to the whole historic life of a human being. Like Dilthey, Turner was also interested in the “moments of experience,” as well as in processes and transformations. He was seeking to specify the ways in which experience and liminality, ritual process and artistic ecstasy coincided. Before his death, he was wondering about body, brain and culture.

From Ritual to Theatre

The anthropology of performance is an essential part of the anthropology of experience… Ritual, ceremony, carnival, theatre and poetry is an explanation and explication of life itself...230

In the last phase of Turner’s academic career, from the 1970s to his death in 1983, he was in Chicago and Virginia focussing on liminality within theatre and performance art. He collaborated with American performance theorist Richard Schechner, professor and experimental theatre director at New York University, who in the 1970s and 1980s became one of the founders of the “anthropology of performing arts” and performance studies.

In 1977, Turner invited Schechner to participate in a ten day conference on ritual and performance which Turner was organising at the Burg Wartenstein in Austria. They worked on several lectures, workshops and conferences and they also prepared together a “World Conference on Ritual and Performance” that convened first in Arizona near the Yaqui tribal lands and later in New York. They both admitted that they greatly inspired each other. Turner reported that he found Schechner’s ideas to be “theoretically illuminating.” In his publication *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play*, Turner indicated how his interests had shifted from anthropological ritual performances to contemporary experimental theatre. He had been given an opportunity to test his speculations in practice when he was invited by Schechner to collaborate with fellow social scientists Alexander Alland and Erving Goffman. Together they took part in “an intensive workshop” to “explore the interface between ritual and the theatre… between social and aesthetic drama,” and the other limina between the social sciences and performing arts.

Turner wrote that “… dramas induce and contain reflexive processes and generate cultural frames in which reflexivity can find a legitimate place.” Turner was interested in how and why different sets of human beings in time and space are similar. He argued how social life is pregnant with social dramas and how self reflexivity – a public way of assessing our social behaviour, has moved into the various arts from law and religion. Turner discussed how “…theatre probes a community’s weaknesses, calls its leaders to account, desacrilises its most cherished values and beliefs - and generally

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takes its stock of its current situation.” He also writes that there is in theatre “something of the investigative, and judgemental of law and something of the sacred, mythic, even supernatural of religion.”

He argued that the movement from ethnography to performance is a process of pragmatic reflexivity.

During an interview held in 1988 in New York, when he was asked how he would define theatre, Schechner replied “I think theatre is a set of perceptual transformations and elaborations on behaviour: it is where we become aware of our behaviour.”

Schechner’s main contribution to anthropology was that he investigated the processes of production of performances, leading to change and public reflexivity. Schechner was concerned with environmental theatre and the conceptualization of space. Back in the 1960s when he started, he focused on being a cultural activist. During an interview in 1970 he said that for theatre to be relevant it has to reflect what is currently going on in society, and the changes society goes through. Theatre needs to touch the real lives of the theatre people, to be able to touch the lives of other people. From the 1980s on he wrote increasingly on multicultural and inter cultural relationships in society, writing less on theatre and more on politics. According to Epskamp, Schechner was of the opinion that sharing culture turns out to be more important than sharing a political system. This view was strengthened during the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the early 2000 with the collapse of the Twin Towers.

Schechner argued that no universal truth exists. It is this combination of critical political discourse and his continuing interest in the anthropology of performing arts, which makes him unique in the field of performance studies. Turner during his friendship with Schechner, on the other hand, grew more and more deeply interested in the preparatory phases of performance, workshops, rehearsals and training - how people made ready for performance to be. Both Turner and Schechner were fascinated by the interdisciplinarity

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235 Ibid. p. 8
236 Schechner, R. (1990) “Behaviour, Performance and Performance Space: an interview with Richard Schechner.” Theater, Theatricality and Architecture, Baldauf, H., Goodwin, B. and Reichert, A. (eds.) in Perspecta: The Yale Architecture Journal, 26, pp. 97-102. During the same interview he said that he liked the idea of finding an old building and using it, like Peter Brooke did, of finding a space and negotiating with it. This is an other reason why his work is useful to apply to this research.
239 Ibid., p.499.
between anthropology and drama, and both saw this fusion as a potential tool of self-discovery, reflexivity and transformation. It is this interdisciplinarity as well as the focus on transformation and reflexivity which makes their theories provide ample potential for application in museum studies. The concept of liminality has endured in performance studies and has the potential for wider usage.

Turner argued that with the renewed emphasis on society as a process punctuated by performances of various kinds, there has developed the view that such genres as ritual, ceremony, carnival, festival, game, spectacle, parade and sports events may constitute various verbal and non-verbal codes, a set of intersecting meta-languages, and the group does not just flow but more actively tries to understand itself in order to change itself. He also stressed the importance of plays, from ancient Greece till today, acting as meta-commentaries on society, whether drawn from myths or reputed historical accounts to be intensely reflexive - like mirrors held up to society that probed and analyzed the axioms and assumptions of the social structure. He argued that no society is without some mode of meta-commentary, not only a reading of its experience, but an interpretive re-enactment of its experience. He argued how plays lead to self discovery and the understanding of others. Schechner in “Performers and Spectators Transformed and Transformed”, also argued that performance is twice behaved behaviour and cannot escape reflection and reflexivity.

The habits, rituals and routines of life are “restored behaviours.” Schechner compares restored behaviour to how a film director treats a strip of film, as these strips of behaviour can be rearranged or reconstructed. Restored behavior is symbolic and reflexive and its meanings need to be decoded. In 1990 Schechner wrote that “the whole performance sequence (training, workshop, rehearsal, warm up, performances, cooldown and aftermath) is identical to “restored behaviour”, “twice-behaved behaviour”, behaviour that can be repeated, that is rehearsed.” There is a strong emphasis on process in Schechner’s theory and on qualities such as “immediacy, ephemerality, peculiarity and ever-changingness.”

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244 Ibid., p.25
Schechner’s work concerning the break with the tradition of mimetic theatre, engaged in dialogue with Turner and defined drama as “that art whose subject, structure and action is social process.” Schechner aimed at poesis, rather than mimesis: making not faking, where the role grows with the actor and is created through the rehearsal process which may sometimes involve painful moments of self-revelation, where personal stories become embedded with other stories. One learns through performing, then performs the understandings so gained. This was not something new, as in the early 20th century the Russian theatre director and theorist Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) and many of his followers, such as Michael Checkov (1891-1955) had already theorised about this and created a revolution in Western modern theories and methods of acting.

Schechner argued that Western modern acting could not exist without the work of Stanislavski, who developed the system/method in acting which focused on individual truthful emotions and on how to control the sub-conscious. Throughout his life, Stanislavski subjected his own acting to a process of rigorous artistic self-analysis and reflection. His “system” focused on the development of artistic truth onstage by teaching actors to “experience the part” during performance. He proposed that actors study and experience subjective emotions and feelings, and manifest them to audiences by physical and vocal means. While in its very earliest stages his ‘system’ focused on creating truthful emotions and embodying them, he later worked on the “Method of Physical Actions”, as a means to access truthful emotions and involved improvisation. The focus was on reaching the subconscious through the conscious. For example, before his production of Gorki’s The Lower Depths (1902), Stanislavski sent his actors into the Moscow slums to prepare for their roles as beggars.

Turner argued that theatre tries to ascribe meaning to social dramatic events by the process which Schechner described as “restoring the past.” The concept of experience is charged with emotion. The anthropology of performance is the anthropology of experience. He goes on to write that “an experience is never truly completed until it is


expressed... until it is communicated with others.”  

He argues how artists and dramatists freely unfold images beyond the bounds of reality and discusses how Schechner’s experimental theatre was alive to the social dramas of his time and how he tried to express reality. Performance, just like poetry and art is capable of re-living experiences in order to understand and help others understand. “I consider my encounter with Freud’s work, particularly The Interpretation of Dreams, to have been decisive in arriving at an independent theoretical position,” Turner wrote in 1978, five years before his death.

**Acting in Everyday Life and Everyday Life in Acting**

When we act in everyday life we do not merely re-act to indicative stimuli, we act in frames we have wrested from the genres of cultural performance. And when we act on the stage, whatever our stage may be, we must now in this reflexive age of psychoanalyses and semiotics as never before, bring into the symbolic or fictitious world the urgent problems of our reality. We have to go into the subjunctive world of monsters, demons and clowns, of cruelty and poetry in order to make sense of our daily lives, earning our daily bread. And when we enter whatever theatre our lives allows us, we have already learned how strange and many layered everyday life is, how extraordinary the ordinary.

Turner wrote that as individuals become cultured, they increasingly come to play parts defined by the dramas of their culture, firstly family dramas, but later, ones that shape the expanding circle of activities with the family. There is a sense in which “human beings as social actors in their cultural Worlds take for granted that they are acting in relation to others who share a history and a set of common experiences and

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250 Ibid.
understanding of experience.”

On the other hand, Turner also argued that great acting on the stage can also be the source of some of our deepest “truest” understandings of the human condition. They serve as meta-commentaries on contemporary society, and can be intensely “reflexive,” as if they are mirrors held up to society and culture.

Turner introduced the idea of what he called “social drama” and not long after, Goffman analysed what he called impression management in a study of the presentation of self in everyday life. Goffman, like Turner, also analysed social life as a drama, in which the performance is “all activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers.” Using metaphors of the stage - actor, performance, script and repertoire - Goffman described how people use social situations to give performances according to a script as if the social stage was a setting for their performance. Initially, he focussed on those situations where people used conversation and non verbal language to present impressions of themselves which reinforced or protected their self esteem, undermined or attacked the self esteem of others or in some cases deliberately deceived others, as in a card game. Later he went on to apply his theories to social groupings and institutions. When Goffman introduced his dramaturgical model for social life in the late 1950s, people’s sex, socio- economic status, religion, geographical location, ethnicity and family all carried an expectation within society of how people were and how they should behave.

Similarly, Geertz used dramatic metaphors in his work on the theatre state. Artists, writers, academics and playwrights from the conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp to the playwright and theatre director Antonin Artaud and beyond have also been thinking in these terms, trying to undermine the distinction between art and life. Schechner in an interview held during the “International Acting Festival”, in Oslo in June 2013, also admitted that he was also greatly influenced by Goffman. When he was asked “what is performance?” he replied that Shakespeare once wrote that “all the world is a stage”,

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251 Kapferer, B. (1986)  
254 Ibid.  
and that Erving Goffman had added on that “all the world is a stage, but what is difficult is to specify what is not”. “The Question is….”, continued Schechner, “…not what is performance... but what isn’t?”.257

Hage and Powers take a postmodern position, arguing that with the breakdown of traditional institutions and the changing definitions of work, leisure and family roles, expectations and roles have changed and are being redefined so that individuals are beginning to negotiate their social and personal roles rather than having them inherited as a given. They argued that most people in contemporary society have acquired complex selves who can maintain multiple identities, in touch with their own feelings and less responsive to social pressure.258

More than just presenting oneself to others, as in Goffman’s pioneering description, roles have come to be understood as one aspect of the social construction of knowledge. The roles people construct are not prescribed but constituted by the individual. They use their roles as a resource from which to make meaning of the situation, and they self-consciously act so that they understand the way their actions will be perceived and will be consistent with their individual and social roles. Roles provide people with an organising framework that they can use to make a performance that will meet the needs of the social setting.

**Post-Modern Theatre and Avant Garde Performance**

Lytotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, argued that the social projects that had dominated western society since the eighteenth century had become exhausted.259 He questioned what he referred to as the “grand narratives” of the enlightenment. He argued that everyone had their own perspective and story, and that the mind cannot always organise the world rationally. He was a frequent writer on

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aesthetic matters and he developed themes in particular by discussing the “sublime” - the moment when we experience a clash between our reason and the imagination.\textsuperscript{260}

Postmodern theatre centred on the fallibility of definite truth, encouraging the audience to reach its own individual understanding.\textsuperscript{261} It focused on raising questions rather than attempting to supply answers. There was a movement away from linearity to multiplicity, where acts and scenes gave way to a series of peripatetic dramatic moments. The narrative did not need to be complete but could be broken and paradoxical. Characters became fragmented, forming a collection of contrasting and parallel shards stemming from a central idea, theme or traditional character. The audience became even more integral to the shared meaning making of the performance process and its members further included in the dialogue of the play. There was a rejection of the notions of “High” and “Low” art. Performances focussed on creating productions that exist only in the viewer’s mind, as what the viewer interprets. The rehearsal processes in theatrical productions started to be driven more by shared meaning-making and improvisation, rather than the scripted text. Performances stepped back from reality to create their own self-conscious atmospheres, sometimes referred to as meta-theatre. The focus was on authentic introspection, questioning and the representation of the human experience.

The year Schechner had moved to New York and formed “The Performance Group” in 1967 he directed the first American “environmental theatre,” a production of Eugene Ionesco’s “Victims of Duty” and he focused on using audience participation. In the performance “Commune” spectators were asked to “stand in” as Vietnamese villagers and in “Mother Courage” the actors served a full supper to spectators as part of Courage’s canteen. They strived for a communal experience. For his performance \textit{Dionysus in 69}, performed in a purpose built environmental set at the Performing Garage in SoHo, New York, for over a year from 1968 to 1969, he aimed at producing


\textsuperscript{261} The modernist installations of artists Marcel Duchamp, El Lissitsky, and Frederick Kiesler, and their colleagues of Dada, de Stijl, Bauhaus, and Constructivism in the 1920s and 1930s, had already challenged traditional notions of the exhibition environment as frame, drawing heightened attention to both the potential and role of space in the exhibitionary apparatus.
theatre with a ritual function, making all participants feel they were building a community. 262

Many artists by the mid 20th century had abandoned the modernist notion of self-expression for a concept of identity that involved an exploration of the dynamics between self and society. With a new critical eye developed through the lenses of, for example, feminism, civil-rights, the sexual revolution, and globalization, they examined identity as a socially constructed representation of self. Often their art not only described this condition in contemporary culture, but also tried to formulate strategies to break out of these confining representations of self. Many of the representational strategies artists used to do this come out of recent philosophies in cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, philosophy and psychology. Artists used these critical tools to negotiate new representations of self. Many artists started exploring their own backgrounds, and came to understand identity not as a confining social “label,” but as a flexible, mobile, and open-ended questioning of the self.

The civil rights movement in the US in the late 1950s and early 1960s, for example, where using non-violent protest methods, based on the actions of Ghandi in India, to highlight and protest the racial segregation of public areas, such as sit-ins or ‘freedom rides’ on segregated transport. In the mid-60s, after the nuclear Cuban Missile Crisis and the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy, anti-war protests against the Vietnam War were also in full force, and art took its place in protest. For example Yoko Ono and John Lennon’s “Bed Peace 1969” was a bed-in, a variation of the sit-in. Both protest and artistic statement against war, the pair sat in bed for world peace. Other artists associated with “Fluxus” often took their actions into the street, aiming to break down the barriers between art and life, and bring the revolution to the everyday. Allan Kaprow, a pioneer in establishing the concepts of performance art, helped to develop the “Environment” and “Happening” in the 1960s. 263

Women protested in mass marches throughout the 1970s, on social issues such as equal pay and the objectification of women. Female artists, traditionally under-represented in

the male-dominated art world began to use performance, and often their bodies, to make work that directly engaged with the roles of women in society and social issues in general. For example, the “Guerilla Girls” in New York, in the 1980s put up posters in the streets devoted to fighting sexism and racism within the art world, with the mission of bringing gender and racial inequality within the fine arts to light.

**Raising the Consciousness of Spectators**

The idea of the role of the museum shifting from a Temple to a Forum has been the subject of various recent studies in Museology, as has also been the case in Performance Studies. During the 20th century, the German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht and the Brazilian director Augusto Boal, who based his work to some degree on Brecht’s “learning plays”, developed techniques of involving communities to improvise and enact their thoughts during plays. Brechtian acting interrogates the character’s actions, proposes alternative actions, and demystifies events that might otherwise appear as “inevitable.” If Stanislavski focussed on the actor’s work on oneself, urging an intense personal study and preparation, Brecht worked in a team which stopped, reflected and uncovered contradictions, tested variations from several points of view. Brecht’s theatre was profoundly social.264 They debated and discussed each other’s roles. Brecht used astonishment to shock or startle the audience into asking questions about what was happening on stage - ideally to (ultimately) question their own social reality.265

Augusto Boal built upon Brecht’s ideas, as well as on the theoretical ideas of Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, published in 1968, which developed a model of problem-posing dialogue, of continual exchange between a teacher and learners.266 Boal created the “Theatre of the Oppressed”, also called “Forum Theatre” in 1971 in Brazil, with the specific goal to deal with local problems. The main objective was to change the spectators from passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon into actors and

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265 For an overview of Brecht’s theories on the educative and transformative potential of performance see Jackson, A. (2007) *Theatre, Education and the Making of Meanings*, Manchester University, Manchester, p.141-142
transformers of the dramatic action. The spectator assumes the protagonist’s role, changing the dramatic action, trying out solutions and discussing plans for change. Boal wrote that “it is not the place of the theatre to show the correct path, but only to offer the means by which all possible paths may be examined.” The play demands a blurring of the boundaries separating audiences and performers. Boal’s message was “This is play and you must play with us!”

The techniques developed by Brecht and Boal could have a lot of potential if further used in museums and palaces. The performances being analysed in the following chapters, by the Rubberbodies Collective, and by WildWorks in particular have been clearly inspired by their works. These collectives also involve the community to build up their narratives and they have as a main aim the idea to influence the communities they perform in, and to provoke them to react, to tell stories and to see the multiple narratives and perspectives each story can tell.

Secular Rituals in the Museum

A number of anthropologists have argued that our supposedly secular, even anti ritual culture is full of ritual situations and events, very few of which, as anthropologist Mary Douglas noted, take place in religious contexts. Secular cultures also build sites that publicly represent beliefs about the order of the world, its past and present and the individual’s place within it. The ritual content in secular spaces is most often disguised. The meditative experience gained when visiting a palace or an art museum has often been compared to a similar one gained in a temple where rituals take place, which was arguably the intention when they built them: to make them like sacred spaces, such as temples. Michel Foucault designated museums as forms of heterotopia – as spaces of otherness that are simultaneously physical and mental. He describes them as places outside of and different from all other places in which, despite their difference, all real

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sites might be “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”

The art historian Carol Duncan built on the writings of Turner in her 1995 publication entitled Civilizing Rituals inside Public Art Museums. She compared house museums to memorials and mausoleums, seeking immortality, a space set apart from mundane concerns for the contemplation of timeless values. Based on the writings on liminality, she wrote that these sites move beyond the psychic constraints of mundane existence, step out of time, and attain new, larger perspectives. Duncan wrote about the ways museums illuminate their visitors in the performance of ritual scenarios, and through them communicate and affirm ideas, values and social identities. She argued that “in art museums, it is the visitors who enact the ritual, whether or not they think of themselves as performers. The museums sequenced spaces and arrangements of objects, its lighting and architectural details constitute a dramatic field - a combination stage, set and script.” She wrote that it is the complexity of the art museum - its existence as a profoundly symbolic cultural object as well as a social and political, and ideological instrument that makes the notion of the museum as ritual.

Duncan argued in respect of art museums that “museums resemble older ritual sites not so much because of their specific architectural references but because they too are settings for rituals. Like most ritual spaces museum spaces are carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention - in this case for contemplation and learning.” Duncan described the art museum ritual where the space is specially prepared for the enactment of the ritual and visitors process around the galleries pausing at the artworks for contemplation. The narrative is provided by the curators and even when visitors only come to see individual art works, she maintains

274 She also says that some individuals may use a ritual site more knowledgeably than others- they may be more educationally prepared to respond to its symbolic cues. Hooper-Greenhill, building on hermeneutic theory wrote about ‘critical pedagogy’ in museums: “people actively construct their own interpretations of what they experience, and the meaning that is constructed grows from an individual’s previous knowledge and experience, but also from the interpretive communities to which the individual is affiliated.” See Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1994) The Educational role of the Museum, Leicester Readers in Museum Studies, Routledge, London and New York, p.23. Hein also wrote about the constructivist museum. See: Hein, G. E. Learning in the Museum (Museum Meanings), Routledge, London and New York
“the museum’s larger narrative structure stands as a frame and gives meaning to individual art works.”

During a ritual’s liminal phase, the participant enters into a higher state of consciousness, and reflection. Duncan cites the art historian Kenneth Clark, who once described the experiences of visitors to art museums as spiritually nourishing and places of transformation and restoration. She quoted him saying: “The only reason for bringing together works of art in a public place is that... they produce in us a kind of exalted happiness. For a moment there is a clearing in the jungle: we pass on refreshed, with our capacity for life increased and with some memory of the sky.”

It is the liminal phase of rituals which Duncan is interested in, and in how the visitor feels enlightened and changed after a visit. Although Duncan identified liminality in the museum, she does not however produce a concrete new philosophical model for the discussion of liminality and the liminoid in museums and historic sites. She also does not look at conceptual and performative interventions in museums that could enhance the liminal state. Thus, while Carol Duncan looks at the Museum as a ritual site, this research analyses the performance/ intervention inside the museum or historic site which enhances the ritual being enacted.

Building upon Bourdieu’s arguments on museums and social classes, Carol Duncan writes that only those who are perfectly disposed socially, psychologically and culturally can have an understanding of what art museums are about. This gives credence to the commonly held notion that art museums are elitist. She writes that art museums offer up values and beliefs about social, sexual and political identity in the form of vivid and direct experience. Duncan’s art museum visitors are usually people who acknowledge the power, legitimacy and authority of art and have their identity as educated and cultured people reinforced by the museum visit. It is with these visitors, she argued, that the museum ritual has the potential to be transformative. Visitors come away with a sense of enlightenment or a feeling of being spiritually nourished or renewed.

Bourdieu had proposed that appreciation of art was related to social class and those visitors who, from their background and upbringing, knew about and understood art felt more comfortable in an art museum. These people would have acquired what he referred to as cultural capital - knowledge of art, a way of behaving, and an expectation

276 Ibid. p. 12
277 Ibid.
of the museum that gave them ownership of the space, and the objects displayed in the galleries.\textsuperscript{278} Schechner and the theatre makers of his time in the 1960s and 70s wanted to break down this barrier of social class and make art accessible to all, focusing on theatre that brings about social change. Similarly the museum world has also undergone a radical change since the 1970s. Whereas in the past the museum tended to be elitist and exclusive, signs of progressive opening up and greater accessibility have appeared.\textsuperscript{279} A climate of increasing reflexivity within the profession, identified as the “new museology,” has become even more popular since the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{280}

If museums and palaces are sites which today can act both as temples and forums, as well as stages for the enactment of rituals and performances mirroring society, what is it that they can learn from anthropology and performance studies to attract wider audiences, and further enhance critical thinking and reflexivity in the museum? Would contemporary experimental performance in the museum further enable a liminal experience to a wider audience?

\textbf{Conclusion: The Performative Turn}

Any performance has a performative potential, that is, a potential to transform the performer as well as the audience.\textsuperscript{281}

This chapter aimed to provide a theoretical context to the rest of the research, which argues how contemporary artists and performers through their conceptual site specific experimental performances and interventions also have the potential to transport the audience to a reflexive liminal state, which questions the human condition.


\textsuperscript{281} Gillren, P. and Snickare, M. (eds.) (2012) \textit{Performativity and Performance in Baroque Rome}, Ashgate, Surrey, p.4
J.L. Austin is reputed to have introduced the word “performative”- which means accomplishing something. Performance is the roles we all play in life, but being performative is something we do to accomplish something, for example showing something to bring consciousness. A new interest in the study of early modern ritual, formations of personal and collective identities, social roles and the production of meaning inside or outside the arts, have made it possible to talk about a performative turn in the humanities. Performances have the potential to become sites of negotiation, a catalyst for change, contributing to the dynamics of public reflexivity. “A good performance is like going to the doctor and getting good medicine” Kazuo Ohno said when interviewed by Richard Schechner in 1986.282

This chapter focused mainly on anthropological and performance theories, with a special focus on the “liminal” state and its transformative potential. It described the works of theorists such as Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, Carol Duncan, Erving Goffman and Augusto Boal in relation to the study being undertaken in the rest of this research. Theories in Performance studies have a lot of potential since they are interdisciplinary and also deal with human experiences, and the human condition, memories as well as change. Discussions among global thought leaders suggest that raising human consciousness is the solution to our planetary ills of poverty, disease, and ecological disaster. Performance is in fact now often employed as a heuristic principle to understand human behaviour. Performance functions both as a metaphor and an analytical tool and thus provides a perspective for framing and analysing social and cultural phenomena. The concept of liminality has endured in performance studies and has the potential for wider usage. It has the potential for inspiring creative “beyond the box” approaches, which can be fruitfully applied to museum studies, as will be observed in the following chapters.

Part Three

Contemporary Performance Responding to the Past
Chapter Three

Interpreting the Historic House Museum

Today’s museum is a theatre, a memory palace, a stage for the enactment of other times and places, a space for transport, fantasy and dreams.\textsuperscript{283}

This chapter builds upon the previous chapters and attempts to further define, through an interdisciplinary use of literature, the potential of contemporary performance in the historic house museum to enhance the liminal and liminoid states discussed earlier. The chapter will not be specifically dealing with traditional costumed re-enactments and role-plays, but will be mainly providing specific examples of contemporary interventions in museums providing multi-sensory experiences, immersing actors, artists as well as audiences into theatrical journeys into the past.

Most of the examples mentioned in this chapter have been influential to the artists interviewed for this research, thus this chapter also serves as a contextual background to the following chapters. It questions: How can performance and installation art enhance a reflective state in the historic house museum? What are the inspirations, values, ambitions and constraints of researchers and practitioners of performance art in historic house museums? What has been done so far in this field and how has this progressed?

The way a historic house museum today is communicating to its audiences is not simply being done through its objects, labels, panels, audio-guides and catalogues, but also through innovative, artistic, immersive experiential and sensory techniques, which are slowly being re-introduced into these spaces. The history of using theatre and performance in museums as an interpretive medium can be traced to at least the late nineteenth century, when for example the Skansen open air Museum in Sweden, from 1891 onwards, interpreted centuries of Swedish history and its domestic life by having costumed natives in period dress performing in historical buildings and dwellings.\textsuperscript{284}

The actors often demonstrated some trade, like a carpenter or a blacksmith, similar to the live ethnographic displays that had become popular during the nineteenth century international expositions.

Later on, the cultural phenomenon known as “Living History” became a major tourist attraction in various historic sites and museums. In the United States costumed actors in historic house museums became highly popular by the late 1960s. An example was the Plimoth Plantation living history museum in Plymouth Massachusetts showcasing the 1627 village as a stage set, where each actor would converse in detail about their imaginary life to their visitors. In the 1970s in the UK, organisations such as the Association for Heritage Interpretation and the Heritage Trust were founded to encourage educational provision including also more dramatic approaches. The National Trust sites in 1976 established the Young National Trust Theatre, which during the 1980s toured various sites to perform pieces of theatre in education for primary school children in relation to the site’s period of history. Other companies were established, such as the White Company and the History Re-enactment Workshop which perform for a wide range of visitors. Also in the 1970s in the UK, “drama in education” and “theatre in education” movements emerged from the development of the professional theatre, searching for a new form of communication within a socio political context. The drama in education movement associated with the ideals of the New Education movement of “self-expression” and “learning by doing”, viewed drama as a process that having an improvisational character could change the participants’ understanding of themselves and the world.

The MOMI Actors Company, performing at the Museum of Moving Image since its opening in 1988, the Spectrum Company resident in the Science Museum in London since 1987, and the Past Pleasures Company founded in 1987, were among the first professional companies created in the UK that arguably shaped the future development

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of museum theatre in the country. With the establishment of IMTAL (The International Museum Theatre Alliance) in 1990, which promotes theatre and live performance as interpretive techniques, a new term emerged: “museum theatre”, which was used instead of terms such as “interpretive theatre”, “living history”, “theatre in museums” etc. There are different forms of theatre used in museums. Re-enactments are an example, and so are demonstrations and storytelling. In first person interpretation programmes, interpreters adopt the role of a historically documented or a fictional character, sometimes encouraging visitor’s participation. A widely used form of museum theatre, especially popular with primary school children is role play. Museum Theatre, however, has been criticised for many things in the past thirty years. The major two categories being: 1. that it “beautifies” historical periods and events favouring aesthetically pleasing, utopian images of the past over more “accurate” dirtier ones and 2. that the enormous gap in historical data between the present and the past makes it very hard to claim total accuracy and authenticity.

ICOM Demhist: The International Association for Historic House Museums

In November 2000, an ICOM conference was held in Genoa with the theme: “Historic House Museums Speak to the Public: Spectacular Exhibits versus a Philological Interpretation of History.” The intent was to discuss the way in which historic house museums introduce themselves to their visitors, concerning their historical identity and cultural role, as well as the financial problems linked to their survival. They discussed issues such as:

293 “Living History. Historic House Museums,” was the theme of the 1997 ICOM (International Council of Museums) conference, held in Palazzo Spinola in Genoa. The need was expressed for a specific ICOM committee devoted to the particular category of house museums. In 1998 the new committee held its first meeting and chose the name “Historic House Museums/ Demeures historiques-musées” as well as the acronym DEMHIST, http://demhist.icom.museum [retrieved 25/03/2012]
Which of the many possible interpretations of their historical and social identities should historic houses present to the public? Is there a danger of betraying their identity by trying to make themselves more accessible to the public through the use of new approaches, such as employing actors, or staging performances? Are we endangering historic house museums traditional educational purposes in our attempts to attract more visitors, thus hoping to raise revenue, in order to solve the museum’s financial difficulties?²⁹⁴

From the ICOM-DEMHIST conference in Genova, Italy and the ICOM-DEMHIST conferences held following it, however, it seems that even though various debates on authenticity were held, it still proved popular to invite contemporary artists and performers to help interpret and respond to objects and sites from the past. The aim has been towards “breathing life” again into historic house museums, by inviting artists to use these spaces as if they were a stage, and to create a contemporary dialogue with the objects, the site and its stories. The interdisciplinary collaboration and peformativity, which was popular in 17th century Baroque spaces, in fact seems to be regaining momentum. The fascination of the fusion of movement, technology, sound and objects in galleries is slowly increasing and so is the interaction between objects, artists and curators. The question is, are they replacing the manipulative rhetoric narrative with the critical fragmented narrative when appealing to the emotions and the intellect of their viewers? And if yes, how is this collaboration between curators and artists working out?

In 2011, the ICOM-DEMHIST conference held in Antwerp, Belgium, was called “Catching the Spirit. Theatrical Assets of Historic Houses and their Approaches in Reinventing the Past.” Ball in her preface to the proceedings of the conference writes that the conference dealt with the historic house museum as a ‘theatre of history,’ and how the concept toys with meaning and identity, mixing so-called authenticity with fiction, thus creating a kind of ‘meta-reality,’ which enables visitors to perceive the historic house emotionally as well as intellectually.²⁹⁵ Such a holistic approach is of

²⁹⁵ Ball, D. in Werner van Hoof (ed.) (2011) “Catching the Spirit. Theatrical assets of Historic Houses
great value for the conveyance of information and emotions, evidence and atmosphere. She argues that the main question that historic house curators ask is: what kind of atmosphere do we wish to create and how can the balance be maintained between presenting the scientific as well as the sensual and/or emotional aspects of an interpretation, while still taking into account the identity of the house and its collection?

The numerous questions and issues addressed during the conference were divided into three parts. The first part dealt with authenticity and if there is a thing like authenticity, as well as if there is such a thing as history or historians reinventing the past. They asked: How authentic can any reinvention of the past be? And if there is such a thing as authenticity, is there such a thing as history or are there only historians reinventing the past? As Knell has argued, “What the museum has, in this world of meaning making, is authenticity, but that authenticity - as in a heritage park - needs careful understanding and control; authenticity is a fugitive quality easily lost.”

The Scientific Narrative and the Emotional Narrative

The creation of Museums in the 19th century arguably brought with it a conflict between the scientific/authentic narrative versus the “Gesamtkunstwerk” attitude of the Baroque period preceding it, which focused on immersive experiences that appealed to the emotions to tell stories. The enlightenment arguably tried to organise its narratives in a scientific manner. Michael Foucault, however, described it as the following:

The idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our

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modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are proper to western culture of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{298}

Today the strong linear narratives typically associated with 19\textsuperscript{th} century classification systems have been criticised for being too conservative.\textsuperscript{299} The enlightenment claimed to free the individual from the fears born of ignorance, superstition, and perhaps even religion itself, but has it really done that? Can truth always be achieved through scientific means? This has been the argument of various current researches in the field of museum studies. Hein, for example, explains how “Theatricality makes a story more compelling emotively, and so design and the art of spectacle compete with logic and evidence in the inducement of belief.”\textsuperscript{300} In light of the debates about agency, authorship and multiple perspectives, interpretation can also be seen as a co-construction in which individual visitors are agents responding unpredictably to curatorial and artistic interpretation and developing their own understandings of the space.\textsuperscript{301}

The 2011 ICOM-DEMHIHST conference invited the British filmmaker Peter Greenaway, the artist Pipi Lotti Rist and the curator of the Dennis Severs house museum in London, to present their personal, sometimes provocative and poetic interpretations of historic houses. They demonstrated how the historic house can appeal to the imagination by becoming a stage. In the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, the trend to experiment with the use of both theatre and audio-visuals in museums is becoming more popular. Peter Greenaway during his key note presentation on “The New Visual Literacy” at ICOM’s 2011 Annual Meeting, had shown a presentation to encourage ‘visual awareness’ among museum people and to support his dictum: ‘the image always has the last word’.

He spoke of a widespread visual illiteracy due to an essentially text-based culture and discussed the global museum’s obligation in this new digital age to promote the visual. Through several demonstrations of his reinterpretations of classic paintings such as

Rembrandt’s *Night Watch*, Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* and Paolo Veronese’s *The Wedding at Cana*, he illustrated what can be done to encourage visual awareness. He presented original perspectives on the potential of new audio-visual technologies in the future development of museums. During his key note speech at the ICOM DEMHIST Conference in Antwerp in October 2011 he stated that he believes that the “cinema is dead - cinema died when the remote control was introduced.” In the cinema people sit down in the dark, looking at one direction, but in the museum or historic palace the audience is immersed in the site and the story and they can walk around, and experience the real objects. The museum or palace could be treated as a theatre set and the objects as the props, with the audience moving around the set like actors in a story. The conference also dealt with the intangible aspects of reinventing the past.

According to Pinna the significance of the historic house and its communication with the public, is that the emphasis is placed not on the value of individual objects but on the whole set of objects and its interaction with the spirit of the people who lived in the house. He also writes about the power of these historic house museums to evoke history and to put the visitor into direct contact with it. The historic house or palace does not only contain objects but it also embodies the creative imagination of the people who lived and moved within its walls, who made daily use of the objects.

For the DEMHIST conference held in 2011, members were invited to visit the Château Seneffe in Belgium and they were fully immersed into the past, but not before putting on silly shoes. “Of course, this is not the authentic pool table,” the guide said, but the subtle scent of tobacco and the sound of clashing billiard balls made it so easy to imagine how life must have been like back then. During another site visit to Gaasbeek Castle in Belgium, the curator Luc Vanackere said:

For five years we have tried to bring history alive. Gaasbeek Castle is a time machine that takes the visitors back into the 19th century. Two years from now we want to accomplish a cross-border project. The visitors will receive a helmet and a

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303 ICOM DEMHIST Conference, Antwerp, October 2011

backpack with a computer. While wearing the helmet they will experience the virtual reality as it was 150 years ago. That is why we need to go even further into trying to catch the spirit. Historic houses depend on emotional value. They have a personality, you can compare them to living organisms. We have to try to find a balance between the emotional and rational level.  

During that same year in 2011 the Museums Association conference held in Brighton on 4th October held a session entitled “Innovative Historic House Interpretation.” Ruth Gill, Head of Interpretation at Historic Royal Palaces (HRP) outlined the HRP audience segmentation model, and she explained how the Enchanted Palace exhibition at Kensington Palace was aimed at the “Cool Rejector” segment, who apparently are “too cool” to visit these kind of sites. The work on the Georgian Kitchens at Kew Palace targets the keen “Time Travellers.” Keith Robinson, Learning and Visitor Experience Consultant at the National Trust explained how the National Trust properties have been working on transforming the visitor experience by drawing out interesting personal stories and allowing visitors to touch objects such as playing the piano or play snooker in the 1930s Upton House.

During the keynote speech at the ICOM-DEMHIST 2012 conference held at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles entitled “The Artifact, its Context and their Narrative: Multidisciplinary Conservation in Historic House Museums,” Sarah Staniforth argued:

In the 21st century the National Trust is moving away from a risk averse presentation of historic houses in which the precautionary principle is exercised and all objects are treated as being equally fragile, to a risk assessment approach in which objects which are sufficiently robust are used by the visitors. This means that visitors can walk on carpets, sit on chairs, play pianos and engage more fully with collections to enrich their experience.

304 ICOM DEMHIST Conference, Antwerp, October 2011
305 Museums Association Conference, Brighton, October, 2011
Immersion

The definition of the word to “immerse” is: to dip or submerge in a liquid; to be completely involved in something; to absorb…

The fusion of the arts during the Baroque age arguably enhanced the immersion of the participants inside the performances and rituals taking place. In contemporary times, this fusion of the arts is once again becoming ever more popular. Machon, while attempting to define “immersive theatre” by surveying a strand of immersive practice arising from the fusion of installation art, and physical and visual theatres of the 1980s onwards, explains how attempting to actually define such a term which involves interdisciplinary practice and blurring of boundaries is not so straightforward. The term, however, is useful to help us understand the ideas behind the work.

The word to “immerse” developed from computing terminology, describing that which provides information or stimulation for a number of senses, not only sight and sound. In theatre discourse “immersive” is now attached to diverse events that assimilate a variety of art forms and seek to exploit all that is experiential in performance. “Immersive theatre… marks a piece of theatre experienced from within rather than as an outsider… You are part of it, rather than looking on fundamentally distinct,” Trueman explained. Jen Thomson, a member of Punchdrunk Enrichment, also interviewed by Machon, argued that “immersive theatre, in general, is about entering a full world, you’re surrounded on all sides, it’s three dimensional, you’re within a real space where there could be sound, smell and taste, all your senses are engaged. You’re being immersed, you’re stepping into an enclosed world that surrounds you and the characters are part of that world.”

Machon cites Gilles Deleuze’s theoretical insights on immanence, sense and sensation and the ludic logic of the paradoxical to support her arguments on immersion. Deleuze’s

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[http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/immerse](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/immerse) [retrieved 13/03/2013]


309 Ibid., p. 21

310 Trueman in *Ibid.* p. 72

311 *Ibid.* p. 214
thinking around immanence identifies that there is a fusion between immanence, a state of being, existing or operating within the material or physical qualities of human experience, and equally in the experience of transcendence. This in-between state is most acutely called into play when experiencing certain works of art, which can take us both into and outside our bodies.  

The term “immersive theatre,” which is used throughout this thesis, is a genre of theatre usually implying access to the inside of the performance in various ways. The question one might ask is: but what kinds of inside might the term “immersive” refer to in this context? “Immersive theatre” has become a widely adopted term to designate a trend for performances which use installations and expansive environments, which have mobile audiences, and which invite audience participation for an immersion happening both around and within the performer and audience-participant. The performances by the collectives discussed in this thesis do not only surround the audiences, but their aim is to ultimately become part of the audience at the moment of the performance. The proximity of performing bodies, along with the physical interaction of the spectator with the environment, means that the experience of the work is multi-sensory, perhaps more than usual. Immersive theatre experiences tend to toy with the boundaries between individual and collective experiences, the fragmented nature of story and plot, of belief and disbelief. They require audiences to improvise their experiences, and do so in an environment that references memory, film, performance art, theme parks and gaming. Compelling questions about participatory performance relate to the agency of both performer and the participating audience member.

White, discussing what might be implied by the term “immersive theatre,” argues that “immersive theatre” has become a widely adopted term to designate a trend for performances which use installations and expansive environments, which have mobile audiences and which invite audience’s participation. Building on Machon’s “(Syn) aesthetics: redefining Visceral Performance” which addresses multiple senses simultaneously and bodily movement, he argues that the term “immersive” implies access to the inside of the performance in some way, likely to be multi-sensory, making

312 Ibid. pp. 108-109
313 The term “Immersive” seems to be a much bandied-about and abused term these days. For a discussion on immersion in performances see: White, G. (2012) “On Immersive Theatre”, in International Federation for Theatre Research, Theatre Research International, Vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 221-235
314 Ibid. p.221
use of exploratory experiences of space and relationships. He discusses how “Immersive Theatre” often surrounds audience members, makes use of cleverly structured interiors and ingenious invitations for them to explore, and addresses their bodily presence in the environment and its effect on sense making. According to Fleming, immersive environments combine holistic and absorbing design schemes with multiple interpretive areas. In the immersive environment every element is designed to engage the visitor in what could be described as an alternative universe or a dream space. Related to this is also the role of empathy where the audience “steps into the shoes of others” in the attempt to understand another’s state of mind.

Calleja’s analysis of *Game Theory* discusses distinct areas that are useful to consider in relation to the term “immersion.” He distinguishes between “immersion as absorption” and “immersion as transportation” and the oscillation between the two. Machon, adapting ideas from Calleja’s work on immersion, applies the following categories as definitions of the immersive within the theatre experience:

1. **Immersion as Absorption**

   The theatre event is able to engage the participant fully in terms of concentration, imagination, action and interest; a total engagement in an activity that fully engrosses the participant. This is applicable to large-scale immersive events and intimate one-on-one encounters, including those designed within a wider immersive experience.

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317 Opposed to “immersion” there is “aesthetic distance” where the audience knows that what happens on stage is not real. Jackson and Kidd have also identified what they call the “empathy paradox” whereby the performance can narrow the audience’s perspective on the past if they are encouraged to empathise with living history, because they could interpret the narrative as “that’s how it was and all we need to know.” See Jackson, A. and Kidd, J. (2008) *Performance, Learning and Heritage*, Manchester University, Manchester, p. 114; Jackson, A. (2007) *Theatre, Education and the Making of Meanings: Art or Instrument*, Manchester University, Manchester, p. 139
2. Immersion as Transportation

Where the audience-participant is imaginatively and scenographically reoriented in another place, an otherworldly-world that requires navigation according to its own rules of logic. Whereas in games practice this occurs in a conceptual space, in immersive theatre a central feature of the experience is that this otherworldly-world is both a conceptual, imaginative space and an inhabited, physical space...immersive theatre worlds afford actual, physical cohabitation and contact between human bodies, thereby fusing imagination, interpretation and interaction. This otherworldliness, outside of the everyday, can be established within minimalist one-on-one moments just as it can with elaborately designed large scale events.

3. Total Immersion

Involving both of the above and leading to an uncanny recognition of the audience-participant’s own praesemblence within the experience. Where total immersion occurs, there is always the experience of formalistic transformation in that the audience participant is able to fashion her own narrative and journey. Certain events may enable emotional or existential transformation to occur due to ideas and practice shared.320

Jackson and Kidd in this context also write about the “cognitive dissonance” of knowing that a performance is not real but allowing oneself to feel immersed. They argue that the visitors “acknowledge that they are entering into a playful relationship with temporality; that they are able to experience their environment, feelings, social context and expectations in the present whilst simultaneously using their imagination and the reality that is being presented for them to inhabit the past as well.”321

The desire to create immersive, powerful interactive experiences will arguably always be a consideration when designing exhibitions. An immersive form has evolved from the innovators of performance practice across generations. The scenographic arts and

the ideas on the “total artwork” of the Baroque in the 17th century in particular, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, show how collections were already being displayed in immersive theatrical environments with maximum dramatic and dynamic effects, with walls and ceilings covered for a full aesthetic effect and with masques and theatrical events telling stories visually and aurally.

While it has been argued that immersive theatre is known to have manipulated and controlled audiences in Baroque palaces, it could also be argued that 17th century artists such as Caravaggio created art for audiences to contemplate and to reveal truths about humanity. Performance theorists argue that “performance” has the potential to transform and empower audiences. It has the power to be critically reflexive and can provide audience agency. It has been argued that while theatre “shows,” performance “does.”

**The Total Work of Art**

Richard Wagner’s theory of the “total work of art,” the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, mentioned in the previous chapter, resonates with the contemporary imagination, and may help us understand the work of contemporary artists and theatre collectives in museums and historic sites. Walter Benjamin’s critique of Wagner’s theory was aimed at the manipulative side of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, using art’s aura to win people’s hearts and minds for a certain cause. The critique of Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* – especially as it was launched also in its original conception - by such critics as Friedrich Nietzsche, and Theodor Adorno, was aimed at the controlling and manipulative role of the artist and the potential of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to overwhelm the spectator’s emotions, impede the possibility of critical thought, and mould a group of individuals into a powerless mass. However, what if the cause is an ethical one, and what if the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is fragmented and multi-layered, with gaps allowing critical thinking and the voices of the community to be heard? Would that still be called manipulative?

German theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht in the early 20th century, building upon the works of Erwin Piscator and Vsevolod Meyerhold, was also developing his “epic theatre” and exploring the theatre as a forum for political ideas and the creation of a critical aesthetics. Epic Theatre proposed that a play should not cause the spectator to
identify emotionally with the characters or actions but should instead provoke rational self-reflection and a critical view of the performance. Brecht believed that the experience of a climactic catharsis of emotion left its audience complacent. He wanted his audiences to adopt a critical perspective in order to recognise social injustice and exploitation, and to go out of the theatre and effect change in the world outside.  

Dixon, writing about space, metamorphosis and extra-temporality in the theatre of Robert Lepage, investigates the use of transformative space and kinetic mise-en-scène, and also usefully provides the modern use of the Gesamtkunstwerk. He mentions the Futurist’s machine cult, the Bauhaus designs for immersive theatres, and the early film-theatre experiments of Piscator and Kiesler in the 1920s which have all looked at ideas of the “total work of art.” The Czech theatre designer, director, and co-founder in 1958 of the ‘Laterna Magika,’ Josef Svoboda is another example of a theatre scenography designer who in his time envisaged a “theatro mundi.” According to Jan Grossman, Svoboda devised a language that was capable of absorbing and artistically working over the density and dynamics, the multiplicity and contrariety of the world we live in. Svoboda was famous for using mixed media technology in the theatre, balancing the static and active, using devices such as mirrors, abstract projections, hydraulically powered ramps, mobile rostra, multiple tiers and dramatic chunks of scenery, using film projection in conjunction with multiple screens and kinetic scenery to create compelling illusions and fantasy spectacles. He used these for the creation and enhancement of narrative, atmosphere and emotion. Dixon argues that the universal appeal of Lepage’s theatre derives from a similar undertaking of “a theatre-metaphysical search of new spatial languages and temporal codes with which to express the simultaneously fragile and confused, yet sublime and transcendent nature of the human condition and to translate such truths into a different language - through nothing more or less than a synthesising Gesamtkunstwerk.”

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325 Svoboda developed complex ‘polyscreen’ systems in conjunction with moving conveyor belts and diffused and directional lighting effects to attain a ‘theatrical synthesis of projected images and synchronised acting and staging’. For a discussion on Svoboda’s work see Ibid.
Bogard writes that contemporary manifestations of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* can be found all around us, from theme parks to virtual realities to theatrical displays in museums.\(^{327}\) Similarly, however, she also argues that it does not mean that it does not also have a potential for change. She notes that “one thing can certainly be learned from Wagner’s concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*: it is much more than just a theatrical form of display; it points out the problem of representation.”\(^{328}\) She explains that Wagner witnessed a rapid transformation of the audiences in his time: how technological advances had a profound effect on the experience and production of culture, and how theatre spectators turned into mass audiences. She also noted that “Art lost its aura and became part of a commodity culture. Wagner understood people’s desire for authentic experiences. In that respect the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was Wagner’s attempt to combat and appropriate the emerging pressure of mass culture.” Our time is not very different Bogard argues.\(^{329}\) Carter, similarly, argues that by definition the narrative museum is philosophical not rational, and creates meaning through the combined efforts of its collections, scenography and architecture. “As a synthesized or total environment, it is the museological equivalent of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.”\(^{330}\)

Yet, the Baroque and the Contemporary are widely separated in time, ethos and language, thus, how can the contemporary mirror the Baroque in its use of a “total work of art”? Whitehead argues that museums, metaphorically and literally speaking, are not “mirrors” and their representations are not mere “reflections.” He writes that “the museum is a map that can also itself be travelled, as the visitor journeys between regions of knowledge.”\(^{331}\) He argues that the potential of arranging objects in physical space is the potential of arranging them conceptually, and it is this that makes of display no mere reflection but rather part of the visualizing technology of idea formation.\(^{332}\) Similarly, Macdonald has stated that Museums suggest ways of “seeing the world.”\(^{333}\)


\(^{328}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{329}\) *Ibid.*


\(^{332}\) *Ibid.*, p.56

\(^{333}\) *Ibid.*, p.54
The “total work of art” of the Baroque in contemporary times is arguably slowly metamorphosing into a more performative style of communicating knowledge, open to critical thinking and co-curation.

In “Narrative and Imagination” Carter attempts to explore the modern origin for practices that have resulted in the present day museum trend of creating narrative templates and simulated experiences. She writes how the founder and curator of France’s first National Museum of Monuments, the archaeologist Alexandre Lenoir (1761-1839) who was devoted in saving France’s historic monuments from the ravages of the French Revolution strongly believed “that truth was acquired not simply from a factual or analytical engagement with material, but rather from sensory experience.” He believed that truth and meaning lay beyond scientific formulation and by means of drama and effect, and the careful deployment of real things it was possible to experience greater spiritual truths. He understood that “what he was creating was a space for imagining and believing at a time when other museum workers, blind to the performance that was taking place in their galleries, were under the illusion that rationalism was attainable and was all.”334

Kirchenblatt-Gimblett distinguishes between “in situ displays” and “in-context displays”, and she argues that these two modes of display differ in approach to the performativity of objects and the nature of their mise-en-scene. “In-context displays” depend on the drama of the artefacts, objects are the actors and knowledge animates them - their script is a series of labels. The performative mode, she argues is exposition and demonstration. The “in-situ displays” are immersive and environmental, such as period rooms. They privilege experience and tend to thematize. In this space, a world is created into which the visitor enters, and this effect, Kirschenblatt- Gimblett argues, is modelled on the experience of travel and transportation.

Writing about memory and museums, Kavanagh argues that “…so much more is happening within the visit than a quest for learning.”335 Kavanagh explores what the cultural geographer Annis in her 1986 essay had referred to as the “dream space”, a

“field of subrational image formation,” the non-rational, affective and reflective experience of encountering material and ourselves within the museum. “The dream space,” writes Sheldon Annis, “is the reflective experience of encountering yourself within a museum.” Kavanagh argues that “dream spaces” are the point at which our inner and outer experiences merge. During the museum visit, memory and the present cease to be disparate but fuse into one singular experience. Annis describes the museum as a site of confusion and disorientation but also of imagination and delight. It is a space in which the ‘mind and eye’ work in tandem, a space in which aesthetic response is produced ‘subrationally,’ a term that draws attention to questions of volition and suggests the creative power of a divided consciousness.

The museum as dream space impacts on both the cognitive and affective realms, provoking memory and recognition but also fantasy, desire and anxiety. It is within the dream space that the most enlivening, enjoyable and possibly subversive parts of the visit lie. It energises both our imagination and memories and it illuminates feelings. Kavanagh argues that in accepting Annis’s idea of the dream space, we have to accept more fully that imagination, emotions, senses and memories are vital components of the experience of museums.336

In a similar manner, Bagnall, writing about performance and performativity in heritage sites, notes that visitors map their experiences physically, emotionally and imaginatively, selectively constructing ‘worlds based around their own experiences.’ 337 Data collected by Bagnall at two heritage sites suggested that visitors practised a form of reminiscence informed by performativity. She argued that “the relationship between visitors and the sites is based as much on emotion and imagination as it is on cognition. Moreover, this emotional and imaginary relationship is engendered by the physicality of the process of consumption.”338 Emotions and imagination then, are acknowledged as key dimensions of the heritage visit, a visit where the physical site and the physicality of moving through that site are not just key, but sometimes take precedence. The site itself then, was identified as a potential trigger to emotion and imagination and emotions were the link between the physical site and mental images.

336 Ibid., p. 3
338 Ibid. p. 87
Contemporary Experimentation: Journeys into the inner-self

Building upon the subject of immersion and embodiment, it has been deemed useful to also provide in the following sections further examples and a brief contextual background to experimental performance art and site specific installation art, produced from the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st century. This will also help in a better understanding of how the contemporary artists analysed in the following chapters, attempt to understand the past by contemplating about their own past emotions. They go through meditative journeys into their inner selves.

Machon argues that since the 1960s there was a wealth of interactive and experiential practice that took forward experimental immersive principles.\textsuperscript{339} For example, Julian Beck and Judith Malina were the instigators of the “Living Theatre” in North America, Richard Schechner and his manifesto for “Environmental Theatre” and the Performance Group, Allan Kaprow’s “Happenings,” Tasumi Hijikata with Kazuo Ono in the creation of the “Butoh Theatre” in Japan and Peter Brook in Britain. All were working at around the same time, sometimes collaborating or influenced by each other.\textsuperscript{340}

In highlighting the influence of self-reflexive performances, it is important in this context to flag up also the significance and influence of the German choreographer Pina Bausch and the “Wuppertaler Tanztheater,” on the performers discussed in this research, especially for the works of the Malta based theatre Rubberbodies Artist Collective, discussed later on. Bausch’s main contribution was the emancipation of contemporary choreography through self-reflexive and fragmented works. It is pointless to ask Pina Bausch what her pieces are about, Birringer writes in 1986. “It is never something you can describe exactly... Basically one wants to say something which cannot be said, so we make a poem where one can feel what is meant,” Pina Bausch


\textsuperscript{340} In the early 20th century ideas on self reflection through performance were already being investigated, and they were built upon by various theatre practitioners. For example, in 1902, the Russian actor and theatre director Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863 – 1938) sent his actors into the Moscow slums to prepare for their roles as beggars before his production of “Gorki’s The Lower Depths”, to interpret the real world rather than a make-believe one. Building upon Stanislavsky was among others Jerzy Grotowski who is associated with Polish laboratory theatre, poor theatre and physical theatre. Grotowski moved beyond the early influence of Stanislavsky towards a ritualized intensity.
responded to Birringer. Birringer explains how the human body has a history and how journeys into the inner self are possible through movement and dance. He argued that the borderline in Bausch’s Tanztheater is the concrete human body, a body that has specific qualities and a personal history - but also a body that is written about, and written into social representation of gender, race, and class.

Birringer described how Bausch wanted to reveal the way individuals feel physically compelled to participate in the games people play, seeking recognition, affection, and social acceptance. Her works were always linked with a sense of personally experienced history. Repressed memory of childhood traumas can be retrieved if only one listens carefully enough to the repetitions of the socialized body, she explained. “We must look again and again,” Bausch once said in defence of her excessive repetitions, “and maybe the saddest thing about our obsessions is that they often look so cheerful.” When the Wuppertal dancers recalled the youthful joy with which they used to drive away the fear built into all children’s games, the hide-and-seek exercises always looked ambiguously sad and cheerful at the same time. Bausch’s dramaturgical method becomes more accessible over time; these adult remembrances of things past are made to evolve slowly and unobtrusively. They take time, and sometimes we cannot see them all at once because they run parallel, commenting on and overlapping with each other. Sometimes they return in a different context and assume a different emotional quality, like the many stories that emerge and disappear again, accentuating the subjective reality of experiences that are both pleasurable and painful.

The emancipatory works by Pina Bausch were received in an extremely divided, controversial way. The radically subjective work style of the choreographer, whose plays were offerings to the spectator's own fantasy, seemed to encourage this kind of critical attitude. The principle of montage, the associative linking of scenic material as structural principle for the dramatic form and the content, was a distinguishing

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342 Ibid. pp. 85-97
343 Ibid.
344 Ibid.
characteristic of the work of the Wuppertal Dance Theatre. The key is in the viewer, who is questioned about his interest and his own everyday experience. This experience is (and must) be compared with, and connected to, the events on stage. What is generally regarded in theatre as the process of interaction or communication demonstrates here also its specific significance for dance theatre. But here the meaning of a word is transformed into body signs, the total expression of body, mime, gesture. Only when the physicality exhibited on the stage (the “awareness of the body” that is portrayed) correlates with the viewer’s everyday experience of his own body can a “sense connection” be established.345

McConachie and Hart state in their introduction to Performance and Cognition that: “…mental concepts arise, fundamentally, from the experience of the body in the world. As neural beings, humans must make meaning with certain spatial relations and bodily action schemas along with other mental constructs arising from the interplay of experience and patterning in the brain.”346 The multi-media experiences and performances by the collectives which will be discussed in the following chapters do not only surround the audiences but their aim is to ultimately become part of the audience at the moment of the performance. The proximity of performing bodies, along with the physical interaction of the spectator with the environment, means that the experience of the work is multi-sensory, perhaps more than usual. Immersive theatre experiences tend to toy with the boundaries between individual and collective experiences, the fragmented nature of story and plot, of belief and disbelief.

345 Ibid.
Site Specific Installation Art as Immersive Performance

Installation art “loosely refers to the type of art into which the viewer physically enters, and which is often described as theatrical, immersive or experiential... plunging you into a fictional world - like a film or a theatre set.”

The artists interviewed for this research and discussed in the following chapters also create installations in their work to complement their performances and they take into account the experience of the viewer as an active participant. The performer in the case of installation art is arguably also the visitor who is no longer simply a member of the audience but a participant in the performance.

In his manifesto for the “Proun Installation” at the Great Berlin Art Exhibition of 1923, El Lissitzky had emphasised the approach to exhibition design that sought to create an active participation by the spectator, rather than a passive viewing. He emphasised that space is “that which is not looked through a keyhole, not through an open door. Space does not exist for the eye only: it is not a picture; one wants to live in it.”

When writing about “Spectacular Immersion” and “Heightened Perception” in installation art, Bishop strongly argues that installation art is closely allied to the concerns of post-structuralist theory and shares its call for emancipation. In her conclusion, Bishop argues that installation art exposes viewers to their condition as fragmented and decentred subjects without closure, and that it could enable viewers to become more equipped to negotiate actions with the world and with other people. Installation art responds affirmatively or transformatively to the given institutional, cultural or spatial context. In many cases the installation transforms the spatial qualities

349 Post-structuralists believe in the complexity of humans themselves and the impossibility of fully escaping structures in order to study them. Writers whose work is often characterised as post-structuralist include Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Judith Butler, Jacques Lacan, Jean Baudrillard. Existential phenomenology is a significant influence on post-structuralism. Furthermore, it has been claimed that a number of elements within phenomenology (mainly Heidegger’s thought) have some resonance with Eastern philosophical ideas, particularly with Zen Buddhism and Taoism. See: Angermuller, J. (2014) Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis. Subjectivity in Enunciative Pragmatics, Palgrave Macmillon, Houndmills, Basingstoke
of its site and the relation between space and installation might become so close that both merge into one another and their distinction is dissolved.\textsuperscript{350}

Installation art focuses on the viewer’s “experience.” Rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, installation art presupposes an embodied viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision. This insistence on the literal presence of the viewer is according to Bishop arguably the key characteristic of installation art.\textsuperscript{351} Reiss also highlights that the key characteristic of installation art is that “the spectator is in some way regarded as integral to the completion of the work.”\textsuperscript{352}

Bishop establishes four main types of experience that installation art can provide, and analyzes them from the point of view of a psychoanalytical or philosophical theory:

1. The Dream-like experience, where the installation provokes unconscious associations to emerge within the viewer.
2. The Bodily experience of the work, where the viewer is made conscious of his body in the space.
3. Mimetic Engulfment, as the opposite of the bodily experience: the viewer becomes lost in the space.
4. The Activated Viewer: works which demand viewers’ participation in order to happen.

Writing about site specific installations used as institutional critique, Bishop argues that the underlying key idea is that there is more than one way to represent the world. One artist who has theorised this shift in installation art, cited by Bishop, is Mary Kelly who argues that “the view is always partial... there is no position from which you can actually see everything at once.”\textsuperscript{353} Like many artists in this period, Kelly came to regard installation art’s multi-perspectivalism as emancipatory - in contrast to single point perspective.

\textsuperscript{352} Reiss, J. (1999) From Margin to Centre: The Spaces of Installation Art, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts
Bishop argues that installation insists on the viewers’ experience to question the stability and mastery of the world, and to reveal the true nature of our subjectivity as fragmented and decentred, attempting to expose us to the reality of our condition as de-centred subjects. She argues that installation implies that we may become adequate to this model, and thereby more equipped to negotiate our actions in the world and with other people.

Contrary to art with static viewpoints governed by linear perspective, someone viewing installation art has the opportunity to be manoeuvered in relation to the artwork. This inclusive aspect of installation art is termed by Bishop as “activated spectatorship,” which encourages the viewer to engage in the work and hence be released from passive contemplation. This phenomenon in experiencing immersive art gives rise to subjective interpretations of the same work instigated by the multitude of available viewpoints. The intervention and installation artists discussed below and in the following chapters utilise three dimensional space, thus the viewer is able to enter inside the artwork.

Totality is integral to installation art, giving rise to the total work of art, Kabakov wrote, referring to the viewer as an actor in a stage play directed by the artist. The viewer is submerged into the scene and engrossed physically and psychologically by its effects to complete the work. Theatre plays on the relationship between art and life by utilising real elements from the lived world and placing them in a staged environment. Many artists turned to installation art through the desire to expand visual experience beyond the two-dimensional, and to provide a more vivid alternative to it. Bishop also argues that installation art’s relationship to the viewer is underpinned by two ideas: activation and decentering. Viewers enter the artwork, instead of representing texture, space, light and so on these artists present these elements directly for the viewer to experience. Thus this introduces an emphasis on sensory immediacy and on physical participation. Critics have argued that the need for the viewer to move around and through the work “activates” the viewer. The idea of the “decentered subject” runs concurrently with this.

Bishop focuses her argument on the type of installation art that inspires dreaming and she argues how Freud’s “The Interpretation of Dreams” (1900) offers a psychoanalytic definition of dreams, that perhaps could also correspond to installation art having a “total work of art” element. For Freud the experience of a dream has three main characteristics. The first is that it is primarily visual, it presents itself with a sensory vividness more akin to conscious perception than to memory and while dreaming we appear to experience not to think. The second characteristic is that it has a composite structure and the third is that the dream is not meant to be decoded but analyzed through free association. Kabakov argues that the total installation prompts conscious and unconscious associations in the beholder.

Panofsky in the 1920s argued in “Perspective as Symbolic Form” that Renaissance perspective, with its vanishing point on the horizon of the picture, was connected to the eyes of the viewer who stood before it and that a hierarchical relationship was understood to exist. Artists throughout the twentieth century have sought to disrupt this hierarchical model. Theories which proliferated in the 1970s, and are broadly described as post-structuralist, seek to provide an alternative to this idea. Poststructuralist theory argues that “the correct way to view our condition as human subjects is as fragmented, multiple and decentered - by unconscious desires and anxieties, by an interdependent and differential relationship to the world, or by pre-existing social structures.” 356 There is no one “right” way to look at the world. Installation art’s multiple perspectives are seen to subvert the renaissance perspective model because they deny the viewer any one ideal place from which to survey the work. Bishop argues that the main theoretical impulses for installation art emerged during the 1960s and 1970s through the writings of Barthes, Foucault, Icaan and Derrida, ideas of heightened immediacy, of the decentered subject and of activated spectatorship as political implication. 357

Examples of installation art produced during this period, which was influential to the artists interviewed for this research, especially to the Maltese based art collective START, was that of the German artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986). 358 The artist strongly

357 Ibid.
358 Joseph Beuys is considered was a sculptor, performance artist, teacher and political activist who shifted the emphasis away from the artist as ‘object maker’ to focus on his opinions, his personality and his actions. To some he was considered also a conman and a showman.
believed that art had the power to shape a better society, and once stated that “It was simply impossible for human beings to bring their creative intention into the world any other way than through action.” This strength of conviction led Beuys to push the boundaries of established artforms to include human action and large-scale sculptural environments exploring universal social concerns. Through his performances or ‘Actions,’ Beuys encouraged audiences to incorporate his political and social messages into their everyday lives. He used the framework of artistic practice to build a style that mixed politics, anthropology and Celtic and Christian mythology, through which he presented a loose philosophy manifested in his many installations, performances, lectures and sculptures. As a result, by the end of his career he emerged as an activist, a ‘social sculptor’ intent on socio-political reform.

Another artist whose site specific works proved influential to the artists interviewed for this research, where those of Meredith Monk, who in the 1960s, was already producing performances at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. “I sometimes think that one of the beauties of live performances is that it ignites a space and time and then disappears,” Meredith Monk was quoted saying on site specific ephemeral artworks. Free from the limitations of theatre stages, she has been interested in space and in new ways of dealing with the performer audience relationship. She has explored a broad range of possibilities combining disciplines and introducing elements such as boats, live animals, motorcycles and fire. Ideas central to her site specific work have been the notions of time and transformation. She chooses her sites carefully, often likening her role in the creation of her work to that of an archaeologist in order, as she said, “to excavate a space and let it speak.”

In her first outdoor site specific work Blueprint held in 1967 in a five storey building in New York the performance took place in the windows, the door and on the roof. In some of the windows were live performers, in others film and in others shadows of...
performers. Simultaneous realities, cinematic scale and performance as direct experience could be glimpsed in the piece. In 1969 she produced Juice: a theatre cantata in three instalments, located at the Guggenheim Museum, the Minor Latham Playhouse and The House Loft in New York City. Considered as one of Monk’s most important site-specific works, audiences moved with the performers within and between each site. The viewer’s perception of the piece shifted from the monumental to the intimate during the progression of the piece from site to site. “I was trying to break down habitual ways of thinking about the act of going to a performance. I made pieces to be performed at different times of the day or pieces that took place over a period of time in different locations, incorporating memory as part of the experience.”

In 1970 she also produced a live movie which she called Needlebrain Lloyd and the Systems Kid set in various locations in Connecticut which included galloping horses across a field, the rowing of a boat across a lake to a land rover filled with performers. She expressed how:

In 1970, I wanted to make a large non-narrative film of dreamlike images in constantly shifting landscapes … I began thinking about how I could work with some of those ideas in a live performance. I had been investigating the performer/audience relationship in terms of scale and proximity. I decided to work with cinematic concepts such as close ups disjunctions of time and space, pan zooms, and dissolves as inspiration for weaving together events in a piece to take place in four different outdoor spaces.

In 1971 she produced Vessel. An Opera Epic, where a bus was rented out to take the audience to the different locations where the performance was taking place. It started from Meredith Monk’s loft to the Performing Garage and then to Wooster Street parking lot in New York City. It was characterised as a performance tapestry loosely based on the life of Joan of Arc. Her experimental, immersive promenade performances

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366 Ibid. p. 206
in alternative sites anticipate the works by WildWorks, Punchdrunk and the Rubberbodies Collective discussed in Chapter Five.

**Theatres of Experience**

Hooper-Greenhill has pointed out that “the old passive general public has become the new active audience,” with individuals now seen as possessing their own unique learning agendas and previous experiences, all of which shape the meaning created and taken away from the museum. Hein offers a solid outline of what a constructivist museum should contain - he suggests that the learner needs to be able to associate an educational situation with what is already known. And he also adds that it is almost impossible to learn something without making an association with familiar categories. This may be achieved through experiencing of performances which dig into the inner self and use movement to re-visit past or present emotions, such as love, hate, hope and fear, so when a visitor sees an actor perform an emotion, according to the constructivist theory, the visitor can also build upon what he experiences and sees.

Similarly, MacLeod argues that if narrative can be usefully understood as both a cognitive mechanism through which we make sense of the world and a form of structuring space, time and experience, the concept of embodiment is helpful in enabling us to understand more about the ways in which narratives function in a fully embodied realm that is architectural, spatial and laden with the past. The notion of embodiment relates to how we experience and make sense of the world around us in and through our bodies.

Exhibition designers are drawing on techniques from film-making and storytelling, conceptualising exhibitions as three-part dramas or as beginning, middle and end. Narrative is acknowledged as having a spatial character and space is recognised as having narrative potential. That is, narrative can structure our sense of space and spaces

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can ‘hold’ or ‘carry’ narratives. More than this, physical space – as a medium – can convey, through our movement through space, a sense of time and an unfolding of experience that a purely verbal or textual medium cannot.\footnote{MacLeod. S, et. (2014) Prisoners, punishment and torture: Developing new approaches to interpretation at the Tower of London, University of Leicester, RCMG and Arts Council England}

There has been great interest in developing installations that augment, accentuate, expand and illuminate the latent narratives embedded in our built heritage – in landscapes and built forms. Importantly, the more successful of these approaches harness the narrative and spatial potential of imported media such as film. Tom Duncan and Noel McCauley, for example, revealed the stories embedded in a found space by augmenting the reality of the Brickworks Factory Museum at Zehdenick in Brandenburg, Germany, using new technologies to help evoke former times and occupants and allowing the existing fabrics to “speak.” Reality is augmented by the use of overlaid filmic and audio interventions, in an interface between imagination, experience and movement.\footnote{Mac Leod, S. et. al. (eds.) (2012) Museum Making, Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions, Routledge, London and New York, p.202}

Building upon the ideas of theatrical effects being used in Museums and Historic sites, there are various examples which can be cited in this context to provide a background to the following chapters. For example, Crawley mentions various works to demonstrate how contemporary exhibitions are being scripted and re-imagined as stage, and how many exhibition designers today are combining new technologies with traditional theatre practices to produce inventive forms of scenographic presentation.\footnote{Crawley, G. (2012) “Staging Exhibitions: Atmospheres of Imagination” in MacLeod, S. et. al. (ed.), Museum Making, Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 12- 20} She argues how in the staging of narratives for objects and spectators, theatricality creates atmospheres of imagination.

Crawley presents some examples, such as the 2007 exhibition The World is a Stage at the Tate Modern in London, and The Theatre without Theatre exhibition organised by the Museu d’Arte Contemporania de Barcelona and co-produced by the Museo Colecao Berardo in Lisbon. She says that today designers are changing the perception of visitors and ways of seeing galleries; “the aim is to exploit the inherent theatricality of the
museum architecture; to approach the spaces, circulation and atmosphere scenographically and to create contemporary interpretation using scenic devices.”

Crawley discusses the use of light and how it can become a theatrical agent- used as a spotlight “guiding the path of vision,” where “what we don’t see becomes as important as what we do see.” Crawley also writes about the “In Praise of Shadows” exhibition at the V&A, during the London Design Festival of 2009, where visitors were given hand powered LED torches to make their own discoveries in the dark halls, thus becoming explorers, directors and performers. She also writes about another exhibition held at the V&A in 2009 entitled “Telling Tales,” with the focus being on the transition from light to dark, using also sound as a significant component.

Another example of immersive performance in museums was the interactive event *Journey Through the Afterlife; Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (2011), held at the British Museum. The intention was to create a grand spectacle involving a series of performances in various locations across the Museum’s Great Court and ground floor galleries, curated by the site-responsive theatre company Periplum. The site specific work of Lundahl and Seitl in museums also has immersive qualities. Their work *Symphony of a Missing Room* at the Kunsthalle in Bern, Switzerland, commissioned by Biennale Bern, is an example. During the event, visitors departed on a collective and personal journey on their guided tour round the museum.

Performance art has only recently entered the institutional realm of contemporary art, with more artists working in and around these disciplines, and with more museums, art centres and biennials considering how to deepen their commitments to performance. These new developments are caught between apparently resisting the commercialization that has engulfed the object-based art world over the same period, and being the perfect products of the immaterial experience economy. For example, the performance art work of the Serbian born Marina Abramovic, whose work explores the relationship between performer and audience, the limits of the body, and the possibilities of the mind and extreme states of consciousness, has only very recently been accepted by the art world. The MOMA in New York invited her to exhibit a retrospective of her works in 2010.

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373 Ibid. p.14
She created performances that challenged, shocked and moved audiences, provoking them to think. Her work has been misunderstood for decades, with people constantly asking her “but is this art?” In 2014 her work was again being performed at the Serpentine Gallery in London focussing mainly on the experience of the body and meditation. Visitors, for example, had their hands held by actors or were placed in a bare room with headphones on, to meditate. The journey was through the inner self and not through the encounter of objects.

It is only very recently that performance art is being further recognised as an art form and given an almost permanent space in museums. In 2012, the year that London celebrated the Cultural Olympiad, the Tate Modern in London also opened The Tanks: Art in Action, a fifteen-week festival from 18 July – 28 October 2012, dedicated to exhibiting live art, performance, installation and film works. That same summer it commissioned the Unilever Series, These Associations by Tino Seghal, which populated the Turbine Hall with performers enacting choreographed actions using movement, sound and conversation. The same year the Tate Modern also launched the “BMW Tate Live Performance Room,” which according to the Tate Modern’s website was “the world’s first space for performance broadcast live online”, conceived by Catherine Wood, curator of contemporary art and performance, which she co-curated with Capucine Perrot, assistant curator at the Tate Modern.

Performance art has a lot of potential in museums and palaces. One need only look at the range of work that was presented as part of the London 2012 festival and the Cultural Olympiad, accompanying the Summer Olympics and the Summer Paralympics, to realise that this type of practice, because it blurs artistic boundaries and is widely accessible in its participatory nature, has been embraced as ground-breaking and important in a national celebration of community and culture. Jubb, (artistic director of BAC, London) argued that theatrical situations where genuine human connection occurs holds the greatest potential for transformation: “…which is why it is good theatre, because theatre ought to be transformative: In a relatively secular society perhaps theatre can provide that place where people come together, explore their differences and
by putting differences and creativity together, invent something new, invent a future...\(^{375}\)

Various historic house museums in the 21st century are turning their attention towards the visitor’s experience through the use of installations and performances. For example, Marcio Doctors, curator of the Eva Klabin Foundation, during the ICOM-DEMHIST conference in RIO, Brazil introduced the conference participants to The Breathing Project. This project, which had already started in 2004, and which is still running, invites contemporary artists to intervene in the museum’s exhibition in order to create a link between the past and the contemporary. According to the curator “the intention was to openly create language frictions between the celebrated art of the past, incorporated to the patrimony, and contemporary expressions,” challenging today’s artists to establish new layers of meaning with the Foundation’s artworks.\(^{376}\)

The Freud Museum in London, from 2004 onwards, has also witnessed the collaboration of contemporary artists to tell stories through sculptures, projections and site-specific installations, curated by James Putnam. Earlier on, in 1994, James Putnam, as curator of Egyptian antiquities, had already initiated Time Machine, where contemporary artists responded to the ancient artefacts in the Egyptian Galleries. For example, Andy Goldsworthy made a 30-ton sand sculpture, while Marc Quinn created a transparent headset amongst the Gods of Resurrection, which contained a hibernating frozen frog. Putnam believes that the museum is a philosophically rigorous institution which should examine and re-examine history, art and artefacts in the light of current cultural-related issues.\(^{377}\)

In 2008, the American artist Jeff Koons also displayed seventeen kitsch pop sculptures at the Palace of Versailles, France, which sparked a dialogue with the sumptuous Baroque decor, celebrating the encounter between the past and the contemporary imagination (Figure 18). These included a self-portrait in white marble in the same

\(^{375}\) Ibid., p. 23  
\(^{376}\) The Eva Klabin Foundation is located in the residence where the collector and philanthropist Eva Klabin (1903–1991) lived for over 30 years in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. The Breathing project has featured artists such as José Damasceno, Ernesto Neto, Chelpa Ferro, Nuno Ramos, Daniela Thomas and Carlito Carvalhosa. A publication entitled “Projeto Respiração, Cobogó/Fundação Eva Klabin”, was released in September 2012, during ArtRio, presenting around 18 interventions since the project’s inception in 2004.  
room as portraits of Louis XIV and Louis XVI, an assemblage of vacuum cleaners among portraits of royal women in the queen’s antechamber, a giant metal balloon dog in the Hall of Hercules, and a hanging lobster made from red aluminium floats in the Hall of Mars, under the title *Let them see kitsch*. The exhibition attracted debate, mixed reviews and criticism from the conservative far-right of France. For example, Edourd de Royere, president of the *Fondation du Patrimoine* heritage group said “I have nothing against contemporary art but I am shocked by this intrusion into a magical place like Versailles.” Arnaud-Aaron Upinsky, the president of the *Union Nationale des Ecrivains de France*, said the sculptures would “soil the most sacred of all symbols of our heritage and identity.” Several dozen people also demonstrated outside the palace gates demanding that the exhibit be cancelled.\(^{378}\) The president of the Versailles Foundation Jean-Jacques Aillagon, a former culture minister, however, argued that “Even before they saw the exhibition, people were talking of an unacceptable sacrilege, but why? Can ancient only live with ancient art? The modern with the modern? ... Art exists to pose questions…”\(^{379}\)

After Jeff Koons exhibited at Versailles in 2008 other artists followed. Japanese pop artist Takashi Murakami exhibited his manga inspired works at Versailles in 2010 (Figure 19). More than 11,000 people signed a petition claiming the show was degrading and disrespectful. The artist claimed that the exhibition was a “face-off between the baroque period and postwar Japan.”\(^{380}\) The Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos in 2012 also exhibited her extravagant yet ironic works at the Palace of Versailles, passing on feminist ideas throughout. In the Hall of Mirrors she exhibited *Marilyn*, an elegant pair of high heeled shoes made of pots and stainless steel lids, created as an ode to the achievements of women in the public and private domains (Figure 20). 2013 saw the works of Giuseppe Penone (Figure 21), while 2014 saw the works of Lee Ufan who wanted to have a conversation with Andre Le Notre. 2015 saw

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the works of Anish Kapoor, which hoped to bring in a more political perspective on power and its depiction at Versailles as it celebrated the tercentenary of Louis XIV’s death.381

Figure 18: Jeff Koons, Balloon Dog (2008)
Palace of Versailles, France

Figure 19: Takashi Murakami, Intervention (2010)
Palace of Versailles, France

Figure 20: Joana Vasconcelos, Marylin’s Shoes (2012) Palace of Versailles, France

Figure 21: Giuseppe Penone, Intervention (2013)
Palace of Versailles, France

In 2010, in Milan, Italy, contemporary designers also intervened in an exposition entitled *Unexpected Guests. Yesterday’s homes, today’s design* in four historic house Museums: The Museo Bagatti Valsecchi, Casa Boschi di Stefano, Villa Necchi Campiglio and the Museo Poldi Pezzoli. About three hundred contemporary artworks found themselves in a dialogue with the past, juxtaposing contemporary design with historical museum houses. The aim of the show was to provoke a dialogue between the signifiers of our own time and those of past epochs, offering the possibility of a parallel reading of the high craftsmanship of the past and the equally masterful techniques of contemporary industrial production.382

In the UK, with the aim to enrich the visitor experience, the national “museumaker” programme was held between April 2009 and June 2011, which saw sixteen museums across the country collaborate with contemporary artists to bring life back into historical sites. Some of the highlights of the project included three thousand black butterflies by Clare Twomey taking over Brighton’s Royal Pavilion, Susie Mac Murray installing a maze of golden thread in the Marble Hall at Kedleston and Bompass & Parr creating a culinary and film extravaganza in the underground ballroom in Welbeck Abbey.383

British film director and artist Peter Greenaway in his intervention entitled *Peopling Palaces*, held between 2007-2010, projected around 500 costumed characters onto the walls of the 17th century Royal Palace La Venaria Reale in Torino, Italy (Figures 22 and 23). Chittendon, writing about the intervention, discusses how “rethinking an intersection of the cinematic, technological and immersive presents a means to interpret and imaginatively engage with lives across a range of museum and heritage spaces.”384

The costumed actors performed the roles of fictional characters before cameras and the films were projected onto the walls and ceilings of the palace. Chittendon argues that interventions such as those by Greenaway demonstrate a powerful way of giving voice and emotional realism to historic spaces. Her article examines the different types of

382 The exhibition was curated by Beppe Finessi with the collaboration of Cristina Miglio and Italo Lupi, and was a Cosmit initiative for April’s *Salone Internazionale del Mobile.*


characters created by Greenaway, looking specifically at how they could help visitors engage with the lived human past of the palace.

Drawing on such fundamentals of human nature as love, jealousy, desire, deceit, gossip and humour, Chittenden argues that these character-led performances suggested ways that dramatic techniques can help to engender imagined and empathetic connections with the past. During the intervention, emotions played a critical role in creating engaging and believable characters. She argues that Greenaway’s ability is to embrace the fictional possibilities for creating an emotional connection with the past. The characters encouraged a consideration of the human conditions of life in the palace that transcends the ornaments and things left behind. She argues that defining the intervention as an “immersive cinema experience” risks obscuring the fact that the palace is already an immersive experience. Yet the installation brings together aspects of theatre, cinema, and immersion in many forms.

Pascoe locates Greenaway's films “between this stance of forecasting unlimited possibilities and the other, of monumentalizing and effacing a no longer active past.” Chittenden says that “A role for future research is to examine how technological (and especially cinematic) interventions can be used to explore specific historic spaces and unpack the various psychological dramas of those who performed in the space. She calls for a new, more dynamic understanding of the potential of cinematic language and immersion in museum and heritage contexts.”

Figures 22 and 23: Peter Greenaway, Audio-visuals projecting costumed actors onto the walls of the Royal Palace (2007-2010), La Venaria Reale, Torino, Italy
This was not the first time that projections were used in a museum or a historic site. For example in 2002 the IWM North in Manchester launched *The Big Picture Show*, a 360-degree experience using surround sound, projected digital moving images and photographs, bringing to life people’s experiences of war, immersing the viewer in the heart of the action, creating a sensory experience which is often very moving, showing collections of photography, art and sound to highlight the themes of the home front, weapons and children’s experiences of war. The Big Picture Show shorts focus on a street bombing in Baghdad in 2007, the experiences of a volunteer nurse in Afghanistan and the theme of Remembrance. Penny Ritchie Calder describing how narrative is employed at the Imperial War Museum says: “we are trying to tell a story… a way in through a human story.”

In 2012, the Titanic Museum in Belfast, Northern Ireland opened, also using immersive technologies, and revealing not just the loss of life, but also celebrating the achievements of the former designers and ship builders of Belfast. In the first gallery upstairs setting the scene, superimposed and moving life-size silhouettes are projected on to blown up images of the streets of Victorian Belfast, giving the impression of residents as they busy themselves with daily life: walking, talking, shopping, children running and playing – you’re immediately immersed in the era, before the Titanic looms into view (Figure 24). Multi-media experiences and an immersive surround animation provides the visitors with a virtual tour through the decks of the ship, and the screens beneath takes them on an underwater journey to the decaying remains in the Atlantic depths.

![Figure 24: Titanic Museum, Audio-Visuals (2014), Belfast, Northern Ireland](image)

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Conclusion

[...] as in a performance, creative space in a museum or cultural environment is primarily the audience’s space. It is a space that resonates with them and their lives, a space where they can learn, explore and be inspired, a space as much in the audience’s mind as it is physical.\footnote{388}

Writing on the performative gallery, Greenberg, director of the architectural company Metaphor, during the 2004 conference held at the University of Leicester, had presented a paper entitled “The Vital Museum.” He argued how exhibit making could shift away from the static conventions of 2D and 3D design, graphics and showcases towards theatre, storytelling and mediated environments, where the audience effectively become actors within a drama set in an architectonic or scenographic space.

He writes about the “experience” in museums and how “we have to change our thought patterns… and think of spaces in a different way, leaving behind our old habits of monumentalism and permanence, in both buildings and their content, and think instead of dynamic spaces.”\footnote{389} Most museums try to reconstruct environments and create experiential effects—a recent phenomenon which is called “experience design.” Greenberg argued how this aims to incorporate storytelling, non-linear experiences, interactive engagement, and rich sensory elements into design strategies.\footnote{390} Similarly, Skramstad claimed that ‘Museums need to recognize that they are in the experience business and that it is the distinctive theme, context and value of the experiences they bring to a particular audience that will increasingly define their success.’\footnote{391}

Bishop’s views on activating the viewers and decentring phenomena, have a lot of relevance here. Where in a theatre, audiences are usually silent, seated and separated from the stage and actors, immersive performance activates the spectacle, thus

\footnote{389} Ibid., p. 226
\footnote{390} Ibid., p.226
extending the theatrical stage of culture into subjective experiences. The viewer is on location and an essential element of the scene in an engagement that confounds expectations of art as a purely representative practice. De Oliveira phrased it: “the artist and viewer are together in a discursive environment”. In other words, the experiential outcome of physically being in the work fosters a sense of dislocation from both everyday life and art, disavowing segregated concepts of reality and systems of representation.

It has been argued by performance scholars that “performance” is a fugitive of its own presence and it can not be grasped; escaping the commodity as an art object, it enters into the economy of the unconscious, its force lying in its ephemerality, resulting into an encounter, a journey. The nature of performance as a transient experience can be used to advantage according to Jackson and Kidd, to “highlight the transience of history and the impermanence of the people and stories that constitute it.”

If I read a play, it is as with life itself. I stride onwards, and the past loses its clarity and distinctness. So the scenes are lost in obscurity. The principle is: only in so far as I maintain the connection, do I achieve a unified overview of the scenes, but then I have only a skeleton. The perception of the whole I approach only through taking it up into my memory, so that all the connecting moments are gathered together.

Chapter Four
Conceptual Installations: START Challenging Spaces

In conceptual art, the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctionary affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes art. \(^{394}\)

The idea of “concettismo” is not something new. Plato had spoken about the “idea” behind a work of art and later it was heavily used in Renaissance treatises and discourses on art and it was even further elaborated during the Baroque age, consequently taking on hybrid forms. The concetto, as the idea lying behind a specific execution, was used by for example the Baroque artist Caravaggio who was active in 17\(^{th}\) century Malta, and who mastered a provocative form of wit in his paintings. His works arguably subvert the viewer’s expectations by providing an oblique point of view rather then one that is straight on and perspectival. \(^{395}\)

This chapter analysis how the Baroque in Malta has taken on hybrid forms, transforming itself into a witty and rebelious neo-Baroque style that subverts and pushes bounderies. The chapter also demonstrates the ways in which the theoretical and historical practices that have been elaborated on in the previous chapters work in contemporary practice in Malta., It explores the notions of subversion of the institutional message and the ways it can be questioned, using the concepts and theories of performativity. It questions the liminal and the liminoid during such practices, and it examines the ways Maltese artists are responding to, and at times metaphorically deconstructing the Baroque past, arguably using a similar language. This chapter shifts the focus from the works of art themselves to the processes, practices, concepts and performances that surround, shape and derive from the staged works executed by the contemporary site specific artists researched for this study.


The chapter starts by providing a context to the key-informant collaborators from the Maltese artist collective START. Raphael Vella, one of the founding members of the collective, in 2008 wrote that “a comprehensive history of contemporary art in Malta has still to be written.” He also wrote that “it is not enough to blame the country’s colonial past or simply to pay homage to the great “masters.” This fixation with the past has contributed to a scarcity of serious publications about Maltese contemporary art… and this gap in Maltese art continues to take its toll on the intellectual maturity of the younger generation.” In an attempt to fill up this gap, members of START have been interviewed for this research. START Exhibition Catalogues, as well as personal attendance from 2002 onwards, to most of their interventions inform this analysis.

The chapter explores how these artists are responding to Malta’s history and context through their site specific interventions. It will discuss the way these artists engage with the past, interrogate it and probe on ethical values and their relation to the ever changing globalised society of the 21st century. It questions how they are exploring the human condition, time and space, drawing upon the knowledge, values and ideals of their own life experiences, combining their works with current debates. It questions to what extent these artists are effective in creating ethical awareness and in influencing activism, and how they are tackling social issues and striving for change. It attempts to explore how and why these conceptual artists create spectacular atmospheres inspired by the Baroque. It explores how the Catholic religious upbringing of the artists informs their artistic practice, and how postmodernist theories, mainly by Lyotard, influence these artists as a philosophy.

It has been argued that the cultural situations of postmodernism were never truly experienced by Maltese society in the 20th century, due to the resistance by the conservative attitudes of local authorities. The main ideology followed in Malta was that dictated by the Catholic Church, reputed to have seen postmodernism as a threat to the Christian values that governed the Maltese identity. However, in the early 21st century.

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397 Ibid., p. 22
century, institutional critiques eventually did find their way into the public realm, when artists joined forces and formed collectives. The chapter questions to what extent institutions constrain what contemporary artists can do in Malta, and if curators are finding their balance between representing a national identity, and expressing universal moral values.

**Introducing the key informants: START**

Looking through the entries in the summer months of my 2002 diary, I come across words that recur on many pages: pressure group, innovation, productivity, recognition, funding, policy, Malta. The tone is political, and there is an undeniable sense of urgency in the illegible calligraphy and odd squiggles that fill the borders of most pages. These reminders of lengthy meetings and heated discussions with artist friends are marked by a feeling of dissatisfaction, as well as the first rays of hope. I suppose that is why we agreed to create START… we also agreed that we would never stand a chance of changing things unless we formed a lobby. In short, we needed to join forces. 399

Even though there has been several plans and efforts, Malta until today still lacks a Modern and Contemporary Art Museum, thus most contemporary artists in Malta strongly claim that they are still in search for space and insertion. In 2001 the Maltese artist Mark Mangion, arrived in Malta from his art studies in New York and he called the other Maltese artists that were to eventually form the artist collective START based in Malta, telling them that he wanted to curate a show at Portomaso in St. Julians called “Uber.” The show opened to the public in January 2002, and it paved the way for a number of exhibitions by the collective START, who “were dissatisfied with the existing conditions for artists in Malta, but… also hoped that these conditions could be changed.” 400

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…it was Mark who managed to bring a group of artists working together, we knew each other but we had never worked together. He had just come back from America after September 11 and he told me that he wanted to get a group of artists to work together, and I told him it’s crazy… it’s not going to happen… you know… I couldn’t imagine he would manage.  

This rebellious attitude of artists, grouping up and lobbying in the hope for change was something which happened mainly in the 1960’s in the rest of Europe and the US. On a similar note, Guy Debord wrote in 1957:

We must introduce everywhere a revolutionary alternative to the ruling culture; coordinate all the enquiries that are happening at this moment without a general perspective; orchestrate, through criticism and propaganda, the most progressive artists and intellectuals of all countries to make contact with us with a view to a joint action.

Between July and August 2002, the artists teamed up again for another exhibition called City Spaces, in an old abandoned house in Valletta, commissioned by YMCA (a non-profit voluntary and ecumenical movement, seeking to promote a more just society, working mainly with the homeless in Malta). Raphael Vella, during the interview for this research explained:

… we worked together since the site was specific and we spent a lot of time together, working in each room. This was basically a building with five floors and two rooms in each floor, or something like that, and each artist had his or her own room… so we spent a lot of time there and that’s when we started thinking to form a group… We didn’t even know what name we were going to call it. I still have somewhere a diary which I used to keep… I used to take notes during every meeting... and then we decided to call it START.

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401 Interview with Raphael Vella, 13/09/2013.
404 Interview with Raphael Vella, 13/09/2013.
When asked why they decided to call the group START, the artists replied that the word implied a journey, a new beginning, and also a sense of incompleteness, of being prepared for exciting and unforeseen developments. They also produced a “manifesto”: START stood for contemporary art, for the exploration of alternative spaces and for innovative forms of art that were not necessarily marketable. The group encouraged collaboration with other groups or individuals, a more decent level of education on the island, and higher quality exhibitions in important artistic institutions.

From that year onwards they have been constantly in search for “spaces”. They have created several thought provoking site specific multimedia interventions across the island in response to the history of these spaces, relating it to contemporary times. They started exhibiting in public spaces, such as in a car park, an old unused prison, a war shelter, an abandoned brothel, churches and at the centre for migrants. They installed art in historic spaces using metaphors that activated the past, while at the same time also passing ethical judgment using modern ethical positions. This broadened this research into questioning how and why these contemporary artists in Malta have mainly intervened in “underground spaces,” questioning the space and the community inhabiting it, rather than exhibiting their works in institutionalized museums and palaces.

The START artists claimed that the use of “alternative” spaces for art events in Malta, was the outcome of a scarcity of spaces for contemporary art and also the need of conceptual artists to experiment with narratives and to freely voice their questions, thoughts and responses in hope for social change. “I felt very strongly that I wanted to express concepts about the real world... I wanted to express the human condition,” stated Norbert Attard during the interview for this research. The role the collective START embarked on was one that encouraged the digging out of the roots of Malta’s cultural realities and evaluating present conditions and directions in a new light. They imbued their interventions with moral authority, turning the tables and contesting the frame. Davies Richard, in 2003 wrote the below in his curatorial, introductory essay in the catalogue of one of START’s interventions called “Borders,” held in the historic Baroque site in Valletta called Pinto Vaults by the Grand Harbour:

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405 Interview with Norbert Attard, 14/03/2013.
For contemporary fine art practice is not just about four white walls; it is not about decisions being made by faceless bureaucrats; [...] and it is not about being constrained by rules, boundaries and borders. However, it is about opportunities for all those who wish it; being continually active and free of outdated legacies, craft skills and outworn habits. It is about being able to create a platform to show work at any time, whether it is in a warehouse, garage or disused airport strip, conventional gallery or indeed a museum.  

Hybridity: Swinging between the Baroque and the Contemporary

Art now has no choice but to inhabit time as parachrony, and space as a terrain of nomadic activity. Being nomadic, art is never local. Because art is parachronic, it is neither old nor new [...] Art making continues to reveal itself like a palimpsest where artists increasingly share a common apophradic anxiety with the past, where the apophrades- the woken dead- revisit the aesthetic imagination by way of helping us chart the terrains of space and time.  

It has been argued that the artistic language of the Baroque has been the starting point for the work of many Maltese contemporary artists and that this relationship between the past and the present in Maltese contemporary art has given the art produced in Malta a discernible hybrid character. Contemporary artists are fusing the traditional with the contemporary, by recycling images, objects, ideas, and methodologies of the Baroque and fusing them with innovative technology. It is in their combination that one not only sees the persistence of a specific way of interpreting the world, but also a reconfiguration of the medium for representation. Spectacles and the propensity to surprise and amaze the beholder were key elements in the display of material in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and are still key elements in the works by START. Their interventions and dialogues in Malta have also spilled from the museum setting to alternative locations outside the museum’s walls, questioning, while at the

same time also arguably being “inspired by,” the “Baroque.” This section will further try to understand why these Maltese artists have engaged in a dialogue between contemporary politics placed in a historical Baroque context charged with an emotional context that is Caravaggesque in style and Baroque in spirit.

Sciberras in *Caravaggio Quote... Unquote* argues that contemporary artists in Malta have very often translated Baroque ideas about the relationship between light and dark, mass and space, illusion, realism and naturalism. For example, writing about the display of his own works, Raphael Vella admitted that his works were inspired by the Baroque but at the same time was reacting and responding to it, when he stated that “In almost all the works that were shown to the public, the social and functional dimensions of the environment replaced the neutral, white spaces of museums and galleries. The objective kind of lighting we associate with galleries was also avoided in many installations, works like *Deus Absconditus, Study Table* and *Mass Weapon of Self-Destruction* were deliberately left in semi-obscurity like the interiors of Maltese Baroque churches... In *Mass Weapon for Self-Destruction*, for example, the *horror vacui* of the Maltese church- where an access of divine beauty and material wealth placed in an immanent plane seeks to convince the spectator of the truth of the transcendant- is replaced by a roughly assembled altar that only commemorates the abuse of religion and suggests, with its biblioclastic treatment of Catholic Cathecism, that its pedagogy is obsolete.”

In the story of art, artists have been actively engaged with the works of artists who preceded them. Generations of artists have reflected on the work of older masters, and consciously or unconsciously were actively influenced by it, reacting to it or totally rejecting it. For example, ever since the exhibition which Roberto Longhi organised in 1951 in Palazzo Reale in Milan in Italy, Caravaggio’s fame shot to stardom and his powerful paintings and biography fascinated several artists. Caravaggio’s imagery permeated strongly into modern art culture and he has been readily turned into a cult figure.

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409 Ibid.
Several artists in Malta are also known for reusing artefacts with a historic religious function, creating what Raphael Vella has termed “art as Catholic postproduction.” He explains how postproduction in art refers to the reuse of pre-existing objects, transforming their meaning, function and narrative. For example, on the one hand some contemporary artists deconstruct fabular histories and pull them apart, such as questioning and sarcastically revealing the pompous dogmatic visual qualities of Baroque art which was used by the Catholic Church and Royalty around the world as a promotional tool. Some artists, on the other hand, are also arguably inspired by artists such as Caravaggio, who never ceased to question, provoke and scandalize the establishments, and who “on all accounts of probability and inclination... would have been a very versatile installation and video artist had he lived in the 21st century!” Baldacchino exclaimed.

A few years before the art collective START was formed, in January 1999, the curators of the Malta National Museum of Fine Arts, Therese Vella, Dennis Vella and Adrian Bartolo, curated a collective art exhibition in response to the Baroque in Malta entitled Reinterpreting Preti, to commemorate the tercentenary of the death of the Italian Neapolitan Baroque painter Mattia Preti (1613-1699). The artist was a follower of Caravaggio’s techniques, and he was one of Malta’s foremost 17th century Baroque court and church painters who spent the last forty years of his life painting in the churches and palaces of Malta. Various venues were selected for the exhibition, including St. James Cavalier, a 16th century military stronghold, now Malta’s Centre for Creativity, and St. John’s Cathedral in Valletta, built by the Knights of the Order of St. John, which has its ceiling covered by Mattia Preti’s paintings. The installation artist Norbert Attard, later to become one of the founding members of START, chose to exhibit his installation entitled “Larger than Life” which consisted mainly of a swinging “pendulum” with a TV monitor in the upper floors of St. James Cavalier, surrounded by animated slide projections of the Baroque paintings by Mattia Preti. During the

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interview held in 2013 for this research he expressed how he felt that the “Baroque is still alive in contemporary society in Malta.” \footnote{414}

Norbert Attard’s swinging pendulum metaphorically represented abstract time, swinging between the Baroque and the contemporary. The intervention projected a typical pompous, flamboyant Maltese wedding, an expression of popular culture, representing the idea that the Maltese are married to the Baroque. The theatricality and pomp of the Baroque can still be observed in Maltese weddings, in the religious Catholic feasts and in the way many of the Maltese decorate and furnish their homes in the 21st century.\footnote{415} The “time-passage” motif was accentuated by Norbert’s installation transforming the severe vaults of the fortress building into ornate expressions responding to Baroque theatricality (Figure 25). Bartolo wrote in the 48th Venice Biennale Catalogue in 1999, where the artist also showed this work that “the installation drew upon the concept of reinterpreting the past, on giving a new sense and dimension to the Baroque artist by transporting him as if by magical performance to our age… By its very nature, the pendulum is a symbol of the empirical subjectivity of time, but its display in darkness reduces this time to a mere illusion.”\footnote{416}
During the interview for this research Norbert Attard also said the following:

I can’t imagine anyone with a different culture producing the same works. My upbringing is Roman Catholic. I don’t practise my religion, but the effect it had on me is still so strong. I don’t think I can ever escape it, to some degree, my upbringing still comes out, even in every day situations. For example, we have been brought up with the concept of sin, even if certain things are not really sinful, we are supposed to feel guilty about things, and I think I still go through that every single day of my life. I feel it’s connected to this upbringing. Even if intellectually I tell myself that I am beyond this, and even if maybe today my way of living is removed from that, it’s still there. I think
my work reflects where I come from, my culture, my religion, my customs in more ways than one, this reflects my upbringing... you know... this idea of heaven and hell. In the Mattia Preti piece I created my intervention with little means as possible so that my intervention does not overempower the architectural space. I don’t want to bury what we already inherit. This for me is very important... to enhance the space. I want people to appreciate the concept but I will not throw away the aesthetic. For me form, function and concept work together, in harmony... An other work I did was an installation called Rites of Passage for the millenium celebrations in Valletta, Malta. It was shown on the last day of the 20th century. My project was on the last seven minutes before midnight. It was projected on the main door of the Prime Minister’s Office, Castille in Valletta.417

This installation held in 1999, curated by Peter Serracino Inglott, was a back projected video with a high content of Malta’s history, again dealing with the concept of time, rituals and culture. The video was a meditation on the passage of time, intertwining moments of major changes in individuals’ lives with those in the history of the nation. It was projected on the building representing Malta’s seat of political power. Arguably a liminoid state was created during this intervention, as well as during the other interventions analysed for this research.

Another artist commissioned to create an intervention in dialogue with the Baroque artist Mattia Preti, for the same exhibition held in 1999, was the Maltese contemporary multi-media artist Vince Briffa, also a START founder, whose early works explored the human body, using a Baroque Caravaggesque technique of realism and chiaro scuro interpreted by modern media. He created a work entitled Tabernacle for Voyeurs (Figure 44).418 The work was an intervention piece in dialogue with Mattia Preti’s painting Doubting of St. Thomas, exhibited at the Malta National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta.419 Raphael Vella wrote that “if Preti’s painting were to be thought of anachronistically as a photograph of the event, Briffa’s work would be classified as a series of x-rays, electromagnetic rays which pierce the opacity of Christ’s flesh.” It

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417 Interview with Norbert Attard, 14/03/2013.
invited the viewer to kneel on a Baroque wooden *prie-dieu* and peep into a slit in a rusty, metallic cube which substitutes the body of Christ in Preti’s painting. The viewer was “forced into” the position of a voyeur or peeping Tom. Within the box, the voyeur’s eyes were confronted with a video monitor emitting images of the internal organs of different human bodies. To someone who needed to see and touch to believe, this ironic twist came as an unnerving, almost macabre surprise. It was this Baroque emphasis on visual excess which Vince Briffa deconstructed, by showing that “a viewer is always a voyeur” and by his substitution of supernatural excess with biological excess. In *Tabernacle for Voyeurs*, the superficial believer’s voyeuristic need for direct observation is deconstructed by presenting viewers with a most curious sight: the obvious.

A later work by Vince Briffa, a video installation entitled *Hermes*, also made its way to the 48th edition of the Biennale of Venice in 1999, after being exhibited in Malta at St. James Cavalier (Figure 26). It depicted a deliberately repetitive cycle of movement much like the cycle of life and death showing individuals of both sexes and of different ages appear for a brief duration of time, one at a time. He explored the theme “Dust you are and dust you will return,” and the finite nature of one’s own lifetime. The work was suspended between movement and stasis, the living and the dead. In 2002/3 he exhibited the multi-media installation *Amen-Nemmen* (*Amen- I believe*) at the candle lit Austrian church Johanniterkirche in Feldkirch as part of the town’s annual festival. The work reflected Briffa’s interest in humanity and their intimate stories, making strong references to the confessional. He utilized the methods of a visual anthropologist filming people as they narrated events that transformed their lives and the general sense of serenity that they associated with the finding of God.

In 2004, another exhibition was organized where contemporary artists were invited to respond to the Baroque works of Caravaggio. The exhibition was called *Caravaggio: Mostra Impossibile* at the Caraffa Stores in Vittoriosa. Norbert Attard exhibited an installation of a box-like construction filled with red cushions supported by wheels, symbolically pointing to Caravaggio’s restless trajectories during his short life, mainly caused by his escapades from justice (Figure 27). Resting on the pillows, were some twenty daggers of different sizes, indicating how Caravaggio was constantly on the run and ready to defend himself from his enemy, even while he was resting at night.
Figure 26: Vince Briffa, *Amen Nemmen* (2002/2003), Johanniterkirche, Feldkirch, Austria

Figure 27: Norbert Attard, *Caravaggio I and Caravaggio II* (2004) in “Caravaggio: Mostra Impossibile” Carafa Stores, Birgu
In 2007, Sciberras curated the exhibition *Caravaggio Quote... Unquote*, as part of the Malta Arts Festival, organised by the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts, to celebrate the 400th anniversary from Caravaggio’s stay in Malta in 1608. Five Maltese artists showed their work in five different venues across Valletta, each in dialogue with the Baroque art of Caravaggio. For this exhibition, Vince Briffa created *Body of Glass – After Caravaggio* at the cellars of the Auberge d’Italie in Valletta, embodying the ambiguous fusion of the materiality of flesh as cultural object with that of the human body as instrument of communication (Figure 28). He focused on highlighting the phenomenological distinction between the body we own - as the body of experience and the body we are - as the subject of experience. He engaged with Caravaggio’s realism and naturalism, echoing Caravaggio’s *chiaroscuro* in its overall aesthetic. The video conceived the human body as being both the performer and the object being performed upon, capable of simultaneously providing and being the locus of spectacle, where gesture and action translated into textural, rhythmic sounds and resonant structures.

*Searching for Caravaggio* was another intervention by the Maltese artist Caeser Attard set up for this exhibition, which consisted of a large box structure strategically placed between St. John’s Cathedral and the Law Courts in Valletta. The artist wanted to connect the intervention with Caravaggio’s defrocking and expulsion from the Order of St. John in 1608, which was held in the artist’s absence. While detained in Fort St. Angelo in Birgu for committing a crime, Caravaggio had secretly escaped the island. Even though the Baroque artist disappeared in 1608, his artworks are nowadays still hanging in the Cathedral’s Museum and his influence on Maltese artists is still strong. Caeser Attard’s aim was to physically attract the spectator within the space and raise questions about Caravaggio’s absence, challenging the spectator to think.

Cutting across time frames, the Baroque has left an indelible mark on Malta’s society and its imagination. Bal in *Quoting Caravaggio. Contemporary Art. Preposterous History*, starts her introduction by quoting T.S Elliot, who 1919 wrote that “Whoever has approved this idea of order… will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.” Bal argues that like any form of representation, art is inevitably engaged with what came before it, and

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421 Ibid., p. 11
that engagement is an active re-working, at times taking on hybrid identities. Bal analyzes the productive relationship between Baroque art and a number of late-twentieth-century artists who “quote” the Baroque. She states that the “Baroque abandons the firm distinction between subject and object”, and she convincingly argues that, the reader is dynamically entwined in the meaning and thus making of an artwork, which she calls supplementation. Derrida had written about “supplementation” of an intervention that does not replace the image but adds to it, keeping the past alive rather than buried and silenced. This is what the contemporary artists interviewed for this research seem to be doing.

Figure 28: Vince Briffa, Still from the Video and Audio Projection


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Spectacles, Institutional Critique and the Sublime

...Should we hang out the gods to dry, as Raphael Vella does in *A Horse for Airing Gods*, in an effort to name, identify and ultimately freeze the myths and lies by which we have become obliged to carry the stones of an overwhelming past while pretending to respect our elders?[^424]

While the previous section has seen how some of the Maltese contemporary artists have collaborated with institutions to respond to the Baroque, this section focuses on how Maltese contemporary artists have also subverted 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.”[^425] Their spectacular representations concern the ‘postmodern condition,’ and the death of the grand narratives, shaped by institutional critique. Like the *speculum*, or mirror, their works enhance the sense of sight and present something extraordinary to the gaze. Thus, while critiquing the Baroque, they arguably do it in a spectacular neo-Baroque manner, using various layers, movement and multiple perspectives. They move beyond the four walls of the museum to critique a broad range of political and religious institutions, offering up provocations that arguably help construct new and socially just views. The theatricality of their dialogues within the spaces they exhibit are exposed for others to experience.

Raphael Vella, the main author of most of START’s exhibition catalogues, probably comes across as the “postmodernist” par excellence.[^426] Highly inspired by Lyotard’s writings and by Beuys’ philosophy he believes that the book is a symbol of authority, a tool for indoctrination and control, thus his artwork is about the violence of the written word, and the role of the book in society. He argues that religious belief is sometimes unfortunately also a fuel for violence, imposing dogmatic conditions on the reader.[^427]

[^427]: Ibid., p. 135
Back in 1998, before START was officially formed, writing in the catalogue for the intervention *Sacred Austin*, Raphael Vella clearly stated that the intention was on the “expanded notion of art.”

This idea was promoted in the 1960s by Beuys, whose expanded definition of art caused both sensation and fierce debate during his lifetime. He did not want to create eternal works, but works which provoked critical thinking. Beuys had created the term “Social Sculpture” to illustrate his idea of art’s potential to transform society. Beuys and his followers were motivated by the utopian belief in the power of universal human creativity and was confident in the potential of art to bring revolutionary change. “Art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power”, Beuys said in a public dialogue in 1974.

*Sacred Austin* was an intervention by START founding member Austin Camilleri at St. James Church in Victoria on the island of Gozo, held on 5-19 April 1998. The intervention included a Maltese brick wall obstructing a painting of Saint Theresa. During an interview with the editor of a newspaper, when asked to comment about this exhibition, Austin Camilleri told the editor to leave the newspaper page “blank… textless, to challenge the concept of the space, even the space of the newspaper itself.”

Austin Camilleri wanted to criticise the media, “it’s all part of the same concept: commenting on the nature of power in the place where that power is important.” During the interview for this research held with the artist Austin Camilleri in 2013, he stated that his idea was to criticise the medium from within. The concept behind many of Austin’s works has a lot of layers. “One of the layers,” Austin says, “is related to what Plato had written: the purest form of art is the idea, then you have matter and then you have sculpture.”

Clearly inspired by the works of Beuys, the question asked was whether a temple representing a particular religious faith could accept in its midst an expanded concept of art without losing some aspect of its identity in its process. Raphael Vella asks “…for who decides on the essence on what is Christian? ... we cannot underestimate the power

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428 Vella, R. (1998) *Sacred Austin*, Exhibition Catalogue, 5-19 April, St. James Church, Victoria, Gozo, 5-19 April
430 Interview with Austin Camilleri, 13/03/2013.
432 Interview with Austin Camilleri, 13/03/2013.
of the institution. A Church is not a Museum: the criteria used to justify the presence of objects in a Museum are different from those needed to admit objects into a Church.”

He continues by asking “... are we sure that the Church’s artistic preferences are conductive to the attainment of the public good?” He quotes the Russian writer Tolstoy’s controversial book called “What is Art?”, published twenty years after breaking up with the Church in 1879 when he decided to defend his thesis about the relationship between good art and “true Christianity.” Art, according to Tolstoy has to arouse feelings in the observer, contributing to the realization of a “brotherhood of man” and “accessible to all people without exception.” Tolstoy believed that the art of organised religion actually discourages “the union of men with God and with each other.”

In the following years Austin Camilleri created several artworks in dialogue with Christianity. The below works were created around the time of the September 11th attacks in New York and Washington DC in 2001. The image below represents Kuruna, a large sized silver finger rosary with crying babies’ heads instead of the customary beads (Figure 29). The rosary beads with baby heads by Austin Camilleri also featured again a year later in 2002 worn by a nude female model at the Uber exhibition in Paceville, curated by Mark Mangion (Figure 30). Raphael Vella writing about these works says that “institutionalised religion means nothing to the crying baby; its innocent wailing is a chant to the absence of sociability.” He writes that “religion expresses the togetherness of shared ritual.” In contrast the symbolic twist in these works expresses the ego-centric disconnectedness of crying babies in relation to the world.

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434 Ibid.
When START was formed in 2002, Austin Camilleri and Raphael Vella joined forces with Mark Mangion along with a few other artists, namely the multi-media artists Norbert Attard and Vince Briffa, already mentioned above, along with musician Charles Gatt, artist Ray Pitre, and artist and theatre set designer Pierre Portelli. Together they created a site specific intervention called *Escape*, also curated by Austin Camilleri, in the old prisons in Victoria in Gozo, between 23rd May till 21st June 2003. The old prison cells date back to the time of the rule of the Order of St. John, and the above artists each chose a prison cell to exhibit their dialogue within the space.

When asked why he decided to curate an intervention in prison cells, during the interview for this research, Austin Camilleri replied that he “found it interesting to have contemporary Maltese artists responding to the historic site... it was a dialogue. The site was memory laden and this made it really interesting. We were not interpreting the prison cells, it was a dialogue sharing a lot of angst - in a space full of angst. The place was a lived in space and that can tell you a lot of things. Then it’s up to the sensitivity of
the artist to... play with it... rather than the artist producing works which are encyclopaedic...”

The space arguably evoked certain memories, anxiety and inner turmoil both past and contemporary. The idea was to create an “osmosis” between the artworks and the memory laden cell at the old prison in the citadel, presenting an artist in society/society in art dyad. “The cells permeate with presence, as if the air is saturated with the vibrations emanating from the graffiti, some of which date back to 1630.”

The artist Norbert Attard, for this intervention exhibited *The Zealot*, a smiling crucified self-portrait (Figure 31). Raphael Vella argues that “while modern and contemporary art has proposed various transgressive versions of the crucifixion, from a female Christ to Serrano’s *Piss Christ* and Sarah Lucas’ *Christ You Know it ain’t easy*... Attard’s work inverts almost every aspect of the traditional crucifixion...” The artists exhibiting in this intervention were responding to the Catholic Baroque inheritance in Malta, and they arguably felt they needed to start “escaping” the Catholic Baroque “prison” which they inhibit and “resurrect” anew.

The exhibition catalogue of this intervention also had a quote by Michael Foucault published in its introduction saying:

> Is it surprising that the cellular prison, with its regular chronologies, forced labour, its authorities of surveillance and registration, its experts in normality,

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436 Interview with Austin Camilleri, 13/03/2013.
who continue and multiply the functions of the judge, should have become the modern instrument of penalty? Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals which all resemble prisons?  

Norbert Attard admitted during the interview:

I never considered myself to be a good writer. If I were a good writer I would create literary works, in writing, you know, and communicate my ideas and thoughts in writing, but I feel I can do better visually… I leave it to the audience to experience and interpret. I am happy that people respond. When you talk about making a difference that’s part of the process that you made somebody reflect and think and respond, positively or negatively… I always thought an artist’s work is related to making people think, but I never offer solutions as such, I am here to discover just as much as the audience is. I feel I am questioning and trying to understand those questions just as much as the audience is.

This statement reflects the performative and transformative elements which the artists in this research are aiming for. Their processes of deconstructing, researching, questioning responding and contemplating have the potential to activate themselves and the participants who experience their work. This is were I believe the liminal and the liminoid come in.

Raphael Vella is known to dedicate a lot of time to his writing and is the author of most of START’s publications. His theoretical writings, which arguably fuelled the collective’s interventions, paradoxically consisted of altered doctrinal texts, which he called “artistic biblioclasm,” on which he wrote his PhD thesis. He started his studies in 2002, the year START was formed, in which he investigated the sublime and the postmodern character of the destruction of books carried out by artists, during the second half of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century, such as by Marcel Duchamp, Dieter Roth and Rebecca Horn. He analysed the aesthetic, political, religious and other implications of artistic biblioclasm also in his own practice.

440 Interview with Norbert Attard, 14/03/2013.
as an artist, with an emphasis on the Mediterranean, Catholic context in which his work is mainly shown.  

For the *Escape* intervention, Raphael Vella created the *Oubliette* - The time it takes to kill time (Figure 32). Twelve diaries were burnt for different lengths and exhibited in the Old Prisons in Gozo, bringing in the idea of the book into the concept of a chronology that is consumed to ashes. Raphael was arguably reacting to the idea of time and its ephemerality. It’s a conceptual work which aimed to shock audiences, provoking them to critique, debate and question.

![Figure 32: Raphael Vella, Oubliette- The Time it takes to Kill Time (2003) Gozo Prison](image)

Raphael Vella felt that the relationship between religious doctrine, indoctrination and biblioclastic processes deserved to be explored further. “The book started to symbolise, more then before, an image of dogmatic power that needed to be challenged.” He pondered on the unreliability of language, and the finite and limited nature of the book, inspired by the posthumously published work written by Lyotard: *The Confession of Augustine* and his inspiration from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant dating to the 18th century. Raphael Vella argued that “postmodern scepticism is still the best response we can possibly cultivate against fundamentalism… artistic biblioclasm is employed as a sceptical process that opens up the book.”

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442 Ibid. p. 156  
443 Ibid. p. 139  
444 Ibid. p.160
It was not about what can be seen but about what can not be seen. It was about this gap which you have between the object and the way you talk about the object- you can not fully describe what you see… It’s like you have knowledge… then you destroy that knowledge. It can be cathartic that the knowledge I have is not enough or it doesn’t quite capture the totality of things. That is always what interested me artistically… I had spent a number of years working with books because this is exactly were the problem is- you know, like a book cover which contains 200 pages, for example, and it is supposed to contain knowledge about X subject… and then there are some books where this knowledge would sound even more arrogant like encyclopaedias, which by their very nature, by their definition they are supposed to tell you all you need to know about the world…so I was very interested in books or in ideas which somehow by their nature have this “arrogance of knowing it all”… and that’s where my interest in religion came in, because religion does have some of that… I have always been interested in grand ideas and their failures… religion could be an example of a grand idea… so my work is about these grand ideas and their failure…

Raphael Vella also argued that “every Maltese person’s upbringing is affected by the Catholic religion. But I have done those works in the early 2000s when there was a lot of talk about religion around the world… especially with September 11 in 2001… I did a lot of drawings and installations mostly about the politics in religion… when I was dealing with religion it was really about “power” ultimately.” “It’s all about power and stories, and whose story counts and how some stories can dominate the way we think,” Raphael Vella stated. Catechism turns into a war machine in Weapon of Mass Destruction, exhibited at Blitz in Birgu (Figure 34). The audience was crammed into a tiny shelter surrounded by violent imagery printed on hundreds of religious book-pages and the subtle smell of slowly decaying meat. “While some members of the public appeared hesitant when confronted with the religious or political nature of the texts I used, many enjoyed the possibility of being challenged to re-think religious or political ideas.”

446 Interview with Raphael Vella, 13/09/2013.
In 2003 for the *Borders* intervention held at Pinto Vaults in Valletta, co-curated by Richard Davies, he exhibited a work entitled *The Politics of Library Furniture*. He burnt a study table from the university library in Malta with books. Writing about his own work in the exhibition’s catalogue, Raphael Vella explains how “The whole set up [of a university library desk] not only provides a comfortable reading environment but also a sense of institutionalised isolation, a private world […] an enclosed space that is not intruded upon by external distractions.” The wooden study table and books were exhibited in a burnt state with ashes and pulp. Another similar installation by Raphael Vella, entitled *Reading Cabinets*, dating to 2006, consisted of red cabinets storing his drawings: a depiction of books known as the *Student’s Catholic Doctrine*, used in Maltese secondary schools to educate students, which he transformed into graphite marks and formless pulp (Figure 33). In his essay entitled “Raphael Vella: Deconstructing Fundamentalism,” Kenneth Wain attributes this strategy as overtly political. Wain argues that it is not books in general that feature in the drawings but specifically religious books in the conventional sense - books about God and religious belief. The political turning point they signal is a movement away from the navel-gazing politics of an art that is obsessed with self-examination, toward a politics of *statement*.

Figure 33: Raphael Vella, “The Students Catholic Doctrine” in The Reading Cabinets (2008)


Figure 34: Raphael Vella, Mass Weapon of Self-Destruction (2005)
Digital and screen prints on catechism pages, varnish, lamb chop, book in red wine, rubber tubes, plaster, glass vessels, installed in an underground war shelter for Blitz exhibition, Birgu
The Search for a Space

Come, Come, enter a magnetic world that simultaneously attracts and repels you. Find your way through the dark, rocky intestines of this underworld; lose yourself in this labyrinth of claustrophobic openings and sudden apparitions. Art does not dominate space but inhabits it like a mole whose body becomes an extension of its tailor made burrow. The blitz is art itself, this angry mole that is forced underground to find shelter but invites you in. To find me, you will grope through the black tunnels of my burrow [...] Your eyes explore objects, images and lights that urge you to paint a mental picture of things that were and things that could be. [...] Make your way out. Gasp for air. Return to your TV. “Explosion kills fifty in Iraq.”

The above introductory quote, written by Raphael Vella in 2005, arguably provoked audiences, through the collective’s catalogue of their intervention *Blitz*, held in the underground war shelter in Birgu. It stated that there is no space for contemporary artists in Malta, so they have no choice but to exhibit “underground.” “If the government doesn’t want to give us a space where to work, then we create one!” he insisted. The START artists created works reflecting the disturbances in history and contemporary life. “Play and watch TV” he tells the audience, however, in his thought provoking words and installations he also hopes that the viewer also thinks about the realities of contemporary life, of the realities of war, and what an ugly “game” it is and how it is not just something of the past but also something contemporary. It was clear from my interviews with him that his hopes are for the viewer to stop being passive, to reflect about the past, the present, and the future and to respond to life.

The female member of START, Ruth Bianco, in her installation exhibited at the above mentioned intervention *Blitz*, was similarly reacting to the past by exhibiting soap, symbolic of an erasure of the past, the erasure of a race, (Figure 35). “Time is within us and stretches and shrinks according to the intensity of our experiences, heightening the emotional tensions between actuality and recollection” writes Bianco in the same

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The concept of “time” is explored in many of START’s interventions. The Baroque age as discussed in Chapter One was equally fascinated by time.

Norbert Attard, in his internal *Zen Garden*, for the *Blitz* intervention, sarcastically littered the ground with limestone bombs combining a peace and war juxtaposition within a thought provoking setting (Figure 36). The shelter which was used during the Second World War to protect families, bonded the horrors of war with their polar opposites, meditation and peace. He also created a carpeted room in the war shelter with a table and chairs for visitors to sit and interactively play “Cowboys and Indians” on a chess board (Figure 37), as well as a swing made out of hand guns, for visitors to swing on. Raphael Vella described the swing as the following: “Looking like conjoined twins the guns union is simultaneously their death… Brothers at war, they are probably too close to figure out the suicidal nature of their conflict… Ultimately all wars are pseudo-patriotic forms of collective suicide… what if the war is simply a grown-up equivalent of child’s play? The swing provides no answer. Its questioning is inscribed in its state of suspension.”

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453 Raphael Vella writing on the installation called “Cowboys and Indians,” by Norbert Attard
Norbert Attard also projected three fighter planes on the internal walls and ceilings of the shelter composed of the words “please wipe your feet before entering shelter,” bringing to mind the way contemporary visitors are perhaps “supposed” to act before entering a “museum.” Antonio Manfredi, Director of Casoria Museum of Contemporary Art in Naples, wrote “Since I have known Norbert Attard’s work, I have realized that his visual language is universal, penetrating the soul of the observer, forcing him to stop and meditate.”

Wars, games, the present and the past are symbolically and conceptually displayed in a performative, immersive manner in the war shelter, arguably enhancing the liminal/liminoid potential. These installations could be interpreted as props set up for a pilgrimage. Once they enter the underground shelter and walk through the setting, participants experience an immersive world, where contemplation is not much of an option. There are no reenactments in the shelter, but dialogues and responses to the past as well as reflections on the present. The physical space was designed to tell stories through a variety of sensory means, appealing to the visitor’s intellect through the body.

Figure 36: Norbert Attard, *Zen Garden* (2005), limestone bombs in underground war shelter *Blitz*, Birgu


Maltese conceptual artist Mark Mangion, also one of the founding members of START, and later on of MCA- Malta Contemporary Art, curated a series of exhibitions in 2007 entitled *The Search for a Space*. These were a series of public art interventions designed to question the role of socially engaged contemporary art practices inside and outside the museum walls. One of the exhibitions in the series was entitled *Forbidden Spectacle*, which consisted of a series of contemporary works in various media which were juxtaposed against the Baroque 17th and 18th century painting galleries at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta. These contemporary works have been described to have attempted to:

[… ] engage the existing historic works in a double-layer exchange within the space; one of comfort and conflict, history and progress, the idle and the rapid, the dark and the luminous. Beauty and violence; representation and the decay of the figurative; notions of reality and artifice relating to the media and web structure of filtration and exchange; the other and cultural appropriations and the romantic void associated with this; the viewer and the subject as an accomplice to the creator. Relationships of speed within the gallery structure and the work itself were addressed within the framework of the show. Through minimal interventions, the site-specific, performance, film and video, painting, drawing,

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455 Mark Mangion studied Painting (Parsons School of Design, New York) and Sculpture (Royal College of Art, London). In 2000 he co-founded the art collective START and in 2008 he founded MCA-Malta Contemporary Art, an ongoing project, which has to date involved over 100 different collaborators. In 2012, he launched Parallel Borders, a long-term project established as a roving platform focusing on a multidisciplinary collective, operating in significant theoretical fields and territories of political relevance around the world.

456 The show was held from 31st May till 3rd June in 2007
photography and sculpture, the works were scattered around the galleries in search of insertion.\textsuperscript{457}

A painting from the collection in each gallery was also removed to allow for this intrusion to take place. Karen Caruana’s piece, for example, showed a self-portrait questioning and disrupting expected modes, to find new ways of speaking, opting to be different from the majority who simply follow and who accept to be passively manipulated (Figure 38). The playmobile attired in red all follow each other with a smile on their face. Her attire is different, she wears a green cloak with a hood on, expressing perhaps a sense of fear, as if she is asking “as a contemporary young female artist in Malta, where is my space and where do I belong?” with her arms held up as if she is ready for a revolution. Her work like the other works exhibited at the National Museum of Fine Arts that evening during the intervention called for change in the museum, responsive to the needs of contemporary Maltese artists. Her work opened up possibilities for multi-narratives, contesting singular views.

\begin{figure}[h]
  \centering
  \includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure38.jpg}
  \caption{Karen Caruana, \textit{Forbidden Spectacle}, in \textit{The Search For a Space} (2007) \hfill One of the “intrudors” at the Malta National Museum of Fine Arts}
\end{figure}

Mark Mangion also produced *We Are Here Now* in 2007, a performative collaboration with five sub-Saharan African refugees from Togo, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Somalia and Congo for the intervention entitled *Forbidden Spectacle: In Search for Space 5* at the Malta National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta (Figure 39). The idea was to defy conventional binary oppositions in the hope of seeing an inclusionary future within which the suppressed would no longer exist as so. One of the curators of the intervention, Mark Haughty stated that from the beginning of the project they considered the African men as collaborators and agents of change, not as passive victims, together engaged in a dialogical and transformative process, contesting citizenship.\(^{458}\) The five men were invited to walk around the exhibition randomly, engaging in discussion with museum visitors. They were invited to talk about anything they wished, from political issues to culture and football in their countries. One of the participants reported a positive outcome from the experience:

“I spoke with maybe nine or ten people. I talked mostly about cultural things in my home country, Sudan. The Maltese told me about aspects of tradition in Malta. There was no problem; everybody was friendly and willing to talk to me...”\(^{459}\)


This intervention was designed to facilitate interaction and dialogue between the museum visitors and African refugees. The “Baroque” museum offered a catalyst for participation, and cultural dialogue, an issue which is still very sensitive with Europeans when confronted with refugees from Africa. The Catholic conservatism and imagery still present in Malta, as can be observed in the two images above, depicting on the right a 17th century marble Baroque sculpture of an African slave (Figure 40) and on the left an Ottoman Turkish slave (Figure 41), part of the monument of Grand Master Nicola Cottoner in the Cathedral of St. John in Valletta, arguably give particular resonance to this intervention. The encounter with the past was through the present, as the sub-Saharan African men were talking about contemporary issues, demonstrating a fundamental point of human rights concerning a common humanity.

In May 2007, the year and month this intervention took place in the museum, African “irregular migrants,” were clinging to a tuna pen in the Mediterranean Sea after the boat they were travelling on sank somewhere between Libya and Malta. Meanwhile the governments of Libya, Malta and Spain argued over who was responsible for their rescue. Martin McCabe argued that we might be forgiven for thinking that borders in Europe do not mean much anymore. He argues that “of course that depends who you are
and where you are. ‘Fortress Europe’ with all of its medieval connotations, is still a powerful and structuring ideological formation at work in union policy. The bodies of young African men being washed ashore on the beaches of Lampedusa near Sicily are testament to this.”

As Stuart Hall reminds us, racial conflict is a pervasive reality born out of global economic injustice. It is a discursive system which has “real” social, economic and political conditions of existence and real material and symbolic effects.

Issues on racism, prejudice and colonialism are universal concerns in today’s museum and it has recently been the subject of various studies. For example, Lynch has argued that national museums have been complicit in the construction of physical and cultural hierarchies that underpinned racist thought from the Enlightenment until well into the twentieth century, in marked contrast to the inclusionary role that many now seek to fulfil. Uncomfortable and sensitive issues have been the subject of museum displays in recent years. High profile exhibitions have explored race, prejudice and colonialism, and they have generated a growing body of literature on exhibitions tackling difficult subject matter. The value of analysing process as well as product has been given value in these contexts. However, Western institutions, argues Lynch, continue to maintain borders and to privilege particular ways of knowing. Lynch asked “Have we yet escaped the colonialist way of thinking and operating? Can we discern traces of institutionalised racism in even the most well meaning of organisations?”

The EuNaMus (European National Museums) project, which has further emphasised the political nature of museums and the increasing debate about their social role, for example, had also investigated “multicultural utopias” in European national museums. Lill Eilesrøs and Arne Amundsen reported that the museum collections and the museum’s institutional history are likely so strongly linked to the national narratives that turning them into dialogue institutions or arenas for intercultural encounters is a very complicated mission. They also reported that thus far, “the success of temporary exhibitions or provocative public debates were still left to convince on a general

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However, what if the provocations are permanently responding to the national narratives, and what if instead of critiquing and competing with the grand narratives, they respond to, complement, enhance and perhaps even complete them by providing alternative models of looking?

How can museums move beyond simply raising awareness and establish a dialogue both within and across communities and cultural boundaries? How are institutions dealing with humanitarian concerns in society? And how can a re-awakening of the past in the museum critique the past and inspire change in the present? During the In Search for Space intervention in 2007, the museum environment created a safe space in which to explore the historical, social and cultural richness of African and European traditions. The performative dialogue shifted the emphasis away from formal passive viewing of artefacts within the museum, and placed the audience at the intersection between perception and participation. Mark Mangion stated that “Ultimately it’s about generating activity within the visual arts, which through the local and through the international creates dialogue and contrast - within a certain vision and philosophy for the space.” In 2007 he also documented the journey of four Africans who made it alive to Malta via the Mediterranean from Libya (Figure 42). “Almost ten years later, this reality has only deteriorated”, exclaimed Mark Mangion on a recent facebook comment expressed in 2015.

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Figure 42: Mark Mangion, The Departure (2007) Screenshot from the documentary on vimeo.com

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The Search for a Space project consisted of five shows in total, and each show took place in a different location in Malta, generating immersive, critical and political contexts. By moving outside the museum, alternative spaces were used as a lab for challenging new structures of showing work and dialogues. The themes in these shows acted purely as a catalyst where movement and loose interpretation took place. The exhibition In Search for Space 3, for example, was located at the home of African immigrants in the Marsa Open Centre of Refugees, sitting at the water’s edge of an industrial harbour, a dilapidated former school, which was condemned as unfit for Maltese school children. The placement of cultural artefacts outside the museum, in the homes of Malta’s “unwelcome guests” and inviting the host community to enter and participate in the construction of meaning, generated a temporal shift in power relations: Maltese citizens unwittingly became the foreigners, placed within this temporal zone and confronted with the “terror of uncertain signs.”465 The audience was invited to understand the insecure position of being the “other.”466

A year earlier, in June 2006, Pierre Portelli, an other START founder, exhibited a similar intervention entitled s, m, l in fort Saint Angelo in Birgu, depicting a boat covered with different shirts in different sizes, leaving its interpretation open to the public (Figure 43).

Figure 43: Pierre Portelli, s, m, l (2006) installation at Fort St. Angelo, Birgu

466 Ibid., p. 5
In 2007 he also exhibited “mewga” (meaning wave), exploring the kinship in the linguistic heritage of two southern Mediterranean countries. The Maltese language is Semitic in origin and grammatically close to Arabic, which is spoken in neighbouring countries. The installation was composed of 128 suspended audio-speakers presented in a wave like walk, and divided into two audio channels. On one channel Maltese poetry was recited, while on the other, the Tunisian Arabic equivalent was recited simultaneously. Some Maltese words of Semitic origin coincided with their Arabic counterparts.

It is these similarities that Pierre wanted to highlight. The work exhibited transcontextualism in that it included the viewer’s experience within the installation as a cultural experience, creating a moment of self-awareness. The installation was EU funded for a project entitled Images and Identity. Improving Citizenship through Digital Art, and the same installation was exhibited in an other exhibition at the Malta Maritime Museum in Birgu, entitled Swim. Fragile Interventions, curated by Austin Camilleri, in 2013. Identity and the limitations of territory on peripheral regions were explored.

[…] The works are meant to incite interaction: physical and intellectual to willing participants ready to rouse themselves from the stupor of passivity. The viewer is no longer a passive onlooker but becomes an interactive part of the work. The barrier between the onlooker and the work is transcended, thus permitting the meeting of different social worlds and the forging of many new meanings.467

From Critique to Collaboration

Those artists who enter museums to work are not iconoclasts like the early modernists with their call to burn down the museum... They are bricoleurs, curious about the place of the museum in contemporary life and the possibilities of disturbing the settled perceptions and set categories of formal knowledge.468

The past few years has seen the disintegration of START as a group, the formation of MCA (Malta Contemporary Art) and the collaboration of START members with museums, religious institutions and the younger generation of Maltese artists. MCA became a research platform for contemporary visual culture and since then has been transformed as an itinerant and virtual space proposing several international projects in various parts of the world in collaboration with Parallel Borders.\(^{469}\) Raphael Vella during the interview for this research explained that:

When Mark opened MCA in 2008 in Marsa, he wanted the first exhibition there to be a START exhibition. He wanted to get START back together and we met again and I had suggested OK lets revive START by having each artist choose one emerging artist so that START sees its continuation... not just ten old artists who are literally getting older, and he liked the idea and so we took it on and we all chose a young emerging artist... today there are a lot of young artists who I’ll be very happy to exhibit and work with... START as a group doesn’t really exist anymore...

In 2012 there was also the launch of Divergent Thinkers, a yearly collective exhibition of young contemporary Maltese artists curated by Raphael Vella, with the cooperation of Agenzija Zghazagh. The aim of the project is to provide a platform for contemporary artistic practices by young Maltese artists, under the general theme of “divergent thinking.” Empowerment, as a process of supporting young people to explore and build their own identities, as well as giving expression to these identities.\(^{470}\)

In 2013 some of the START artists teamed up again to collaborate with the Jesuits to create interventions held in seven different churches across Valletta, in an exhibition entitled Revisit. The Contemporary Face of Faith. The exhibition, curated by Vince Briffa, was held before and during Holy Week, when people of the Catholic faith go round the island to visit seven churches.

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\(^{470}\) Teuma, M. (2014) “Possibilities and Opportunities”, in Divergent Thinkers 03, An Agenzija Zghazagh Exhibition Catalogue, in collaboration with St. James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, Valletta
Vince Briffa explained that “The result, rather than an affirmation of faith, is more of an exploration of what faith is – and isn’t. ... I use religious iconography to question faith, rather than to ascertain it. I wouldn’t say I’m overtly religious,” adding “my religion is my artwork, actually.” 471 Doubting, and self-doubting, are at the very heart of his work ethic, and of his conception of what faith is. In 1999 in fact he had exhibited a work entitled Tabernacle for Voyeurs at the Malta National Museum of Fine Arts, mentioned earlier, which also deals with this topic (Figure 44).

Arguably in line with Turner’s theory on reaching a reflective state during the liminal and the liminoid, and his interest in artistic processes, Vince Briffa explained how:

The artistic process consists of the doing and the self-reflexive part, so you’re thinking about what you’re doing, researching, and you’re doing, it’s a cyclic thing and you move forward. There are parallels with faith, because you’re questioning... You can’t have faith without doubt, otherwise it’s not faith. It’s the questioning which is the enriching part of faith; it enriches you because you need to move forward in order to grasp something. I don’t think there’s any gain in accepting everything and stopping there, from an intellectual or religious level... I don’t look for answers in my work; I look for questions, and I approach faith with the same frame of mind. So with questioning, you sometimes feel comfortable; sometimes you don’t feel comfortable... And if you do find the answer... what will you do with it? I really and truly think there is no one answer to what one will find at the end of the day.472

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472 Ibid.
He finds that the pageantry and the symbolism associated with Catholicism have a certain poignancy and depth to them. Many times, he says, the way the Church uses its visual imagery is “totally wrong... If you look at the churches around us, you’ll still find they’re extremely traditional... We need to find a different language, perhaps, visually, to pass the religious message, and that could be a very interesting exercise for art... It would help the Church if it were to reassess its visual output. This project is very much a step in that direction. It’s a very bold step for the Jesuits to take. The work is not sacrilegious in the least, but it questions, and it’s in a different aesthetic form from what we’re used to in churches,” he says.⁴⁷³ Art puts you in a certain frame of mind, especially installation art, where you enter the piece, and that ambience is very conducive to making one feel different. It places the viewer in the work, and site-specific work has this feature.

Briffa says, “It’s indirectly getting people closer to God...” Part of the challenge in this project was the exhibition spaces themselves – Maltese churches, with their Baroque tendencies, are hardly the building equivalent of a blank canvas. “Rather than only encountering the church, one will encounter the work of the contemporary artist within the framework of the church. This is an interesting, but challenging concept, as churches are already laden with images, information – particularly Baroque churches, where you have to compete with the place itself,” Briffa says.⁴⁷⁴

Pierre Portelli, for example, in his work entitled Anastasis, explored the resurrection, both as a reflection of Christ’s triumph over death, and as a series of transformations and liberations believers undergo on their walk of faith (Figures 45 - 46). The revisitings of faith were presented as a series of shirts in an upward spiral ascending towards the cupola. In September 2014, Pierre Portelli also exhibited an intervention entitled #settembru64 to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Malta’s Independence. The work symbolised the importance of transparency in a democratic society. It was placed at the entrance of the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta, and the public was invited to interact with it by playing the Maltese anthem (Figures 47 and 48).

⁴⁷³ Ibid.
⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.
Figures 45 and 46: Pierre Portelli, *Anastasis* (2013), San Gagbu Church, Merchants Street, Valletta

For the 2014 Valletta International Visual Arts Festival Viva, curated by Raphael Vella, held between 1-7 September, Austin Camilleri was also invited to exhibit a public art intervention at the entrance of Valletta, in front of the newly designed parliament by Renzo Piano. He created a bronze statue of a horse with a missing leg, a crippled symbol of power and authority, which he called Zieme, representative of an equestrian statue with no leader riding it (Figure 49). Digging deeper we see a subversion of power, which raises questions. Camilleri tells us “here is your horse, the symbol of martial glory, but I’ve messed it up, these are the spoils of war, this is what glory looks like. It is a rebellion against a history written by winners to reflect the true internecine nature of conflict.”

Austin admitted that the scale of public response caught him off-guard. “I tried not to be part of the discussion, as much as I could: my statement is there. Sometimes misinterpreted, even by the intelligentsia…when the work is done it has a life of its own.”

“You need works that challenge people, and you need people to see these works and be open to them,” he explained. “Power is not always what it seems to be. Monuments are manicured versions of truth-as-selected. The power they portray owes as much to manipulation/omission as to what is presented”, argues Martin.

In 2015 Austin Camilleri also won an international call for proposals for a conceptual monument to the Maltese Republic, as well as an invitation to set up a children’s installation in La Valletta Square for school children as part of a national children’s festival called Ziguzajg. The aim was to give children a voice in a public space in Valletta. Around 12,000 drawings by children living in Malta were digitized, printed and displayed on huge illuminated spheres in Valletta.

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477 Ibid. p. 24
Conclusion

Four main themes have emerged and have been explored in this chapter. Firstly, how the theatrical Baroque (the use of immersion, metaphors, movement and the appeal to the emotions) and the Caravaggesque style (the dark realism and conceptual style of Caravaggio) still informs and influences the contemporary in Malta, creating a hybrid type of art. Secondly, the way postmodern philosophy has been adopted by Catholic Maltese contemporary artists, engaging viewers with ideas in an expansive process of self-discovery, pondering on the human condition. Thirdly, the exploration of space and identity by contemporary Maltese artists in an island situated between Southern Europe and North Africa, and finally how artists are “swinging” from critiquing institutions to collaborating with them.

The artists engage in these interventions as both insiders and outsiders in such institutions, and the critical engagement of the viewer is seen essentially as an act of communication, in which both the artist’s idea and the viewer’s cognition are valued. After taking ownership of the meaning, the artists exhibit their dialogues to the public in semi abstract states. They leave plenty of space for questions, allowing the viewer to fill
in the gaps, thus building up the interpretation of objects and sites through a collaborative community. It can be argued that during the “dialogue” the artist becomes an active collaborator in the process of meaning making. Arguably, during the “liminal” space created by their interventions, one can also question, dream, and discover alternative stories and ideas.

It could be argued that the artist group START might have had an impact on decisions taken by the Maltese government in recent years to further focus its attention on culture and the arts in Malta. In 2002 the year START was set up, Heritage Malta was also set up, the national government agency in Malta entrusted with the management of national museums and heritage sites, replacing the former “Museums Department.” That same year the Maltese government also established the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts. In 2003 START curated an exhibition entitled *Borders*, and a year later in 2004 Malta joined the European Union. The pressure on Maltese institutions by Maltese contemporary artists, was also observed in November 2013 when the decision of revamping and relocating the Malta National Museum of Fine Arts to a more central location in Valletta was for a brief period halted by the government.

Until 2015 Malta still had no National Modern and Contemporary Art Museum. Also until 2015, the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta mainly housed a collection of Baroque art, and only had one small room showcasing Maltese Modern art. It was only in 2013 that plans were made by the government to give the National Art collection a face lift and to transfer it to a more central location in Merchant’s Street in Valletta. The project, however, as already mentioned was halted, and it only went back on track after activist pressure by contemporary Maltese artists. Various slogans, posters, petitions and protests were organised and promoted via the social web (Figure 50 and Figure 51).
During an angry public conversation on Raphael Vella’s facebook wall on 10th November 2013, following the government’s decision to stop the move and revamp of the National Museum of Fine Arts, Vella publicly stated: “The arts upstaged by politics, again. First, Heritage Malta announces a competition for artists to create a series of sad monuments to dead politicians, and now this. When the arts merely mirror the cult of political self-gratification, they quickly lose their autonomy and disappear, out of sight, where they can't hurt anyone.” Various responses were publicly sent to Raphael’s statement on facebook. He continued his argument by stating that:

[…] the lack of philosophy in Maltese Modern art is notorious ...and let’s not even start talking about art criticism... what can artists do? well for starters they should ignore competitions that make them servile to the establishment, like competitions that are not about their work and ideas but about celebrating the political agendas of the few... the problem is not about museum space, even though this decision about the National Museum is depressing. An artist wins or maintains his/her autonomy not by so many meters of space on the museum’s walls but by reconfiguring the face of art despite the expectations of so-called cultural authorities […] the decision not to move the museum to a more decent space like

the Auberge d’Italie is clearly not a good one. But it’s too convenient for some arts people to blame authorities when the work they produce and the ideas they propose remain virtually unchanged. It’s too convenient because you risk ending up with a new museum that’s full of old ideas... I am sure that the hopes and plans for the new museum at the Auberge would have helped to improve things for the visual arts, infinitely so, but the museum cannot change things alone. And it definitely can not do this if the entity it belongs to continues to ask artists to design old-fashioned monuments to politicians that make HM [Heritage Malta] look like it never heard of a whole century of artistic revolutions in the 20th c. We laugh at monuments to Chairman Mao but we accept his crap. I’m glad you bring up education because this is where change is really possible, where minds and lives can be sculpted (to quote Beuys) in a perpetual effort to resist the status quo... Yes the rays of hope are few, but they’re there.480

Ruth Bianco, an other START member, replied “well said Raphael about education... the idea of “old-fashioned monuments” in the way you describe serve only to perpetuate entrenched ugly reminders that “shackle” rather than “free up” thinking... and in our open social spaces!!... hardly encouraging posterity to sing and dance in the future, or coming anything remotely close near to Beuy’s ideas of “social sculpture” and reform for that matter!”481

This was not the first time that artists in Malta in recent years had to “fight” to have their artworks shown publically. In 2009 a work called Pornolitics, also by Raphael Vella, was censored and excluded from a collective exhibition called The Life Model, by the Malta Council for the Culture and Arts, for being potentially libellous and because among other things it included an image of the Maltese President. The work consisted of digital images showing a spectacle of Maltese politics by appropriating televised and internet based images of political discussions and connecting these images visually to erotic images, accompanied by a quote from Guy Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle. Raphael Vella told The Times Newspaper in Malta “Just like pornography is the illusion

480 Ibid. [retrieved 10/11/2013]
481 Ibid.
of sex where the actors have fake breasts and pretend to enjoy themselves, politics is all about the manipulation of media and creating the right package”.  

Public debate focussed on the identity of political figures, showing how contemporary artists had to avoid the subject of local politics in their art for decades. “Is Maltese art divorced from the social realities that it inhibits?” was one of the questions posed in the media. The controversial exclusion of the work sparked off a debate about censorship in local newspapers. After several weeks, the works were later allowed to be exhibited at another venue, at St. James Cavalier Centre for Creativity. The title was changed to Pornolitics Remix, and the faces of politicians were covered in a thin silver film of paint and the public interacted with the piece by scratching the layer of silver paint, thus liberating each image and symbolically disposing of censorship (Figure 52). “It’s the audience who gets to decide, physically and metaphorically, whether to remove a “censorship layer” or not to see the installation as it was originally intended” Raphael Vella said during the opening night of the show. “…I also did it for my students, because I felt that by removing my art piece the council had unwittingly passed a judgement on me as a lecturer. I always tell my students to be open-minded and take risks in their work. If I backed down, what message would that send to them?”

Figure 52: Raphael Vella, Pornolitics Remix (2009) St. James Cavalier, Valletta

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483 Ibid.
A year later, in 2010, a group of around a hundred artists and protestors, wearing black, mourned art at a funeral march in Valletta. They claimed that they were mourning the “death of art and freedom of expression,” as they marched down Republic Street in Valletta in protest at the country’s censorship laws. The protestors carried a coffin which said “art is dead” and stopped in front of the Cultural Secretariat in Merchants Street. Members from the Front Against Censorship, argued that censorship in Malta was on the rise, and that concrete action had to be taken immediately to avoid artists being criminalised and potentially sent to jail just because their art might be unpalatable to certain individuals. They called for a more open and tolerant society and for the end of an inquisition style approach to art by authorities.487

Like the artworks of the German artist Joseph Beuys, mentioned earlier in this thesis, the art of the collective START often has a social agenda with a political undertone and many of their team-based projects emphasize social investigation. Their approach to the political within their work is a tool by which to experience the time in which they are living. Today, a wide number of artists worldwide, working in a variety of ways, have inherited aspects of the Joseph Beuys sensibility. For example, the work of the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn also often has a social agenda with a political undertone. Another example is the work of the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan who is known for upturning the Beuys myth of the artist shaman and plays games with his legacy. The clearest example is Cattelan’s sculpture La rivoluzione siamo noi (We Are the Revolution) of 2000, in which a cast of himself, wearing a shrunken grey, felt suit, hangs from a coat hanger. Beuys’s ambition to play a larger role in society is seen by Cattelan, and many of his colleagues, as delusional. As American director and screenplay writer David Mamet suggested, “art cannot really change the world, but it can prompt you to think about the world from a different angle, which, once you step out of the fiction of art, may help to make some changes in your life and eventually to the world.”488

The artworks of the collective START, like the work of Beuys in Germany, adopt an artistic language of signs and symbols, intervening in spaces, communicating dreams to change the world, but at the same time also depicting irony, cynicism and humour, infiltrating the communication channels and opening up dialogues. During a recent interview on his exhibition entitled *Raising A Revolution* held at the Senate Hall at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in Poland, in December 2014 Raphael Vella stated that:

When a work of art makes you react, motivates you to look at something with new eyes, or even makes you stop in your tracks to reflect about something, it is already performing a political action. ‘Politics in art’ is not equivalent to ‘art about politics’… Art does not need to deal thematically with specific historical events to be political. Whenever I feel that I might be getting dangerously close to ‘illustration’ in my work, I turn away and return to ‘art’ or some other discipline that I’m interested in. I am not interested in didacticism because I believe that didacticism isn’t ‘education’. Education is only about opening another person’s eyes, not about directing his or her eyes to a specific place.\(^{489}\)

The world still sees unequal levels of economic development and a world-wide struggle between “contemporary culture and traditional culture.” The museum sector has recently been developing a discourse on the moral agency of museums. Sandell, for example, has often argued that objectivity is an elusive stance and a default position that imparts value through the invoked authority of the institution. Sandell uses the term “moral activism” to suggest a direction for museums to realise their potential as change agents in promoting social inclusion and human rights both inside and outside the museum.\(^{490}\) Marstein in her essay “The contingent nature of the new museum ethics” focuses on how museums can assert their moral agency through social inclusion, radical transparency and the shared guardianship of heritage. Museums build up trust from their public through democracy, transparency and relevance.\(^{491}\)

START aimed for a revolution in art in Malta, an art that questions, and that inspired a younger generation of artists to produce art questioning their space, their identity and seeking collaboration with institutions. The following chapter shifts its attention from installation art to performance art in Museums and historic sites in Malta, an art form that has recently gained momentum universally as a contemporary living form of dialogue with the past.
Chapter Five

Immersive Performances:
Exploding Narratives and Alternative Universes

The building itself can tell such vast stories of emotion... Emotions, I think, based on some of the historical research that I did, are the same, now as the 16th century, because we still experience love and sorrow and fear... all of these emotions are what links us all together. (Mercedes Kemp, Associate Director of WildWorks, 2013) 492

It’s the empowerment of the audience in the sense that they’re put at the centre of the action; they’re the pivot from which everything else spins. It’s the creation of parallel theatrical universes within which audiences forget they are audiences, and thus their status within the work shifts. (Felix Barret, Artistic Director of Punchdrunk, 2013) 493

We want to tickle their brains; we want our viewers to participate in a journey through the inner-self with us. (Jimmy Grima, Artistic Director of The Rubberbodies Collective, 2011) 494

We tell stories and help people to remember their own stories... Our stories and our memories are what make us human. We mustn’t lose them. (Bill Mitchell, Artistic Director of WildWorks, 2009) 495

This chapter centres on the works of the immersive performance artist collectives based in Malta and in England: The Rubberbodies Collective, Theatre Anon, WildWorks and Punchdrunk. These groups claim to have pioneered in a game changing form of transformative theatre, in which roaming audiences experience epic storytelling inside sensory theatrical worlds. They create participatory performance outside of traditional

492 Interview with Mercedes Kemp, 05/08/2013. Kemp is Associate Director of Community and Research for WildWorks Theatre Company and Senior Lecturer in Fine Arts at Falmouth University, UK
theatre venues. They incorporate a focus on local culture, history and politics, working in spaces in need of regeneration and some also in warzones, as well as in museums and historic sites. Their work is interdisciplinary, it adds live performers to their conceptual installations and it takes audiences on sensory and emotional journeys. The collectives listen to the stories of different communities and they turn these stories into poetic performances. They embed the stories into their “exploded” narratives, rooted in moods, imagery and sound rather than narrative text, crossing boundaries of culture and language.

The questions that this chapter attempts to answer are various: How is the Baroque taking on hybrid forms in the works of these theatre collectives? How are the “grand narratives” fragmented through dialogues and multi layers? How are emotions and memories translated into visual immersive performances in historic sites and museums? How do these kinds of performances enable self-reflection? How is the “liminal” experienced in the physical and emotional journey of the performance?

Watson argues that “we negotiate our understanding of the world through an emotional lens that is both individual, time specific and cultural. The production and regulation of emotion is an important means of unifying diverse communities and establishing the ‘other’ against which we measure ourselves. Heritage sites sometimes deliberately encourage visitors to engage emotionally with their narratives using sensorial experiences, in an attempt to foster empathy and association with peoples in the past, particularly in a national context.” She questions: “How does this happen and how can we understand this in theory and practice?” Watson also argues that many museum designers and professionals tend to prioritize thinking over feeling, rationalism and objectivity over personal emotional experiences. She argues that research into the emotional impact in museums and historic sites is still in its infancy.496

This chapter attempts to build up on this, as well as answer the questions outlined in the Introduction. It attempts to describe and analyse the processes and the ambitions of the site specific performances by the collectives researched for this study. Interviews held with these collectives, as well as newspaper articles, websites, performance catalogues,

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video and photographic documentation inform this analysis. Personal attendance at most of their shows also helped in the further understanding of how these can be further applied in museums and historic sites.

The interviews held by Machon with WildWorks members Sue Hill and Bill Mitchell, as well as her interview with Punchdrunk’s artistic director Felix Barret were highly useful for this context and discussed in detail here in order to build upon her work. While Machon’s interest was mainly in achieving a more clear definition of immersive theatre, this chapter’s main aim is to analyse how the theatre collectives works can be further put into use by museums. The Maltese collectives Theatre Anon and the Rubberbodies Collective have never been academically studied and their work has never been published. This chapter aims to place their work in a wider European context and further justify the potential of their work as an interpretive medium in museums and historic sites. Various images will be shown to support the text and in the further understanding of the visual quality of the work.

**Introducing the Key Informants**

In the past decade various theatrical companies, some more active than the others, have specialised in immersive site specific performances. Among the immersive performance groups which have been highly inspirational for the collectives interviewed for this research is the work of the UK based immersive theatre company Punchdrunk, which formed in 2000. The company WildWorks, growing out of Kneehigh Theatre Company was also active in Malta on various occasions, and it has arguably inspired the creation of the other two companies, based in Malta, discussed and analysed in this chapter: Theatre Anon and The Rubberbodies Collective.

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497 There are various site specific theatre companies based in London, such as Artangel; dreamthinkspeak; Look Left, Look Right; Welfare State; You Me Bum Bum Train; Oily Cart; Coney; Blast Theory and Shunt. They will not be discussed in this study, but the researcher is aware of them and has attended various performances by these groups.


Punchdrunk is known for blending classical texts with physical performance and installations, usually taking over deserted buildings, staging their cinematic immersive site specific theatre.\textsuperscript{499} Felix Barret, the creative director, uses also the term “site-sympathetic”, when describing their work: “The building tells you the show it wants to have inside it.” He might be inspired by something as subtle as “a smear on the wall that looks like a handprint.”\textsuperscript{500} “We’re trying to build a parallel universe… For a few hours inside the walls, you will […] slip into this other place,” Felix Barret explained.\textsuperscript{501}

From 2008 onwards, realising the potential for transformative engagement, Punchdrunk also established “Punchdrunk Enrichment” reaching out to children in schools and museums. The 2015 Punchdrunk Enrichment project led by Pete Higgin, called Against Captain’s Orders: A Journey into the Uncharted, was held at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, UK (Figure 53). Children aged between 6 and 12 were encouraged to act as the crew of HMS Adventure, taking on seafaring roles as Ship Watch, Navigation, Midshipmen and Salvage. Punchdrunk Enrichment’s work is inspired by childhood curiosity, fuelled by Higgin’s own formative years. “An early installation of a space ship is still one of my overriding memories of Primary School. It is the creation of this lifelong memory that inspires me most,” Higgin confessed.\textsuperscript{502} The National Maritime Museum described the intervention with the following:

With so much history secured in one museum – so many objects, so many stories, so many doorways to other times and other worlds – Against Captain’s Orders: a Journey into the Uncharted will take you on the adventure of a lifetime through the National Maritime Museum’s extraordinary collection of maritime artefacts… Exciting, enlightening, and, who knows, perhaps just a tiny bit dangerous, promises a theatrical journey through the Museum…\textsuperscript{503}

\textsuperscript{503} National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, http://www.rmg.co.uk/national-maritime-museum [retrieved 04/06/2015]
The theatrical company WildWorks, was set up by artistic director Bill Mitchell in 2005 and it is currently based in Cornwall, England, producing community based, “landscape theatre.” WildWorks member Sue Hill used to organize “Wild Walks,” taking small groups through the woods, where the audience was moving rather than settled. They are now known to hew theatre from a landscape and the memories of its inhabitants, drawing on its people’s hopes and concerns.

They perform in historic spaces, which they believe, have a lot of resonance and stories to tell, and they operate at the interface between history and imagination, theatre and installation.\(^{504}\) They are a multi-disciplinary international company, drawing on myth and play with ritual, creating outdoor theatre with communities around the globe. “We are simply searching for ways to tell a story… We don’t give people lines to learn,” said WildWorks director Bill Mitchell.\(^{505}\) “We don’t overdo, don’t have to put everything there, we choose the clues that we want to give for that world, all they need is the smallest hint and encouragement and they work it out for themselves,” he explained.\(^{506}\)

Among the first immersive, promenade landscape theatre that members from WildWorks did of this kind was in 2001 in Malta, when they were still working with Kneehigh Theatre Company.\(^{507}\) They were invited to go to Malta to create a show in a harbour town called Birgu, which at the time was in decline, but on the verge of being

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\(^{507}\) As well as the production of text and story line, her role within *WildWorks* involves creating and maintaining relationships with host communities, exploring their relationships with place and memory and adapting text to fit each new location.
re-developed. The show was called *Island of Dreams*, and it received such an acclaim that Kneehigh decided to return to Malta in 2003, with the support of the British Council and with EU funds to create the *The 3 Islands Project*, held between 2003-2005.\(^{508}\) The 2003 production in Malta was also timed to coincide with the Birgu feast and it included various aspects of Maltese village life, traditions and culture, such as Catholic religious feasts celebrating the patron saints. They also worked with Maltese musicians and the cast included a lot of children from Birgu. Bill Mitchell described it as “a piece of theatre for people of all ages who have a sense of adventure. It is a performance where the emphasis is on the visual spectacle and physical theatre- it is not about words, but what you see and understand.”\(^{509}\)

The project was a transnational theatrical collaboration between Kneehigh Theatre Company, St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity in Malta and the Cyprus Theatre Organisation. It was a landscape production, inspired by Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s short story *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*. It had three venues: Malta in 2003, Cyprus in 2004 and Cornwall in 2005. They thought the story by Garcia could be applied in all three sites, because the story dealt with profound issues of communities affected by change, and the metaphor of the sea bringing and taking away (Figure 54).\(^{510}\)

![Paul Portelli performing the role of the Very Old Man with Enormous Wings (2003-2005)](image)


\(^{509}\) *Ibid.*

The work of two of the Maltese actors who worked with Kneehigh on this production, Paul Portelli and of Jimmy Grima, is also discussed in this research. Paul Portelli was the co-founder of Theatre Anon, which was set up in 1994, and Jimmy Grima the co-founder of The Rubberbodies Collective, set up in 2009. Arguably, what these artistic directors have in common is that they work with the concept of resonance; they work with communities and their memories, combining them with those of the historic sites and museums they work in.

In July 2010, Theatre Anon produced the site specific immersive performance called *Ospizio* in the historic, unused site known as Ospizio in Floriana, just outside Valletta, as part of the Summer Arts Festival. The site had various stories which could resonate with their audiences. It was originally built as a gunpowder mill and later turned into a welfare institution by the Portuguese Grand Master Antonio de Vilhena (1663-1736). Eventually, the site was also used as a home for the elderly, a mental institution and a foundling home for orphans and prostitutes. Theatre Anon collaborated with historians to build up the site’s forgotten and fragmented narratives, and they included various themes, like, for example, guilt facing up to the past. They created a performance involving local Catholic traditions such as carnival and religious processions. Artists, actors and musicians came together to create an interdisciplinary fusion. Throughout, the audience was part of the journey, as they walked through the site and participated on emotional, tactile, sensual and oral levels.

Following in the footsteps of the older generation of artists in Malta who had before them formed the collectives START and Theatre Anon, The Rubberbodies Collective also specialise in site-specific, immersive performances. The creation of the Rubberbodies Collective came about as a direct response to a series of discussions amongst young creative individuals, who realised that an artist network was missing within the local Maltese art community and that spaces in which they could perform were limited, unless they set up a collective and look for alternative “stages” set outdoors, in abandoned spaces or in museums and historic sites.

Collectively, they believed they could create “a force that was strong, dynamic and

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Initially, the core members were Jimmy Grima (having a visual and physical theatre background) Rebecca Camilleri (having a choreography and dance background) and Matthew Pandolfino (the costume, props and scenography designer, specialising in kinetic sculpture). Eventually Ira Melkonyan (a scientist and performer), and Mario Sammut (sound designer) also joined in, as well as various other artists, researchers and curators who have also collaborated with them. The collective is mutable and ever-changing. They aspire to push contemporary art forward in Malta’s culture and plan to develop this not only with other artists, academics and curators, but also with a local participating community, by bringing art to the people.

The idea of creating a collective emerged from the challenge to commit to a process where historical research, choreography, mime, installations and musical compositions could be intertwined and moved to new directions. Using in a way, the Baroque idea of the “total work of art”, of fusing the different arts to create a spectacular immersive fusion, appealing both to the emotions, as well as to the intellect. Their aim is to find novel ways of bringing to life their own conceptions outside of the individual realm, exploring imaginations, and creating spaces for the observation of social and political issues. “The tough part for me is to put everything together. This is why we call ourselves a multidisciplinary artist collective” explained Jimmy Grima during the interview. 513

Similar to the methodology of WildWorks, Punchdrunk and Theatre Anon, The Rubberbodies Collective fuse the real with the surreal. Museum objects, stories from the archives and historic spaces are used in their work, and combined with the curator’s and researcher’s stories, as well as with their own personal stories. “I look at myself as an archaeologist… I feel like I am digging for stories…” explained Jimmy Grima. 514

They use the film story-board technique, as a script to create their work, constantly improvising and creating a lot of fragmented scores, which they record during the process. The visual storyboard is usually composed of fifty boxes, each worth a one minute value, and it is sketched in. “Themes and chapters come first” explained Jimmy Grima, “then the choreography builds up in the boxes, and the sound artist builds up the

513 Interview with Jimmy Grima, 12/03/2013.
514 Ibid.
soundscapes with us.”\textsuperscript{515} The other elements: props, costume and music, develop in parallel. “I translate visuals into music,” explained Mario Sammut the sound artist.\textsuperscript{516} The narrative that emerges is an abstract blend of stories from the archives, the collective’s and the community’s memories fused with emotions and music. They work with moods and concepts, building up their narratives in a community, leaving gaps for audiences to fill up with their own memories.

Umberto Eco’s essay entitled “The Poetics of the Open Work”, in 1962 had addressed the open-ended nature of modern art, pointing to the wider implications of this particular mode of communication. Eco argued that “an artistic work that suggests is also one that can be performed with the full emotional and imaginative resources of the interpreter. Whenever we read poetry there is a process by which we try to adapt our personal world to the emotional world proposed by the text. This is all the more true of poetic works that are deliberately based on suggestiveness, since the text sets out to stimulate the private world of the addressee so that he can draw from inside himself some deeper response that mirrors the subtler resonances underlying the text.”\textsuperscript{517}

Eco argued that one can find a striking aspect of openness in the open form of the Baroque. He argued that the Baroque form is dynamic, tending to an indeterminacy of effect, conveying the idea of space being progressively dilated, searching for kinetic excitement and illusory effect leading to a situation were the work of art never allows a privileged, definitive frontal view, rather it induces the spectator to shift his position continuously in order to see the work in constantly new aspects, as if it were in a state of perpetual transformation. The poetic treatises concerning “maraviglia”, “wit,” “agudezas” sought to establish humanity’s inventive role, and engage audiences in works of art to participate in the potential mystery to be solved and a stimulus to quicken his imagination.\textsuperscript{518} The search for suggestiveness by the Rubberbodies and the other theatrical groups studied here, is a deliberate move to “open” the work to the free response of the addressee.

\textsuperscript{515} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{516} Interview with Mario Sammut, 14/03/2013.
The Rubberbodies have produced performances in collaboration with the Malta National Museum of Fine Arts, with the Malta Maritime Museum, and with Malta’s National Museum of Archaeology. They also produced work for the Science in the City festival in Valletta, focussing their themes on science and medicine in society. *The Pill*, for example, was performed by Ira Melkonyan as an autobiographical monologue in 2014 at *The Splendid*, a historic house in Valletta, exploring society’s relationship with sickness, pill-popping, health practitioners and the dependence on remedies within society. The story continuously transitioned between her childhood and adulthood, calling to mind Deleuze’s and Guattari’s definition of capitalism as a divisor and paradoxical system, relying on the stability in the form of social order and the contradictory personage who must consume and strive for uniqueness.

The works of WildWorks, Theatre Anon and The Rubberbodies Collective have been inspiring for various cultural institutions in Malta, who have believed in their work and who have given them the go ahead to experiment in their sites. Their work has also been highly inspiring for the Malta Maritime Museum, which has recently also come up with its own initiative to work with the community and to collect their memories. In 2015, in collaboration with the Valletta 2018 Foundation, the national entity responsible for the events leading up to Valletta’s celebration of the European Capital of Culture in 2018, organised an event called *Qatt Ma Ninsa* (I Will Never Forget). Locals were invited to bring in to the Museum, objects, photos and stories related to the sea so that they could document and store them in their archives. From these stories, another immersive promenade performance was developed and performed around the streets of Birgu by a young theatrical company called the Teatru Manoel Youth Theatre, next to the Malta Maritime Museum in the summer of 2014. Thus, as one can observe, the *Island of Dreams* project produced by Kneehigh in 2001, is arguably still having its ripple effect, inspiring collectives as well as institutions to also collect memories from the communities and create immersive performances, which arguably have the potential to provoke change.

The work of the art collectives under study seek to exploit all that is experiential in performance. They transform stories into visual movement, fusing audio-visuals with

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dance and theatre, communicating with audiences through the senses and the emotions, as was popular in Baroque churches and palaces. Their storytelling is arguably once again looking back at the ideas of “the total work of art,” creating alternative dream-like universes. However, the narratives as well as the characters are fragmented, and the audience is integral to the shared meaning making of the performance process, and included in the dialogue. Their work can also be defined as postmodern theatre, as well as meta-theatre, for creating self-conscious atmospheres, and for creating multiple narratives with inter-related webs of stories, instead of one grand narrative.

They argue that they place the audience at the heart of what they do, encouraging them to reach their own individual understanding. Pearson, writing about site-specific performance also argues that the audience members are participants as well as perceivers, capable of altering the processes and the outcomes.\(^{520}\) As already discussed earlier on in chapter three, immersive theatre is the practice which allows the audience to be in the playing area with the performers, physically interacting with them. As Machon explains:

> the direct participation of the audience member in the work ensures she or he inhabits the immersive world created. This live(d), praesent experience, the participants physical body responding within an imaginative environment, is a pivotal element of an immersive experience and a defining feature of immersive theatre. Where virtual or mediated technologies are employed these accentuate sensual involvement and playfully manipulate a visceral virtual perception. This creative agency, involving processual interaction throughout the experience, shapes the unique journey for each participating individual.\(^{521}\)

**Engagement with the Community**

The thing that makes our work distinctive and why I think it’s such an interesting form is the way we include the people of the place. There was a sort of click in Malta where we were in an urban situation for the first time,

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given a site that was a town. We were immersed in the people of that landscape, surrounded by people who were wondering who we were and what our role was. Our instinct was, we want to work with you, we want you to tell us your story. 522

WildWorks utilise specific sites such as harbours, quarries, villages and factories, as well as palaces and castles, and they work closely with curators and the local community, pushing boundaries of participative and professional practice with a reputation for working on public projects. Their shows reflect and embrace the host communities from which they draw their inspiration and meaning. No WildWorks show is ever finished; they are works in progress, evolving as they encounter new landscapes and new communities. Their method involves a kind of eclectic ethnographic research into a variety of sources: archives, libraries, cemeteries, village halls, local historians, town gossips, snapshots, old photographs, conversations with local musicians, fishermen and so on. Their methodology also involves a close observation of the process of memory and its effect on the value that people place on their environments.

They ask questions to the community of the space they perform in. Bill Mitchell describes it as “detective work,”523 holding tea parties, winking out memories, and recruiting local people to take part in their promenade performances, making sure that the viewers are as much part of the spectacle as the actors. They ask questions to the inhabitants such as: “How do you create a future when the past is being lost? If you had to leave home, never to return, what would you take? ...”524 “Because memory is so much part of what we do, we thought wouldn’t it be wonderful if people wrote down their most important memory to leave here. It was an innocent story point when it started- 35,000 or so of these things later, some in English, some in French, we have this archive, which Mercedes now calls ‘The Archive of the Human Heart,’ Bill Mitchell said, while explaining how they immerse their audiences both physically, and emotionally in their promenade journeys.525 They had asked six different questions to their audiences in one of their promenade works: “what does your heart want to

522 Ibid., p. 243
523 WildWorks. Our Story, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3IoGY3Szrk [retrieved 06/10/2014]
remember? What do your eyes want to remember? What do your hands want to remember? What does your heart want to forget? What do your eyes want to forget? What do your hands want to forget?"526

During the Island of Dreams production held in Birgu, already mentioned above, there was a small community living there at the time, many of them were older people and there were quite a lot of social problems, as well as a negative view from the other areas of Malta, Mercedes Kemp explained. She also recounted the following about the methodology and the process of their work:

We arrived in Malta around three months before the production. Three of us came, including Bill Mitchell, the artistic director, and we met the people at the council there. We had also a meeting at St. James Cavalier where we invited local artists who would be interested to work with us and talk to us. That is how we established the early contacts. Then there was a lot of research taking place, basically by talking to people, conversations with local people about their values, and stories and so on. And clearly a lot of stories from the war came up and there was one particular story about a local man from Birgu, who was a boat man and a strong man, who had become famous for various daring rescues that he carried out, but also because he was diving into the wrecks and getting food, and give to the hungry people. There was a story about St. Lawrence’s church that was quite tragic, about the bombing, but anyway, we decided that this hero could be the character around whom this whole production could be written. We were working with people, homeless people, professional people and amateurs from around the area. We did a lot of research into local music, and I remember meeting [Maltese musician] Andrew Alamango and going to their concerts. We were really trying to get the feel of the island…527

There was a key moment, where I made an open invitation [for local people] to come to the local council and to bring their family photo albums and I had thought that this might be a key to unlock personal stories and memories. Because up to that moment, since Malta is a very historical island, if I asked people about Malta they all came up with stories from the colonisers and the

526 Ibid. p.247
527 Interview with Mercedes Kemp. 05/08/2013
Knights and so on. And I was telling them no, no I want to know about “you.” So, anyway that was the unlocking moment - the albums had been locked away for a long time and nobody really looked at them for a long time... the loves that people had, people also talked about the laundries in Birgu, and anyway from these stories the entire show developed because we were able to use the people’s stories. The theme that encapsulated the whole show was about developers coming over to take over your home, which was effectively what was happening. That was the trigger for actually bringing people to talk about the things they valued and what they loved about the place and that moment became the key to all the work that came after for us. The site was really important - the site was occupied by people and the people have a really strong relationship with the site, so that relationship became the focus of our work and that is how we work up until today.\textsuperscript{528}

Mercedes Kemp during another interview, again emphasized the involvement of the community in their work: “when I wrote Island of Dreams… the script emerged out of the community. The process took nearly a year of forging relationships and gathering the narratives of the city. The people of Birgu who were involved in the production were very active in developing the script and I think they developed a real ownership of the story.”\textsuperscript{529} Sue Hill, also commented that “this thread, which started in Malta, was how do you really listen to a community? How do you find ways in which they can tell you their deepest feelings?”\textsuperscript{530}

Both Kneehigh and WildWorks are known for working with communities that are facing dramatic change, and with embattled communities, even making theatre in war zones. They build up an experience for the local people to inspire hope and a sense of pride in their identity. In 2004, Kneehigh was given permission by the UN to put on their show for the 3 Island Project in a derelict taverna in Cyprus, which had been closed because of sniper fire on the Green Line buffer zone separating north and south. “Although it was the same story we did in Cornwall and in Malta, it had a different

\textsuperscript{528} Interview with Mercedes Kemp, 05/08/2013
meaning there, it resonated the themes of that conflict,” Bill Mitchell explained.\(^531\) Actors and audiences from either side of the line came together for performances that ended with the image of an angel flying over the divided island.

Jimmy Grima, the Maltese artistic director of The Rubberbodies Collective, who at the time was working as an actor with Kneehigh Theatre Company, in fact reported that in: “Cyprus we were on the green line, where the Greek and the Turkish part meet. They have a political situation there in Cyprus... it is divided. The Turkish invaded and the United Nations are on the green line and we did a performance there. It was a very sensitive area, so we invited people from both parts to come see the production.”\(^532\) They collaborated with a mix of Turkish and Cypriot theatre makers and every night they brought the closed tavern back to life with songs, dances and shared memories and emotions. Mercedes Kemp explained that

the strongest memory of making this show was in a rehearsal. Derman, a Turkish Cypriot performer began teaching his dance to the company. The Greek Cypriot girls immediately joined him, with tears in their eyes saying: ‘This is my dance. This is the dance we do in my village.’ We had been told that the two cultures have been separated for twenty-six years. We had a glimpse of what that meant and this perhaps is what this work does best- it leaps across boundaries of nationality, culture, language, prejudice and history.\(^533\)

In 2009, in a similar manner, WildWorks created the production entitled *A Beautiful Journey*, at Devonport Dockyard, inspired by *The Odyssey*, casting the audience in the role of survivors of an unspecified catastrophe, provoking them to contemplate their futures (Figure 55). The memories and the life-stories of the local community helped shape the journey of the performance, just as the local community in Malta and elsewhere had done. “They inform so much of the content of the show, it’s like we enter a different world every time,” explained WildWorks performance director Nicola Rosewarne.\(^534\) The site was protected by a high wall nicknamed the “Berlin Wall,” built after the Second World War, as the military expanded the local navy base and dockyard.

\(^{531}\) *Ibid.* p.249
\(^{532}\) Interview with Jimmy Grima, 12/03/2013.
\(^{533}\) Interview with Mercedes Kemp, 05/08/2013.
\(^{534}\) *The Beautiful Journey*, BBC
http://www.bbc.co.uk/tyne/content/articles/2009/04/15/the_beautiful_journey_feature.shtml [retrieved 17/04/2013]
Its construction had ripped the heart out of Devonport; the community, gave up its view of the sea for the sake of national security. Generations grew up by the sea unable to see it and unaware that the area behind the wall had once been home to pubs, cinemas and dancehalls where their parents and grandparents had probably met. “What we try to do is over a period of time get to the heart of a community” said Bill Mitchell. People’s memories might inspire new characters or storylines, for example, or their photographs and objects might be used as props in the show, “…we don’t get them to act, but they are performing… we can build their skills into the show and that becomes part of the performance”, Bill said. He explained how, for example, they talked to a couple about their relationship to the sea and the man who was in the Merchant Navy said “I love it, it’s everything to me. His wife on the other hand said “I hate it, I’m jealous of it” and WildWorks decided to put this at the center of the show. At the heart of the narration was the question: “What future do we want to build?”

Figure 55: WildWorks, The Beautiful Journey (2009) Devonport, UK

In 2012 WildWorks in collaboration with four London theaters - BAC, the Lyric Hammersmith, the Young Vic and the Theatre Royal Stratford East produced the show Babel in Caledonian Park in North London. Inspired by the Book of Genesis, they visually recounted the story of how the generations who came after the floods were one tribe, with one language, and built the city of Babel; however God got angry and

535 Ibid.
536 Ibid.
537 Ibid.
destroyed their tower and confused their language and the tribes scattered all over the world. The show, like their other shows, was drawing on myth, fairytales and memories from London. During an interview with Lyn Gardner for the *Guardian*, Bill Mitchell stated that:

> Many people no longer agree with, or have faith in, the government or the banking system... they are looking to other ways of expressing themselves, and that includes last summer’s riots and the Occupy movement. The model I’m interested in is neither, but in what happens when you bring together people who feel lost in the city. If the city doesn’t fit you just have to go out and make your own.\(^{538}\)

More recently, in September 2013, they created a performance at Khan Al-Wakala, in the Old City of Nablus in Palestine. They called it the *City of Stories*, an evening of tales, music and ideas gathered from the local people of Nablus (Figures 56 and 57). WildWorks were in the city for two weeks working with local communities on the performance, gathering their stories and local traditions such as shadow puppet theatre, to create an inspiring fusion for the local people there (Figure 58). Bill Mitchell explained:

> We want to create an understanding that theatre does not have to belong in buildings and be restricted to a certain class of people. Theatre can be in the open, be inspired by the everyday and the landscape – it can, and should, include local people in its creation. Together we empower participants to probe feelings, thoughts, stories and memories to unlock narratives. Our work gives participants a reaffirming experience of art, celebrating what they do. It will place their culture, aptitude and environment centre stage.\(^{539}\)

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Figure 58: WildWorks, Poster for *City of Stories* (2013) Khan Al-Wakala, Palestine
When asked during the interview for this research how WildWorks moved from working with local communities, in for example Malta, Cyprus and Palestine, to working with big institutions like Kensington Palace run by Historic Royal Palaces in England, Mercedes Kemp replied:

They are kind of different and they are not - they are also places with communities... when we were offered the job we pondered about it because it was not something we had done before. We worked before in derelict buildings and outdoors mainly, you know, so we discussed that we were also interested in buildings which had that kind of history and resonance- it made us realise about an other layer of the world which is about emotion- the work is always about emotion and this seemed like a really good opportunity to explore a building from an emotional side, with its communities... for myself as a researcher I am really interested in actually bringing out what the building has to tell the world... a lot of those rooms you saw, the mood of those rooms, the emotional temperature in those rooms came from hours of sitting there and absorbing and of course from major library research into the history of what happened in the room and artifacts. It took a long time to make decisions, because in a palace like Kensington you could tell a number of stories... There was also an element of how to take this huge body of historical evidence, letters, archives and in somehow boil it down to something that makes a reference to our contemporary space and emotional experience.540

For the *Enchanted Palace* exhibition Historic Royal Palaces had also commissioned a cabinet of curiosities, in collaboration with WildWorks and the women from the community at Kensington Palace. Kensington is multicultural, so they got maps of the women’s journeys to London and from all over the world. The theme was the journeys of women, journeys both in geographical terms and also the journeys of life such as growing up. In 2013, WildWorks collaborated on the *The Museum of Us* project at the Royal Cornwall Museum, and the cabinet came back to Cornwall re-imagined as a living archive to provoke conversations and meditations on contemporary Cornish-ness. WildWorks asked their audiences: “If you had to choose one object that represented an aspect of Cornwall, or told a story about your relationship to Cornwall, what would it

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540 Interview with Mercedes Kemp, 05/08/2013.
be? A piece of pyrites from the mine? The programme from the village panto? A surfing trophy? Your granny’s recipe book?” Throughout April and May they held a series of free tea parties in towns throughout Cornwall to collect treasures for the cabinet.

Our intention is to work honestly with people, to build up trust and mutual generosity, make the best piece of work we can. What’s amazing to me is the things that come out of it and the new connections and friendships that happen, new ideas when we’ve gone.541

**Fragmented Multi - Narratives**

The idea of presenting multi-narratives to tell stories is not new, and both theatre practitioners and museum curators have long been debating this topic, however, the application of it is still in its infancy. In the 1990’s, American avant-guard theatre directors like Robert Wilson and Deborah Warner, were already creating immersive performance work, which proved to be a great influence to the performers interviewed for this research. Wilson’s works are noted for their austere style, very slow movement, and often extreme scale in space or in time. For example, *KA MOUNTain and GUARDenia Terrace* was staged on a mountaintop in Iran and lasted seven days.542 Punchdrunk’s artistic director Felix Barret explained how he had experienced the sublime work of Robert Wilson, which he described as densely atmospheric, with a huge implied narrative, “it was amazing to be in an environment that was so charged…it was the room to breathe, the amount of space your imagination had to fill in the gaps, which was totally seductive,” he explained.543

Punchdrunk’s production *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable*, which opened in July 2013, was the first time that they played with the idea of more than one lead narrative (Figures 59 and 60). They rejected the passive obedience usually expected of audiences and allowed them to follow any character up close, constructing their own fragmented narrative, while the action took place in different rooms simultaneously. It was an immersive journey which unfolded across four levels of the building that was

previously the Royal Mail sorting office, located at 31 London Street, London. [See images below] The audience was initially led in small groups from the entrance into a lift, thereby creating the illusion of ascending into the surreal journey that followed.544 Audiences were transported to a mocked up derelict film studios from the 1960’s, inspired by Georg Buchner’s Woyzeck (1837). Over the four floors there were gloomy corridors, bedsits, shops, bars, trees, caravans, a chapel, and even a working cinema (Figures 61-64). The audience members, who were free to roam around the sets at will, wore white masks for anonymity, to distinguish themselves from the cast. The narrative was communicated through a series of overlapping scenes and the audience could follow any plot line or performer they chose.545

During the performance, audience members were also encouraged to retire to a bar to talk. Fraser and Coulson in “Incomplete Stories” discuss how the work of Punchdrunk, illuminates what happens when people are drawn together into a dialogue.546 Colin Nightingale, the producer of Punchdrunk is cited by Fraser and Coulson in explaining that: “The more people talk, the more they get out of the whole experience because they start to understand what other people have seen and they piece it all together. Suddenly the whole experience is not just about what we’ve presented, it’s not about what they’ve seen, it’s all about the other, different connections they have made.”547 Gregory and Witcomb argue: “For in silence, in gaps, there is presence.”548

Fraser and Coulson further argue that “If history is formed from multiple viewpoints, how can museums reflect the debate, uncertainty and even confusion in the imaginative space between the stories they tell and the grander narratives of history?” and “… how can incomplete stories be used to enrich each person’s experience?” The museum is a space in which we seek to understand and make sense of disparate fragments that make

544 The work of the theatre company called Shunt, was a great influence for Punchdrunk. Their base for performances under London Bridge Station was inhabited from 2004 to 2010, and the access was through a door located in a small archway off the concourse between the underground station and the mainline railway station. For Tropicana their first show there, the audience was led in small groups from the entrance into a space that appeared to also be a large lift, thereby creating the illusion of descending further below the station into the interior of the industrial city. [Punchdrunk, http://punchdrunk.com/ [retrieved 06/02/2015]


546 Ibid., p. 200

up an exhibition. Fraser and Coulson throw light upon the spaces between that abound in the museum: between artefact and label; between narrator and visitor; and between history and imagination. They critique the role of language and authorship in exhibition design and argue that gaps within the museum are important sites of imaginative translation.\textsuperscript{549}


Similarly, WildWorks are also passionate about experimenting with fragmented multi-narratives: For example, “Physical space changes audiences in very powerful ways. You compress an audience by putting them in an enclosed space and you allow them to breathe by putting them into an open space. The opening and closing of space, at its most basic level, or the lightening and darkening of space, changes an audience so powerfully,” says Sue Hill.\(^{550}\) She continues by saying that “When you’re looking at a site, it’s lovely to have a big view but you also want to have the element of surprise, you want to be able to turn a corner, so enclosure or compression or screening becomes really important in order to articulate a story that isn’t all immediately visible. We’re passionate about narrative and for narrative to work you need to have a curiosity about what happens next,” she continued to explain.\(^{551}\)

In 2008 a decision was made by Historic Royal Palaces to embark on a major re-presentation of Kensington Palace in London, and instead of closing it to the public during the renovation works between 2010 and 2012, they invited WildWorks to create


\(^{551}\) *Ibid.*, p. 246
an intervention. Their idea was that the vibrations and disturbances during the renovation works were shaking stories out of the walls of the palace with the dust, and they were somehow running free in the State Apartments. Their work has been described as the most radical presentation project ever undertaken by Historic Royal Palaces and the first to polarise audiences dramatically. “Those who love it really love it, but others with more traditional expectations are confused and even angered by it. But it will transform us, our methods of working, our audiences and the ways in which visitors engage with our history. It has already begun to shift perceptions of what a visit to a palace can represent.” Sue Hill also wrote that most of the people working in the palace were deeply anxious about the future of the palace and their role in it. Many had reservations about the plan to experiment with new forms of interpretation, but all of them had been frustrated by the use of audio-guides over the past few years, relegating their role to one of a security guard and turning the palace into a strangely silent environment.

The intervention by WildWorks was described as an experience which is “like falling into a fairytale, albeit a sometimes sinister one.” They fused the epic with the intimate, connecting them to grand narratives. They told the stories of seven princesses who lived inside the palace and they arguably transformed Kensington Palace into a bewitching universe, creating a mysterious world full of gripping emotions. Installations included nests of clocks appearing down fireplaces, twisted trees straining upwards through floorboards, and ivy creeping out of brickwork like something out of Sleeping Beauty. They focussed on the people who lived in the palace, whose fairytale lives seldom ended in happy-ever-afters. The rooms became alive with whispers or song, or the quarrelling voices of Queen Anne and Lady Sarah Churchill. In the Queen's Gallery, Princess Diana could be glimpsed as a shadow gliding across the ceiling, on the King's Grand Staircase, a Vivienne Westwood dress stood in for the fleeing figure of George IV's daughter, Princess Charlotte, who could not escape death in childbirth at 21

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552 This was not the first time HRP collaborated with a Theatre group to work on the interpretation of the site. For example in 2009, the theatrical group Goat and Monkey played A Little Neck at Hampton Court, about Queen Anne Boleyn. Personal communication with John Barnes, Director of Conservation and Learning, Historic Royal Palaces, 2013
554 Ibid., p. 17
They named the King’s Gallery the *Gallery of War and Play*, reflecting its role as the place where wars were planned and where children played at soldier’s games. They placed hundreds of toy soldiers on the floor where William III played with his nephew, whose death, aged 11, spelled the end of the Stuart line (Figures 65 and 66). Audiences in this room could have intimate experiences while playing with the toy soldiers, but at the same time making wider connections with ideas around war and power. Performers popped up amid the installations, their coats and helmets with lights making them seem like a cross between curators and miners excavating history. WildWorks’ aim was to bring the building vividly to life, raising melancholy ghosts to remind visitors that palaces were inhabited by real people, with real emotions. The whole experience was a thought provoking immersive dreamscape. All the various elements came together in a digital storyboard that was constantly updated with new ideas, installation designs from artists, drawings from fashion designers and clips of the poems. Rather than trying to control all the different voices and visions, their aim was to create a world existing in different layers.

*Figure 65: WildWorks, The Enchanted Palace (2010-2012), Kensington Palace, London*
Mercedes Kemp explained how:

The objects that were there were absolutely central to the show […] In terms of the power of the objects, the emotional power was huge because there was the bed where the prince was born that people said was a changeling, for example... Another interesting object was the sculpture of the bust of Newton that made me want to find out what Newton’s relationship with the place was and the relationship with Queen Caroline... Also the dresses, some of them were made by designers like Vivienne Westwood. The dresses from the archives, the clothes of the children, the shoes had a lot of resonance (Figures 67 and 68).\textsuperscript{556}

The curators of Kensington Palace led the WildWorks team through the State Apartments, telling them stories of the objects and the people who lived there. For example, Sue Hill described how “Joanna opened the box and turned back the white tissue paper. A small dark dress lay revealed, the dress of a teenager, a girl in mourning for the death of her uncle. The colour had faded and mottled, but the dress sang with

\textsuperscript{556} Interview with Mercedes Kemp, 05/08/2013.
narrative- this was the dress that Princess Victoria wore on the day she became Queen, to meet her ministers and advisors. And somehow we understood a little more of the spirit of this woman, seeing how young and small she was, confronting the burdens of her future, but also seizing the freedoms it would give her.”557 Mercedes Kemp wrote:

I had immersed myself in the history of the palace, stalked its rooms, sat on windowsills for hours, listening to the voices of its dwellers, past and present, read letters, memoirs, journals, shopping lists… What I remember most is the unearthly golden light in the Cupola Room, and the clock ticking away palace time, and a density in the air that held within it the images of what might have been: the girl in her bed dreaming her princess dreams unaware that she’s already queen; the rebel tomboy leaping into the arms of love. Trailing her own mourning clothes behind her. In the highly regulated world of palace life these princesses yearned to run into the woods and dance.558

Sue Hill talking about the process stated that they “worked with fashion designers and, rather than giving them a worthy brief, we gave them a kind of jackdaw pack, so they had a list of possible dress titles; “a dress for dancing all night in the woods without permission”; “a dress to hide beauty”, provocations so that they had as much of an imaginative springboard as possible rather than us cramping their style. We also wrote a list for ourselves of the things you’re not supposed to do in a palace and then we tried to do all of them.”559 John Barnes, the director of conservation and learning, Historic Royal Palaces, wrote that “making it has been a challenge, an adventure and an experiment. It has brought artists from many communities into the palace to work with our own teams.”560 Sue stated that “it was clear from the beginning that this was no conventional procurement exercise, but a true collaboration, where neither partner knew the exact destination, but both agreed on the direction of travel.”561 Up until today, Historic Royal Palaces are still collaborating with site specific artists and theatre collectives to interpret their collections.

558 Ibid. p. 22
561 Ibid. p. 16
Between 2013 and 2015, Gaasbeek Castle in Belgium, inspired by the *Enchanted Palace* exhibition in London, also collaborated with WildWorks. They called their intervention at Gaasbeek *Once Upon a Castle*, once again turning the space into a “dream-scape” (Figures 69 - 75). They created a multidisciplinary experiment, combining history, art and stories. Three storylines were composed around the castle owners- Count of Egmond (1522-1568), Paul Arconati (1754- 1821) and Marquise Arconati Visconti (1840- 1923). The WildWorks team constructed a microcosmos around each of these characters merging a web between fact and fiction, combined with archival research, including letters, diaries and inventories which served as a starting point for the poetic narratives, exposing and adding layers of meaning. The director of the Castle Luc Vanackere explained that for him “Heritage is not a static or forever undisputed given, but a fluid in which each generation can discover new content and new forms of relevance.”

He described how visitors played a key role in the project, and how visitors deciphered the messages and the impulses they received according to their own context and frame of reference. He wanted to draw the public in on a voyage of discovery, through a dreamscape, made up of poetic installations, music and performance, inspired by the archives and the objects inside the castle. Mercedes Kemp, talking about the power of objects in creating the narratives for the intervention explained how:

…in one of the rooms there is a little alabaster plaque with the date of the marriage of Charles V with Isabella of Portugal and it’s a wedding gift and there is an image of the emperor himself and of Isabella of Portugal, … and she is holding her heart out to him like a little object. This is a tremendous powerful object that survived all these years and it is like a token of love and it is extraordinary. So, objects, yes, are hugely important, you know… When you pick on an object and you try to read its stories it becomes something else.

WildWorks promoted the work with the following words: “What if a castle could speak? What would it say and how would it say it? Kasteel van Gaasbeek is just outside of Brussels, it craves the company of humans but its memory is faulty. We are helping the

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563 Interview with Mercedes Kemp, 05/08/2013.
castle remember its long life by imagining the stories of three exceptional characters that lived life to the full many years ago. At the moment we are busy bringing life back to the old stones. Through a combination of installation, performance, music and storytelling we are coaxing the memories that are deeply ingrained in the fabric of the castle…"  

The project has been described as one in which the castle could once again play its role of *gesamtkunstwerk* to the full, a Neo-Baroque way of presenting its stories. In their hands, Gaasbeek Castle was turned into a living organism, with dramatic and intimate moments that alternated in a maze that played with different layers of time. “Thank you for creating a time machine. Five senses all stimulated at once. The emotions stirred our soul,” expressed one of the visitors.  

Luc Vanackere, the director of Gaasbeek Castle, following the writings of Foucault (1926-1984), described it as a “heteropy”- an intermediate or mediation place that is “different” and in which the continuity of daily life is interrupted. He described the experience as a go between the past and the present, as a labyrinth full of mirrors, in which you repeatedly encounter yourself and cross the thin line between “truth” and “invention”. A visit to such a place is therefore also something of a ritual, he wrote.  

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Figures 69-74: WildWorks, Once Upon a Time (2014), Gaasbeek Castle, Belgium
Liminality, the Liminoid and Self-Reflection

It’s a journey of discovery - even for the audience hopefully - within a space. But by the end you are not quite sure whether you have also been travelling inside yourself.567

Performance work exploring the limits of the body, as well as the influence from meditation techniques on reaching a state of mind that enables the performer to have more control over the body, actions and thoughts, is evident in the work of these collectives, especially in the works of Theatre Anon and the Rubberbodies Collective. They strive to reach a liminal state, allowing themselves to be transformed in the process.

During Theatre Anon’s site specific performance *Ospizio*, the audience participated by moving through the site and discovering its secrets as the story unravelled around it. They arguably also discovered more about their own identity and history. For example, the audience followed the character Magda on her journey and they met Paolo Passionei, who was Malta’s longest-serving Inquisitor, his secret mistress and their two daughters; the mad Mayor; the Monsignor; the hearthrob lawyer; Madam Sylvie, gatekeeper to the land of the forgotten; Di and Do, the perfect incompetents; Milly the cranky old woman; Rozita, who summoned ghosts whenever she sang; and Pandora who led the *Chorus of the Forgotten*. The audience followed a cast of eighty actors, performers and artists together with The Big Band Brothers. They created “a fascinating tale; one that was also spectacular, magical and hilarious – but also touching, because the story not only revealed the history of the Ospizio… but also told audiences something about themselves” (Figures 76-81).^568

Mario de Marco, Parliamentary Secretary for Tourism, the Environment and Culture of the time, wrote: “I was particularly struck with *Ospizio*… Set within the historic backdrop of Floriana’s bastions, incorporating a brass band that churned out Mediterranean tempos, the production was contemporary in feel yet universal in appeal. It made me, and all those fortunate enough to be present, proud of our heritage but also proud of our artistic present and future…”^569 Darrin Zammit Lupi, the events photographer wrote in his blog that: “All in all, a magical performance space… the audience, always on its feet, moved through the complex as the play progressed and much of the action took place among the audience… The final scene, in an underground chamber, where an artificial lake was created as the main acting area, was one of the most beautiful scenes I’ve ever watched…”^570

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Figures 76 - 77: Theatre Anon, *Ospizio* (2010), Floriana, Malta
Figures 78 - 81: Pierre Portelli, designs for the props of *Ospizio* (2010), Theatre Anon
In a similar manner like Theatre Anon, the Rubberbodies Collective also create magical worlds, in what is arguably a liminal/ liminoid state. They believe in the awakenings from within, of interior processes translated into external gestures. “The process of finding the secret self, emerging through the body of the performance… complete absorption, it is our lives; a deep, submerged reality that we have created through the collision, fusion, and self-destruction followed by growth… the Rubberbodies became a lifestyle, we were not only sharing a process but our lives. We had found a way into and out of the labyrinth. We knew this didn’t always happen…” they explained.

The collective communicates stories, memories and emotions through their bodily movements in their chosen historic sites. During the process they aim to unearth the multiplicities within themselves, constructing their identities while opening up to their roots. They claim to be de-constructing and re-elaborating themselves, by immersing themselves into a fantasy world, and a deviation out of the system. The Rubberbodies Collective from their inception emphasised a process of creation by digging deeper into themselves in order to bring out the essence. Body presence and movement is needed to ignite hidden feelings and memories, a fascination with the materiality, as well as the memory of objects, sculpting the air around the human body, with script dissolving into score and score into sound, they poetically explained.

“At Dartington College of Arts, in Devon, I followed the works of Robert Wilson, Peter Greenaway, Robert Lepage and Pina Bausch and I learnt that theatre is not all about script writing, but also about moving images and different realities,” expressed Jimmy Grima. Pina Bausch, as has already been mentioned, was highly inspirational to the collective. She is known for this very specific process, in which she went about creating emotions. She focused on the human condition and on the improvisation and the memory of the dancer’s own experiences by asking questions about for example their parents, childhood, feelings in specific situations, the use of objects, dislikes, injuries, aspirations. From the answers developed gestures, sentences, dialogues, little scenes. The dancers were free to choose any expressive mode, and it was with this freedom that the dancer felt secure in going deep within themselves. Her works often involved large multi-media productions, elaborate sets and eclectic music. She is known for her quote

in which she says “I am not interested in how people move but in what moves them.” She was also quoted saying: “I loved to dance because I was scared to speak. When I was moving I could feel.” In September 2009 the Rubberbodies Collective collaborated with a former student of the Tanztheatre Wuppertal Pina Bausch, the Greek dancer Athanasia Kanellopoulou, on a piece called *Penelope: Dust in Our Awakened Dreams*, performed at MITP Theatre in Valletta. The work has been described as a self-portrait, a poetic dance piece through which the body could speak, uncovering those fragments of the past burrowed deep in the vaults of memories. As she traced voices of the past, she was led through the labyrinth of her mind, until she arrived at the locket which held her burrowed memories. Physically contorted, she faced up to reality. The performance journey through past and present, was a pushing of restless memories into light.

The Rubberbodies Collective similarly expressed how “The process required honesty, a de-veiling of the self behind the techniques and methods, in order to take responsibility and ownership of the performance, an understanding that this was something that belonged to all of us and that each was responsible to pull a thread and sustain the tautness of the web.” They also expressed how “through this process something revelatory happens, an exterior force can steal into your private world and pluck fruit for exploration.” Jimmy Grima explained that they do not use text in their performances because they find text on stage limiting for what they are trying to achieve. He argued that when there is a dialogue on stage the focus is on the spoken word and viewers would dedicate all their energies to try and analyse those words and find associations. “I tried to write down the internal monologue, but now when I reread it, it makes no sense. The means of theatre is action, and sometimes putting actions in words make it primitive and uninteresting,” wrote Rebecca Camilleri.

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573 Mattei, E. (2011) Rubberbodies. A trajectory of an artist collective in Malta, BestPrint, Qrendi, p. ix

574 Ibid., p. 15

575 Ibid., p. 38
The work of the collective is about people... We try to portray a series of images that penetrate the viewers’ unconscious and play around with their memories, thoughts and senses... I think our work is a fusion of art disciplines which together creates an experience for the audience.576

The Rubberbodies Collective have described their work as “transforming actions into poetry through which the body speaks, unravelling the memories which are buried in the soul.” As they trace voices of the past, they lead audiences through the labyrinths of their minds, until arriving to the locket which holds their memories, explained Rebecca Camilleri.577 “Our work should be seen as a very long poem – not of words but of everything else...”578 explained Jimmy Grima in 2011. “The need to jump into a fantasy world of play, movement, scribbles and voices is a deviation out of the system, and a journey towards a common ground where expression can exist. As a collective, Rubberbodies ensures a future of creative freedom...”579

Their early productions explored mainly the themes of love and gender following discussions between the group about male dominated societies, domestic violence and women’s silences. Following their first performance entitled Grace u Rofflu performed at the MITP theatre in Valletta, the collective has continued to look for alternative spaces and collaborators. They document the processes, approaches and techniques undertaken to create their work. Discussing space and site specific performances in museums and historic sites with the collective for this research, Jimmy Grima expressed how they were looking for different spaces to work in and that when they found it, the space became a collaborator. “The stimulus to movement is energy coming from within, from the space, from those moving around us,” they explained.580 The use of space in the creative process developed from an initial function of a performative investigation, which became a platform for the unfolding of the performance. “Malta is full of historic sites… the first [site specific performance] was in 2010. We got permission to work in

577 Camilleri, R. (2012) Woven Threads. Recounting the creative process of Penelope: Dust in our awakened dreams, the Rubberbodies Collective, Malta
578 Grima, J. (2011) Interviewed by Baldacchino, L.G. in “Collectively. Artistically” in The Times of Malta, Malta, Tuesday 5 July
579 Ibid.
the old docks, in Dock number 1 built by the British. It was a huge space and we were working on a piece… but as soon as we entered the space, and this is very important when working in historic sites: the space took over.” The performance was called 100 and it was sited in Cottonera in an industrial abandoned building by the sea:

The work was about empowering the female, because I believe we live in a super macho society in Malta… There were two seasons: summer and winter in the performance. It was divided into two parts: 25 minutes for summer and 25 minutes for winter. Summer was the first season, it was very slow and passive and nearly nothing happened. Then the second season was winter and we introduced a masculine figure. And we had tragedy and all the dark sides of this world. At the end they destroyed the male figure and the female figure re-emerged. What was beautiful is that we worked in a space which was originally populated by around 3000 men… the docks…hehe… There were still graffiti. It was closed for maybe 60 years… don’t know exactly… but this feeling was still resonating. No theatre will give you this opportunity!”

During the following two years in 2011 and 2012 they collaborated with the Malta Maritime Museum in Birgu, creating performances inspired by the collections preserved there and by the Mediterranean Sea. “We wanted to create a performance about the stories lying at the bottom of the grand harbour, like the shipwrecks, men never returning and women waiting for their sailor men…” explained Jimmy Grima. White Sea was performed at the theatre at St. James Cavalier in Valletta, Lore of the Sea. Immemorial Waters was performed at the Malta Maritime Museum, Birgu in 2011 (Figures 82 - 86), and Old Salt was performed outdoors by the Grand Harbour in Birgu, in 2012 (Figures 87- 88).

Lore of the Sea at the Malta Maritime Museum was a three part event. It featured a tour by the museum’s curator Liam Gauci, a dramatised performance, and a drinks reception after the show, on a balcony overlooking the marina in Birgu. The performance was oriented around selected artifacts from the Museum’s reserve collection, placing them

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581 Interview with Jimmy Grima, 12/032013.
582 They collaborated with the curator Liam Gauci at the Malta Maritime Museum in Birgu, the maritime archaeologist Timmy Gambin and myself, who a few years back was also working at the Malta Maritime Museum.
inside the performance’s narrative, that had been devised and scripted in response to the stories recounted by the museum curators. “We projected all over the place and the space changed its dynamics. We chose off white for costumes because like that the objects stood out. We projected the diaries, old maps, battle scenes, paintings… this obviously gave a different dimension to the audience…” Jimmy Grima explained, when asked to elaborate on the scenography. Talking about the process of this particular performance he also recounted the following:

I went to the museum… and for me it was fantastic… It reminded me that you don’t have to look for inspiration: it’s there and it’s shouting at you… Our process in a nutshell starts like this: we sit around a table and if we are doing a piece about the sea, then I tell them to write ten words about the sea. So if we have five people then we have fifty words. Then we categorise them into characters, situations and places and we have some sort of an idea, like cats, port, captains, females, seagulls.

Then we went with this material to Liam [the curator] and we asked him to back it up with historical facts. So he came up with stories from diaries and so on. So they were not all invented, it was a fusion of fiction with history…The museum gave us the key to the reserve collection. We went in the five of us: a choreographer, an actress, a sound artist, a prop artist and myself, and I asked them to choose two objects each … The objects had multiple purposes. First we built the story around them. Then we worked with them, they were our props and our set…we exposed the works… you know what I mean… not behind glass with a label anymore but naked in the middle of the space with us… 583

The two choreographers Ira Melkonyan and Rebecca Camilleri, recounted the following about their experience and the process of this work:

Working in a museum was a new way of working for us because of the subject of the museum. First you enter, you watch and you become the spectator and then the creative work as a performance comes later. With the theatre you

583 Interview with Jimmy Grima, 12/032013.
don’t have this opportunity. It is a blank space. In the museum the subject is predetermined… it gives you pictures in your mind. Speaking about the props, we were very lucky because they let us use their objects from the reserve collection. Even working together with the curator Liam, he is a very good storyteller. It makes a difference, when you have a curator telling you stories… it gave us a lot of energy… there is a big difference when you have objects inside a glass cabinet with a label and then having a curator telling you stories… the stories further enhanced our imagination… we create scenes in our heads, we each give our own interpretations. I would have a scene in my head and Bec would have a scene in her head and we don’t always share them and in this sense we give the audience more freedom to interpret our movements because they are very visual and there are no words. They can give any interpretation they want and sometimes when you are given little you have to fill in the gaps in between. This can be very exciting if you are ready for it, but for example, for some people they would say ‘oh but there are too many gaps.’ But it comes from us… that’s how we work.

We work on how to translate scenes in our heads into movement. And we don’t tell each other like ‘Becky this is what am thinking and this is how I will move…’ I have my own thoughts and sometimes I share but not always. We would have a common intention…like we would know the scene is on a ship but then we have our own interpretation of how to do it… we work with words or phrases if anything but not a script… we bring in our background, our past… we leave it in a semi abstract state so that the audience fills in the gaps…this is also maybe related to dance because we don’t usually use a script for dance…we played many roles but also that of sailors.

Basically we also played with the issue of gender, we had corsets and sometimes a moustache. We shifted from male to female…we learnt a lot especially from the museum’s collections and stories…on how the sailors dressed and even to handle ropes and carry ropes and heavy boxes. This is the work of building a character- we learnt a lot…you can’t really understand something unless you experience it yourself…I think its maybe easier to speak about the economic crisis…but feelings we think are better expressed through
movement, visually… emotions like love and loss… we are not providing the narrative and script, but there is a lot of background information and research involved in the process… so yes I guess I would call the group conceptual because there are stories behind the visuals and the movements…  

Mario Sammut explained how “the actors don’t move according to the music… they move according to the story board, so the music works the other way round: the music is built according to the movements and storyboard… Lore of the Sea at the Maritime Museum was with headphones. Beck and Ira never heard the music, not during and not even before the performance” He also expressed that “the Maritime Museum gave us so much information and it helped in the creation of the music. Liam was great, and he helped in creating moods. For example, the doll’s house and its story of the little girl and her father who built her the doll’s house before he died at sea… I remember the moods of these stories and that’s what also helps me create my music for the performance.”

Jimmy Grima, stated that their main aim is to provoke audiences, they want them to question “where they came from, who they are and what the purpose of their life is,” because he feels that contemporary society “is very passive and sometimes too lazy to think…. Through the sounds and movements of the performers the audience is transported,” he argued. Using a post-modern technique of fragmenting the narrative, he insisted that “it is important to leave stories open for different interpretations… people are used to asking: what is the moral of the story? People are searching for that... but we are not interested in that... we are interested in provoking the mind. We want people to go home and think.”

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584 Interview with Rebecca Camilleri and Ira Melkonyan, 16/03/2013.
585 Interview with Mario Sammut, 14/03/2013
586 Interview with Jimmy Grima, 12/03/2013.
Malta Maritime Museum, Birgu
The Rubberbodies latest productions also explored sound in temple sites and the liminal effects on the subconscious, in collaboration with the Malta Archaeology Museum. In 2012, the Collective produced a silent concert entitled Oracle at the c.6000 year old UNESCO World Heritage temple site known as Hagar Qim. “The performance was about religions, it was about people who were condemning religions… there was the Pope, a Jew, and an Indian… it was about religions brainwashing humanity, and how humanity rebelled against religions and these brainwashing entities… we divided it into the dark age and the golden age” explained Mario Sammut.587

He also explained588 how he was also collaborating with the Archaeology Museum, experimenting with EEG devices to test how the brain reacts at certain frequencies at the UNESCO World Heritage Hypogeum known as Mnajdra in Tarxien. Ancient chanting could have influenced temple design, as the sound waves could have taken worshippers to a higher state of consciousness. The site consists of a multi-levelled complex of caves and ritual chambers. Acoustics may well have been part of a widespread religious tradition, used intentionally to facilitate an altered state of consciousness.589 The Old Temples Study Foundation suggested that sound and a desire to harness its effects may have been equally important as vision in the design of these ancient temples.

Reaching beyond the scope of traditional archaeology, a multi-disciplinary approach has opened a new dimension for the study of the ancient world. “We may be hitting on one of those ‘lost secrets,’ said Linda Eneix, President of the OTS Foundation.590 There is a small niche, in what we call ‘The Oracle Chamber’, and if someone with a deep voice speaks inside, the voice echoes all over the Hypogeum. A consortium called the PEAR proposition: Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research, pioneers in the field of archo-acoustics, merging archaeology and sound science found that the ancient chambers sustained strong resonance at a sound frequency between 95 and 120 hertz. The ancient temples in Malta were found to match the same pattern of resonance.

587 Jimmy Grima describing how he collaborated with the curators for the event recounted the following: “When we produced the silent concert at the World Heritage Site, [reputably] the oldest freestanding temple in the world, Hagar Qim… we learnt from our previous mistakes. We set up an agreement between Heritage Malta and the Rubberbodies… We wrote down the roles and responsibilities of both parties. It was a very sensitive area, but it was a success story.” Interview with Jimmy Grima, 12/032013.
588 Ibid.
589 Ibid.
590 Ancient Temple Architects May Have Ben Chasing a Buzz From Sound Waves, in ViewZone http://www.viewzone.com/archeosound.html [retrieved 19/10/2013]
Sound scientist Prof. Daniel Talma of the University of Malta explained that at certain frequencies, you have standing waves that emphasize each other and other waves that de-emphasize each other, creating a certain trance, and this was already being used thousands of years ago.\textsuperscript{591} Dr. Ian Cook of UCLA published findings in 2008 of an experiment in which regional activity in a number of volunteers was monitored by EEG through different resonance frequencies. Findings indicated that at 110 hz the patterns of activity over the prefrontal cortex abruptly shifted, resulting in a relative deactivation of the language centre and a temporary switching from left to right sided dominance related to emotional processing. People regularly exposed to resonant sound in the frequency of 110 and 111 hz would have been “turning on” an area of the brain that bio-behavioral scientists believe relates to mood, empathy and social behaviour.

\textbf{Conclusion}

When Felix Barret, the creative director of Punchdrunk was asked what vital elements are needed to create parallel universes, he replied that “it’s the fusion of all the disciplines and the belief that no one disciple is more important than another; the light is as important as the sound, which is as important as the action, which is as important as the space...”\textsuperscript{592} He also explained that it is “through sound, through light, through proximity to performers, through lack of performers, through levels of threat and tension around a building; it’s a richly decorated tapestry that’s there, gently pointing them towards moments of interest.”\textsuperscript{593} Reaching a liminal state of mind through the fusion of the arts during rituals, spectacles and performances, was arguably a technique used since time immemorial and it is now once again arguably being experimented with in a critical manner by these collectives.

Their work is about bringing performance to the public and arguably inspiring their audiences to realise that humanity can have common elements all over the world, past and present, and experiencing emotions and memories of love, loss, anger, hatred, fear, hope and curiosity. Watson argues that the entwinement of reason and emotion means

\textsuperscript{593} \textit{Ibid.} p. 162
that many of our specific emotional responses are learned and that some of them are conditioned by our cultural background. She cites Ikegami who comments that attempts to study the rational and emotional mind separately are doomed to failure... Our current emotional repertoires are a product of human consciousness and the cultures such consciousness produces.” Middleton in 1989 concluded that “The organisation of our emotions bears the stamp of time and place.” Watson argues that there is general consensus that emotions are regulated by communities and groups, and that they are time and situation-specific and can depend on cultural constructions of the past, on place, space, and the general environment. This, however, still requires further research.

Building up on constructivist views, stories are not life or truth they are always constructed. Stories are developed from the interplay between self, others and the world. Museums and historic palaces build stories of humanity, and it is these stories, entwined with their own personal stories that performers portray. The work of the collectives under study focuses on re-discovering a community’s identity and roots, by digging into their inner self. They do not propose a factual narrative and solutions to social problems and they do not re-enact the past. They attempt to provoke thoughts and discussions, perhaps also providing a voice to otherwise muted histories and memories, allowing audiences to participate and have their own perspectives. They strive to make visible the invisible through a collective effort by using meditative techniques in an attempt to reach higher states of consciousness.

They collaborate with museum curators and use their bodies to tell the stories of the local communities of the spaces they intervene in. They listen to the stories of communities and intertwine their memories with their own stories to form their multi-narratives and their multi-layered spaces. They take their audiences on mental and physical journeys into alternative universes, provoking them to re-awaken their memories, creating atmospheric spaces for dreaming.

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To conclude, four main themes have emerged in this chapter:

1. The collectives create multi-narratives and multi-layers of history, allowing participants to make their own sense of the stories and add on their own memories to the narrative - thus building the narrative in a community.

2. There is activation and stimulation with the help of performers and installations

3. There is Agency - activating passive audiences through multisensory and immersive atmospheres.

4. Museums and historic sites are transformed into spaces of dialogue, ethically creating awareness and contemplation, to promote hope, peace, love and an understanding of humanity in an intercultural, global manner.

By fragmenting the grand powerful narratives, and by including the stories of communities, these theatrical collectives produce meaning collectively. They exploit each other’s co-presence in the creative process in time and space by experimenting with the body and the mind, the relationship between other bodies, memories of museum objects and the historic space. They have created their own strong language of artistic expression, drawing inspiration from memories and from working with others. Their jointly improvised activities induce the participants’ creative potential, which on the emotional level perhaps overcomes the imperfections of verbal communication, experiencing a new system of languages. These artist collectives transmit inspiration, hope and change by listening to people, making stories relevant to contemporary societies, and by emphasising collaboration, through immersive performances. It is argued in this research that there is much that museums and historic sites can learn from contemporary theatre collectives.

The museums and historic sites where the collectives performed were re-conceptualised, from the “white cube” model of displaying art, to a studio or experimental “laboratory.” Their work is open-ended, interactive, and resistant to closure, often appearing to be “work-in-progress” rather than completed. Their work seems to derive from a creative misreading of post-structuralist theory: rather than the interpretations of a work of art
being open to continual reassessment, the work of art itself is argued to be in perpetual flux.

Nicolas Bourriaud argued that art of the 1990s took as its theoretical horizon “the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.” Meaning is elaborated collectively rather than in the privatized space of individual consumption. Rather than a discrete, portable, autonomous work of art that transcends its context, this type of art is entirely beholden to the contingencies of its environment and audience. Bourriaud, while attempting to distance contemporary work from that of previous generations, sees as a main difference the shift in attitude toward social change: instead of a “utopian” agenda, today’s artists seek only to find provisional solutions in the here and now; instead of trying to change their environment, artists today are simply “learning to inhabit the world in a better way”; instead of looking forward to a future utopia, this art sets up functioning “microtopias” in the present. Bourriaud summarizes this new attitude vividly in one sentence: “It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows.” Mercedes Kemp, for example, stated that their performance called The Beautiful Journey held at the Devonport Dockyard, was “a story of hope. Not idle hope, but hope effected by action. It isn’t about buying a lottery ticket and sitting there hoping it’s going to win, it’s about going out there and doing something.”

597 Ibid. p. 13
598 Ibid. p. 45
Chapter Six

Conclusion: The Baroque Palace Re-imagined

I’ve explored the Baroque as a transhistorical state that’s extended beyond the historical confines of the seventeenth century - a period traditionally associated with a Baroque order of vision… The Neo-Baroque combines the visual, the auditory and the textual in ways that parallel the dynamism of seventeenth century Baroque form, but that dynamism is expressed in technologically and culturally different ways.600

The Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta, like various other palaces worldwide, in the 21st century has not used its full potential in telling stories in an engaging manner, like it once did during the Baroque age. Today, it presents its collections and stories in a dispassionate way, relying heavily on its text and objects within a narrative framework. As Watson argues, this is a system of presentation that owes much to the original scientific mission of museums, which affected all its disciplinary interests and which dates back to well before the arrival of a range of media.601

Watson argues that emotions have been neglected in the theory and practice of museums and galleries.602 Curators, designers, academics, and museum education staff have spent considerable time attending to the aesthetics of both the object and the display but little to the emotions beyond the aesthetic experience which the galleries engender. Watson cites Pekarik (2002) who calls for more attention to be paid to what visitors feel, arguing that it is this that they remember after their visit.603 As Austin also points out:

if your body schema is unprovoked and a narrative is not developed you remain passive and unchanged. A successful narrative environment will prompt embodied perception, physical action and intellectual change or transformation, this may be described as learning or discovery in an exhibition context but could also be

602 Ibid.
603 Ibid.
described as a rewriting of your sense of self. 604

The initial aim of this thesis was to expose and further explore diverse ways of interpreting the Baroque Grand Master's Palace in Valletta, by peeling off its various layers through extensive research. It has questioned how the palace was and can be conceived in different worlds and contexts, and by different audiences. It has questioned its interpretation now that it is open as a public museum. It has also opened up a conversation about what it could be, whilst also remaining true to the performative nature of the Baroque, touching on the themes of emancipation and empathy, engaging with theories of consciousness and performance.

Baroque artists created theatrical worlds in which the observer arguably became an active participant, absorbed into the spectacle through the emotions. Ross discusses in length the Treatise on the Passions of the Soul published in 1649 by the philosopher Rene Descartes, in France, showing how influential the idea of persuasion by expressing emotions as well as appealing to them through the arts was during the Baroque period, and arguably still is today. 605 As observed in the Introduction and in Chapter One, and as Foucault had described it, the Baroque was the age of the play, of dreams and visions, the stage in which poetic dimension of language was defined by metaphor, simile and allegory. As Skrine convincingly argued, the world was seen as a stage, and the universal theatre of mankind remained dominant throughout the Baroque age. This research aimed at understanding how Baroque concepts have taken on hybrid forms and how they are being translated into contemporary visual performances and artistic installations that have the power to create atmospheric experiences which provoke audiences to contemplate and question. My interest was in how these performances could potentially lead to the creation of an open, reflective and critical imagination rather than one that is narrow-minded, pre-formed or inflexible.

The Baroque palace, like the theatre, deployed the extraordinary impact of the fusion of art, music and design to create a subliminal effect on its audiences. This thesis has

605 Ross, S. (1984) argues how Descartes was a big influence on the French artist Charles Le Brun (1619-1690). The first and foremost task which was ascribed to the art of painting in 17th century France was a political one: glorifying the reign of Louis XIV. He insisted that the arts could leave eternal marks of his power and teach posterity the history of his grand actions.
questioned if in its contemporary displays the Baroque palace, through its liminal and liminoid potential, can become an agent of transformation and social change. It has also questioned how its contemporary interpretation can enlighten its audiences to re-think its heritage. It has questioned if the palace can act as a forum for critical contemporary artistic dialogues. It has questioned if the Grand Master’s Palace can present multi-narratives and a critical production of knowledge. The research has questioned if Baroque performances still resonate in Malta’s contemporary art and performances, and if they have taken on hybrid forms. It has questioned if Maltese contemporary artists and performers are responding to the Baroque, and if they have spaces to voice their concerns in the local and international art scene. It has analysed their processes and journeys through in-depth qualitative interviews and observation methods, exposing their methodologies, inspirations, techniques and concerns.

In order to be able to answer these questions, this research has perceived the palace and its surroundings as a stage, the painting and sculpture collections as well as the tapestries as scenography, the furniture as props and the people inhabiting the space as actors. It has questioned if there is such a thing as authenticity, when “all the world’s a stage. And all the men and women are merely players.” What remains of the Baroque in the twenty-first century is arguably a fragmented multi-layered grand spectacle, which has taken on hybrid forms and which has spilt out into the streets. Many Catholic processions and feasts, spectacles, and theatrical events celebrated during the Baroque age have come down to contemporary times through traditions. This has provided the Maltese islands with a rich intangible heritage which reflects particularly the Catholic religious calendar. The Baroque, as has been observed in Chapter One, had an obsession with rituals, spectacles and ceremonies. The material objects collected for their rituals arguably exerted power, and it is this power which is questioned in this thesis and if we are able to enhance it or resist it, and perhaps also reverse it and transform it through the “liminal and liminoid” in contemporary performance.

Having examined key elements in both the Baroque and the contemporary periods, this thesis has conceived both the past and the present as “theatres.” The use of performances to pass on concepts, as well as the liminal and liminoid effects produced

606 William Shakespeare (1623), in “As You Like it.”
by such activities is arguably present in both worlds. It has taken into consideration the complex theme of the museum as a dream-space, which enhances journeys into memories of the past. The concept of meta-reality, mixing authenticity with fiction, through the creation of community theatre, which can enable visitors to engage both emotionally and intellectually, has also been explored, with the aim being to generate agency and resonance with the world, and to provoke change. Museums today can use audio-visuals, installations and performance to stimulate, provoke and to engender a strong intellectual and emotional impact, particularly when a point needs to be made about human suffering, discrimination or the injustices of the “other.”

In “Re-staging Histories and Identities”, Beier-de Haan writes that over the past thirty years or so there has been a shift towards cultural and micro-history, in which the emphasis in History Museums is less on facts and more on the description of contexts and emotions, and in which the scientific analysis of sources is accompanied by inspiration, empathy and understanding. History Museums are shifting from displaying grand histories of nation states to focusing on everyday themes, experiences and memories. Autobiographical documents and personal testimonies are also becoming an important part of allowing for multiple interpretations rather than a single authoritative account of the past. Hooper-Greenhill, similarly, writing about the post-museum discussed the evolutionary state of museums, of moving out into the spaces of the communities that they serve, focusing on processes and experiences. The essence of the modern museum as the classifier, authoritative holder, producer of knowledge, source of the right inspiration and dominant narrative is now arguably becoming something of the past.

Most of the questions raised in the beginning of this research journey, regarding the interpretation of the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta, have been answered in this thesis, however, much more remains to be explored. The Baroque palace is very complex, however, it arguably does have the potential to act as a forum for critical contemporary artistic dialogues. It can do this by inviting contemporary conceptual artists, such as the ones explored in this research, to create fragmented performative immersive worlds capable of decentring and activating its participants in an attempt at

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enhancing higher states of consciousness. Much more research can be undertaken on this topic, however, especially in the exploration of empathy and emotions inside museums and historic sites.

This conclusion offers a brief summary of the thesis argument, of how the questions presented in the Introduction have been answered and demonstrates the significance of the research within the context of existing scholarship. It will consider how and to what extent the project aims set out in the Introduction were achieved and how the research has contributed to museological knowledge. It provides an overview of the findings from previous chapters, contributing to an understanding of how a hybrid form of the Baroque in contemporary installations and performance used in historic sites and museums can be used as a reflexive tool. It also returns to Victor Turner’s theory on liminality and the liminoid (introduced in Chapter Two), to elaborate on the experiences of the case studies. It will explore how the neo-Baroque can be analysed in relation to Victor Turner’s theory on liminality and the liminoid with a particular emphasis on transformation and to the creation of community theatre generating social change. Finally, it will explore ways in which this research might be developed in the future and build on the evidence represented in the case studies, identifying a number of potential directions and questions.

**Thesis Argument: from the Baroque to the Neo-Baroque**

To name an object is to suppress three-fourths of the enjoyment of the poem, which is composed of the pleasure of guessing little by little: to suggest… there is the dream.608

This thesis began by looking back at the political and poetic spectacles surrounding the Baroque palace of the Grand Master in Valletta, to be able to move forward. This thesis has questioned if the grand-narratives which the objects, the space and its surroundings currently display are still appropriate to a contemporary globalised audience, when taking post-modern, as well as constructivist theories into consideration. The

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historiographical discussion in Chapter One analysed the rhetorical spectacles inside and around the Grand Master’s palace promoting mainly Catholicism. Political, propagandistic and triumphal military overtones have journeyed across the centuries, through the scenography inside the Palace in Valletta and also through the spectacles and ceremonies which spilt out from the Palace walls and theatres into the streets, the harbours and into village life.

The history represented inside Catholic Baroque palaces was often that of the martyr versus the tyrant. Many of the walls, as well as the ceremonies inside and surrounding the Grand Master’s Palace arguably became a martyrrology dedicated to the Knights who sacrificed their lives during the Sieges against the Ottoman Turks. The Grand Master also arguably acted out his role as Christ during the various rituals held across the islands, such as during the possessio - the yearly ritual celebrating the possession of the island by the Grand Master. The Order of St. John’s justification of its existence was to defend Europe from its Muslim foe. Heroic and victorious depictions of battles, as well as scenes reminiscent of the afterlife and the new world, constituted much of the scenography for the spectacles.

Communities participated in allegorical spectacles which passionately provoked emotions of terror and anger, but also promoted martyrdoms, heroism, fame and bravery. The Knight’s patron saint, St. John the Baptist, as well as the dramatic visuals of martyrdoms of other saints, was glorified as the first fallen Knights and their images would arguably provide audiences with memorable and even mnemonic form. The scenography and the spectacles expressed human passions through gestures, derived from ancient rhetoric and poetic theory to move the soul, serving political and didactic purposes. The archival documents consulted for this research are testimony of such spectacles and so is the decoration inside palaces and churches, and the intangible heritage observed in today’s several Catholic feasts held across the islands.

As has been argued in Chapter One, Neo-Platonic interpretive principles structured the creative imagination and helped found the ceremonial festive expression of mythic-political values in symbolic patterns. The emphasis on moving images for the revelation of higher knowledge arguably placed language as an inferior tool. As Kristiaan Aercke argued in Gods of Play: Baroque Performances as Rhetorical Discourse, these events were intricately connected in time and space, by the presence of the participants, as well
as by the deployment of related symbolical - allegorical schemata.\textsuperscript{609}

The victory of the Great Siege in Malta had great propaganda value, and in this way the Christian ideal kept alive the fear of Islam. The Roman clergy propagated the belief that Christendom was under the constant threat of attack. Sermons contained several references to Turkish cruelties, Masses were said against the Turks and prayers were offered for salvation from heathen attacks. Whatever the true magnitude of the Ottoman threat, fear of it in the Christian mind was and still is real, as observed in carnival parades, village feasts and other religious feasts throughout the year.

The thesis argument followed with an analysis of artistic interventions within Baroque buildings in Malta, and elsewhere such as historic royal palaces in the UK, exploring notions of subversion of the institutional message and the ways history can be reconceptualised and questioned within frameworks of established and authoritarian structures such as churches, palaces and even bomb shelters, using the concepts of theatricality and performativity. The interventions of the artist collective START in Malta, as discussed in Chapter Four, inspired by postmodern theories and the writings of Lyotard on the sublime, as well as by the writings of Joseph Beuys on social sculpture, questioned national narratives, as well as the impact of religion on society. Their work had activist and institutional critique agendas, aiming to morally and ethically strive for positive creative transformations within the local Maltese community. They focused on raising questions rather than attempting to supply answers. Their provocations arguably stimulate viewers with confidence to contemplate and to react. Jacques Ranciere had observed in his essay on the Problems and Transformations in Critical Art, that:

> In its most general formula, critical art intends to raise consciousness of the mechanisms of domination in order to turn the spectator into a conscious agent in the transformation of the world… [however] The exploited have rarely had the need to have the laws of exploitation explained to them. Because it’s not the existing state of affairs that nurtures the submission of the oppressed, but a lack of confidence in their own capacity to transform it.\textsuperscript{610}


More recently, the START collective, as well as the other theatre collectives under study: Kneehigh, The Rubberbodies Collective, Punchdrunk, Theater Anon and WildWorks, however, seem to have opted for collaboration with institutions rather than critiquing them. Like the open forms of the Baroque these collectives’ search for immersion, kinetic movement and illusory effects, inducing the spectators to shift their positions continuously, in order to see their works in constantly new aspects, as if they were in a perpetual state of transformation. They encourage the participation of their audiences and through their multi-narratives and the fragmented appeal of the emotions and memories, change arguably occurs internally through reflection, creating a sense of hope. For example, as has been observed in Chapter Five, when the theatre collective Kneehigh was given permission by the UN to put on their show for the 3 Island Project in Cyprus, actors and audiences from either side of the Green Line came together, projecting a sense of hope.

The collectives under study undeniably use poetic openness, similarly used during the Baroque, to stimulate emotional and intellectual responses from their audiences. Umberto Eco in his essay entitled The Poetics of the Open Work611 argued that Baroque manifestation is to be seen as the first clear manifestation of modern culture and sensitivity, because man for the first time opted out of the canon of authorised responses and found that he was faced by a world in a fluid state which required creativity on his part. Eco argued that the poetic treatises on “maraviglia” sought to establish humanity’s inventive role, seeing the work of art as a potential mystery to be solved, a role to fulfil, and a stimulus to quicken the imagination. Whenever we read poetry there is a process by which we try to adapt our personal world to the emotional world proposed by the text. The poetry sets out to stimulate the private world of the audience so that he or she can draw from inside some deeper response that mirrors the subtler resonances underlying the poem. As Eco further analysed

The poetics of the “work in movement” sets in motion a new cycle of relations between the artist and his audience, a new mechanics of aesthetic perception, a different status for the artistic product in contemporary society. It opens a new page in sociology and in pedagogy, as well as a new chapter in the history of art. It

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poses new practical problems by organising new communicative situations. In short, it installs a new relationship between the contemplation and the utilisation of a work of art.612

The Baroque arguably continued and continues to have life, despite being codified specifically in relation to the rough temporal confines of the seventeenth century. Throughout the twenty-first century, Baroque form continues to alter its identity as a style in diverse areas of the arts. It restlessly continues to move on to new metamorphic states and cultural contexts, while being nurtured by a culture that is attracted to the visual and sensorial seductiveness that is integral to Baroque form. Perceptually, sensorially and intellectually the interventions presented in the case studies of this thesis arguably engage their audiences in like-minded ways.

**Contribution to Knowledge**

The principal contribution this thesis has made is the argument that both the spectacles surrounding the Baroque Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta and the contemporary performances produced by the collectives under discussion create liminal and liminoid states, transporting participants into worlds beyond the visible, with the potential to transform. The theoretical analyses of this thesis, moved the discussion to the argument that by reaching a liminal state, an immersive performance is capable of unveiling the invisible, uncovering a reality which is in the world, but which is also beyond the world. Through the performative fusion, the liminal and liminoid states arguably stir the emotions and create reflexivity, agency and empathy.

When analysing the installation and theatre collectives for this research, certain similarities with how the concept of liminality works, as described by Van Gennep (1909) and Victor Turner (1967), arguably surfaced. For example, as has been observed in Chapter Five, the main aim of the performances by the Rubberbodies Collective is arguably to create contemplative rituals. For example, their performance held in 2011 at the Malta Maritime Museum in Birgu, *The Lore of the Sea*, had a three stage process:

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1. **Separation**- Orientation and curiosity enhanced by the curator’s museum tour. This acts as a threshold, assisting the journey from real life into the dream space.

2. **Liminal**- The in between dream-space. Performance art inspired by museum objects and stories which are merged with the actor’s and the audience’s memories, creating multi narratives, enhanced by the choreographies and the audio visuals. The performers, through their repetitive movements, the new knowledge gained from the museum archives and curators, fused with their own personal memories, experienced a journey into the inner self, arguably reaching higher states of consciousness. Thus, arguably also reaching liminal and liminoid states. This could be similar to the experience in religious and Baroque courtly rituals, however, also fusing their emotions with their intellect.

3. **Re-assimilation**- Reception on the balcony of the museum overlooking the marina and the Grand Harbour in Birgu: A space for contemplation, reflection and evaluation. Confused and intrigued the audience and the participants tried to figure out what they have just experienced. They asked questions and discussed.

This process is arguably still in its experimental/laboratory phase and much more research as well as experiments and evaluations ought to be conducted. The above process has also the potential to influence museum and palace display and interpretation by consciously perceiving them as a “stage.” Rituals can be woven into museum experiences, by involving communities to participate in the construction of fragmented multi-narratives. This study illuminated how the fusion of disciplines, creating liminal states, have the potential to enhance critical engagement. Embedding the outcomes of this research into exhibition planning and design can contribute further to the experiential and transformative element of museology.

Think Tanks based on this research, with museum studies and history of art university students having onsite practice based sessions at museum galleries in England and in Malta, led to successful results in gallery design and narrative planning, perceiving the gallery as a stage. Masters students at the School of Museum Studies in Leicester in 2013 and 2014, during the Think Tanks based on this research, had the opportunity to rethink the design and the interpretation of the galleries at New Walk Museum in Leicester using the concepts of performance and theatricality. The History of Art
Students at the University of Malta had the opportunity to re-think the design and interpretation of the galleries inside the Cathedral Museum in Mdina and at the Inquisitors Palace in Birgu, in 2015. They used the storyboard technique, in a similar manner the Theatre Collectives interviewed for this research do, and they were asked to re-design the galleries using immersive, and performative techniques, keeping in mind the idea of presenting multi-narratives. It would be useful to have similar Think Tanks with students from other faculties, such as from the architecture and the theatre and performance departments to enhance interdisciplinarity.

This thesis has synthesised material which has not been brought together in previous studies. It has taken an interdisciplinary approach and as has been discussed earlier has contributed to knowledge by mainly building upon the anthropological and performance theoretical writings of Victor Turner. This research has analysed Turner’s findings in relation to the literature on museum studies and Baroque studies. It also undertook an ethnographic research method whereby contemporary performers and artists were observed and questioned in a dialogue regarding the processes of their work in museums and historic sites, which has also not been done before. The gap in the museum studies scholarly literature regarding the processes in reaching the liminal in museums and historic palaces has been addressed in this thesis by focusing on the processes of Malta and UK based artists and performers in creating liminal atmospheres.

The interdisciplinary overlap between anthropology and drama, as well as the focus on transformation and reflexivity makes Victor Turner’s theory provide ample potential for application in museum studies. The concept of liminality has endured in performance studies and has the potential for wider usage. As has been discussed in Chapter Two, Turner believed that ritual provided communities with a significant social function, to dispel conflict and schism and to mend quarrels. Throughout his career, he investigated rituals, and he argued that the establishment of codes and etiquette imposed from the institutions “above” can be reversed, and their reversals can be observed during the spectacles reflecting the struggles and the feelings of the people, as, for example, during carnivals. Through their anti-structural provocations and dialogues with historic sites, the works of the twentyfirst century creatives in question, similarly have a reflective and a transformational potential. Their interventions could potentially transform museums and historic sites into theatres of critical engagement, where participants can reconnect
with the self and the other.

Turner argued that there is in theatre something of the investigative and judgmental of law and something of the sacred, mythic, even supernatural of religion. This study has revealed how theatre can act as a meta-commentary on society - like mirrors held up to society that probe and analyze the axioms and assumptions of the social structure. The same can be argued about museums and historic sites, as they too mirror life and strive to further understand the human condition. Participation in spectacles in museums and historic sites may be understood as a cultural performance, in which people either consciously or unconsciously seek to have their sense of self in relation to others and to other times reinforced. People arguably participate in these events to “feel”, as they invest emotionally in the understanding of the past and the contemporary. The creation of emotions and experiences by the theatre and installation artists undertaken for this study, play on the memories of their audiences to assist in the expression of identity and belonging.

Drawing upon Schechner’s arguments that for theatre to be relevant it has to reflect what is currently going on in society, and the changes society goes through, this thesis has investigated the concepts of community theatre and immersion. Theatre needs to touch the real lives of theatre people, to be able to touch the lives of other people. Schechner in his practice aimed at producing theatre with a ritual function, encouraging participants to feel they were building a community. Similarly the theatre collectives interviewed for this research involved the community in the rituals they performed and in building up their narratives.

The thesis has also built upon the writings of Carol Duncan, who argued that museum spaces, like temples, offer to their audiences the opportunity to reach a higher state of consciousness. This research took her writings a step further, as it aimed to demonstrate through the case studies presented, how the fusion of disciplines applied by the contemporary artists and performers have immersive neo-Baroque qualities leading to a liminal state in museums and historic sites. Carol Duncan did not specifically look at the experiences of contemporary performances in museums, she anlayed the art museum space as a site of rituals.
Chapter Three presented a contextual overview of the use of multi-sensory theatre in historic house museums and definitions of immersive performances, to further locate the position of the collectives under study. This research aimed to place Malta on the wider international map, fitting it into the recent discussions on performance, immersion and liminality in museums, in which so far Malta has been left out. The work of the international community ICOM-DEMHIST on the interpretation of historic house museums has been discussed in this research, and this thesis has in return been presented to the group during ICOM’s International Conference held in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil in 2013 in which over 3000 people attended. The thesis has also been presented during the Performance Studies International conference held in Shanghai China in 2014 to introduce the Maltese case study and the performers active in museums and historic sites in Malta, also to international theatre and performance scholars and practitioners, at which Richard Schechner was also present.

The writings by Kirschenblatt-Gimblett on museums perceived as theatres performing the knowledge they create, where audiences can be transported to other times, has been highly influential for this thesis. So was the publication by Machon on immersive theatres, and the writings on site specific installation art by Claire Bishop and her ideas on activation and decentering. The theatrical work of practitioners, such as Peter Greenaway in Palaces and in Museums, as well as the emancipatory work of Pina Bausch’s choreographies, has also been highly inspiring for the writing of this thesis. The Maltese case studies presented in this thesis were aimed at building upon their ideas.

Chapters Four and Five have contributed to the history of contemporary art and performance in Malta and it has been observed how these collectives swing from the Baroque to the Contemporary and from institutional critique to collaboration. Chapter Four has analysed how the Malta based art collective START’s search for spaces and insertion, positioned them in such a way that they imbued their post-modern interventions with thought provoking moral authority, turning the tables and contesting the frames. One such event was Forbidden Spectacle, curated by Mark Mangion, which consisted of a series of contemporary works in various media which were juxtaposed against Malta’s National Museum of Fine Arts Baroque seventeenth and eighteenth century painting galleries. Moving also outside the museum walls, various alternative,
as well as underground spaces were used as a lab for challenging new structures of showing work. Power relations were clearly evident in their interventions as they questioned and interrogated the past and Malta’s national identity through their site-specific visual dialogues. This study has illuminated how their Baroque Catholic upbringing is evident in their works, in the way they paradoxically deconstruct it, as well as supplement it, using metaphors that activate the past, such as the works by Norbert Attard, Vince Briffa and Raphael Vella. They subverted sacredness in the spirit of critique, and their combined creative efforts in the visual arts scene in Malta has been living proof that when artists unite they have the potential to bring revolutionary changes.

Chapter Five, through its case studies, Theatre Anon and the Rubberbodies Collective based in Malta, and Wildworks and Punchdrunk based in England, has explored the processes of these immersive performance collectives. It has analysed how they have experimented with multi-narratives, and the involvement of the community in their site-specific works. These collectives arguably use various elements of the Baroque in the way they create spectacles appealing to the memories and the emotions of their participants, fusing a variety of disciplines. This study has demonstrated how the liminal and its transformative elements is arguably the major contribution of their site-specific performances. They produce journeys of discoveries, activating agency and resonance. Through their fragmented narratives and dream-like experiences audiences have the potential to reach higher states of consciousness, unravelling the memories which are buried deep inside the soul. This research has proven that the collaboration between theatre collectives and museums has great potential and should be explored much further. If the Baroque palace, from which the modern museum collection has originated, was originally a theatrical space, creating liminal effects through its ritualistic spectacles, shouldn’t its contemporary response and interpretation also speak a similar language? Activating audiences through the creation of thought provoking, critical contemporary spectacles appealing to the emotions is arguably the key to unlock the complex age of the Baroque.
Future Research

The study of such a vast and complex phenomenon as the Baroque and its resonance in the contemporary era raises more questions than it answers. There are many avenues of enquiry which might be fruitfully explored and this research could be developed in a number of ways. For example, there is the need for further research to understand the connections between past and present performances. Baroque performances and spectacles were part of a complex, historical, political, cultural, intellectual topography, of which this thesis has examined only fragments, thus there is the need to further research spectacles in the archives in Malta and elsewhere and conduct comparative studies. The manner rituals have developed across time and space, and entered the realm of museums, as well as the way sensory experiences can lead to higher states of consciousness in museums, could also be a subject of further investigation. In one of Turner’s last writings, dating to 1985, entitled “Are there Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual and Drama,” he had actually discussed the evolution from the “Liminal” to the “Liminoid,” in order to show how traditional, modern and postmodern performative genres interconnect. Further research on this topic could include museology, with case studies from across the globe. A post-doctorate study could also be undertaken on the study of how current emotions and feelings can help us further understand the past.

It would be also useful to combine theory with practice, by experimenting with similar collectives and analysing their processes while they are in action. Such projects would again rely upon interdisciplinary methodologies, which are as this thesis has shown a great value in studying complex phenomena. Conducting visitor studies on audiences participating in such performances would also be beneficial to further analyse the impact of such practices. Experimenting with narratives and multi-narratives and evaluating how audiences react emotionally to different narratives would also be an interesting study. Analysing and discussing the voices of other activists and site specific performers regarding their experiences and their processes in museums and historic sites around the world to conduct comparative analyses would also be useful.

This research has shown that contemporary immersive performances and installations can have an impact if used in a critical manner, as can be observed by for example the
intervention of the sculpture Zieme, positioned in front of the newly erected Parliament in Valletta by START founding member Austin Camilleri. There is also the need for further study to analyse the shift from institutional critique to collaborating with government entities to make sure that the critical aspect is not lost in favour of pure spectacle. Critical engagement of audiences can arguably enable a future where diversity can flourish. The multi-narratives in the works created by the collectives under study can enable audiences to look at stories from various viewpoints. They can further create a concept of identity that involves an exploration and a re-negotiation of the dynamics between the self in relation to the world, through the open-ended questioning of the self. The museum, like the theatre, mirrors life and has the potential to act as a critical lens, enabling participants to view in its reflections the injustices and inequalities that the world at times presents, with a new critical eye.

The Baroque age understood the concepts of transience and ephemerality. It understood the need to mirror time, to repeat time and to be in-between time. Through spectacle - the speculum - alternative universes and dream spaces were created. The speculum can reflect and enhance an awareness of the injustices, failures and crimes conducted by the world. It can raise consciousness and can urge to react. The Baroque’s resonance extended well beyond a simple reduction to either style or period. Multi-faceted, fragmented, dynamic and appealing to the emotions, with little respect to the frame, Baroque spectacles, having ritualistic effects, have taken a hybrid form across time and space. Drawing upon a myriad of cultural influences, fused together to create new forms of expression which are in permanent flux, the Baroque is still alive, crossing geographic, disciplinary, conceptual boundaries and extending them. Research into the ways in which immersive and sensorial experiences can produce individual responses and collective identities is, however, is in its early stages, and more cross-disciplinary study will be required in the future.

To conclude, this thesis has drawn attention to immersive liminal experiences and to the potential for achieving critical agency when installation and performance artists are invited to respond to historic sites. It has observed how museums and palaces are performative sites, which in the 21st century, can act both as temples and forums. Arguably, the Baroque is not mirrored by contemporary immersive performance in museums but it is slowly metamorphosing into a more performative style of
communicating knowledge also open to visitors’ ideas, to critical thinking and to the co-curation of memories. Fusing community based contemporary performance into the Baroque Palace experience can enhance ritualistic effects, creating liminal spaces which arguably enable reflection, leading to the confidence in participants to break out of their frames, pull down barriers and leap across boundaries and thresholds to act as catalysts for change.
Appendix I: Maps and Archives

Figure 89: 17th century map of Valletta. The Grand Master’s Palace is the building marked in red in the centre of the city. Various baroque spectacles and ceremonies where held outdoors in the streets and also in the harbours surrounding the city. Private Collection

Figure 90: Googlemap showing the geographical location of Malta between Europe and Africa
Description du palais magistral

Le palais où demeurait le grand maître est situé au milieu de la cité Valetta; sa for-
me est carrée, il fut bâti par le griev. M.
La carrière en l'an 1572. Il y a deux
grande places, l'une devant la porte
qui regarde par midi, dans laquelle
place il y a une belle fontaine faite
par le griv. M. de Vignacourt. L'autre
demain, la porte qui regarde par le che-
cest dernière est petite. Il y a deux autres
portes qui sont exposées, l'une au regle,
Et l'autre au chiodo, en entrant par
la porte de midi, on y trouve un
Ciel ouvert fort petit auquel quelque
loges, sous lesquelles sont la secrétair
Et celle, la salle ou l'on fait la ma-
des paumers, on trouve en face un
Figure 92: Diary written in Italian by the Maltese letterato Ignazio Saverio Mifsud (1722-1773) dating to January 1741, describing how the Portuguese Grand Master Emmanuel Pinto de Fonseca (1681-1773) watched from his palace balcony and possibly from other locations too, the highly decorated spectacles set up during the month of his election as Grand Master. Flowers, mirrors, candles, a lot of silver are mentioned. Archives of the Order of Malta. National Library, Valletta. Lib. 9, f. 380
Figure 93: Continuation of the diary written in Italian by the Maltese letterato Ignazio Saverio Mifsud (1722-1773) dating to January 1741, describing how the Portuguese Grand Master Emmanuel Pinto de Fonseca (1681-1773) attended the opera entitled *L’Arminio*, at the Manoel Theatre in Valletta during the month of his election as Grand Master of the Order. Archives of the Order of Malta. National Library, Valletta. Lib. 9, f. 381.
Appendix II: Visuals of The Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta through the Ages

Figure 94: Charles Brochtorff, *Tapestry Room* (1820), Grand Master's Palace, Valletta
Courtesy of the National Library, Malta

Figure 95: Charles Brochtorff, *Perellos Room* (1820), Grand Master’s Palace, Valletta
Courtesy of the National Library, Malta
Figure 96: Richard Ellis photography, *The Perellos Room* (early 20th century)
Grand Master’s Palace, Valletta. Courtesy of the Malta National Museum of Archaeology

Figure 97: Richard Ellis photography, *The State Dining Room* (early 20th century)
Grand Master’s Palace, Valletta. Photo courtesy of the Malta National Museum of
Figure 98: *Interior of Grand Master’s Palace, Valletta* (c. 1890)  
Courtesy of the Malta National Museum of Archaeology

Figure 99: *Hall of St. Michael and St. George* (c. 1910). The photo shows the neo-classical intervention by Colonel Whitmore, covering the Baroque decoration. The hall was later refurnished in the Baroque style. Courtesy of the Malta National Museum of Archaeology
Figure 100: Giuseppe de Brochtorff, *The Palace Ball* (late 19th century) Grand Master’s Palace, Valletta. Private Collection

Figure 101: An engraving taken from *The Graphic* (1899), showing a Carnival Ball being held at the Grand Master’s Palace, Valletta. Private Collection
Figure 102: Palace Armoury in the Grand Master’s Palace (c.1890)  
Courtesy of the Malta National Museum of Archaeology

Figure 103: Armoury (early 20th century), Grand Master’s Palace, Valletta. Courtesy of the Malta National Museum of Archaeology
Figure 104: Design for temporary Stage in front of the Grand Master’s Palace, for the Duke of York visit to Valletta in the early 20th century, Office of Public Works, Floriana

Figure 105: Design for a temporary stage, for the visit of King George V (1912) at the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta. Image courtesy of the Office of Public Works, Floriana
Figures 106-107: Traditional dances during carnival in February include the *parata*, a re-enactment of the 1565 victory of the Knights over the Ottoman Turks, and an 18th century court dance known as *il-Maltija*. Both are annually performed in the public square in front of the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta till this very day, re-enacting the Baroque age.
Figure 108: Carnival floats parading around the streets of Valletta, a tradition dating back to the time of the Knights of St. John in Malta
Figures 109-112. Processions round the streets of Valletta during Holy Week, before the celebration of Easter. The City of Valletta is turned into an immersive stage as the passion of Christ is re-enacted. Catholic statues are carried around the city, and the community dresses up like the characters from the Catholic Bible.
Appendix IV: The Rubberbodies Collective and WildWorks

Figure 113: Rubberbodies Collective, Oracle, at the Haġar Qim megalithic temples, dating back to c. 3600 B.C. A silent electronic concert during which audience members used wireless headsets, on March 23, 2012. A sound art project that linked historical rituals with those of the modern day. Photo by Darrin Zammit Lupi.

Figure 114: Athanasia Kanellopoulou, in Penelope: Dust in our Awakened Dreams (2012) at MITP theatre, Valletta. The performance, a collaboration with the Rubberbodies Collective, deals with the unravelling of the memories which are buried in the soul. Photo by Darrin Zammit Lupi.
Figures 115-117: Ira Melkonyan and Rebecca Camilleri performing “White Sea” (2011) by the Rubberbodies Collective at St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, Valletta. The non-verbal visual performance was about two women and the journey of their lives shaped by their connection to the sea. Photo by Darrin Zammit Lupi.
Figure 118: Ira Melkonyan and Rebecca Camilleri at the Malta Maritime Museum, Birgu. Their costumes are white so that when archival maps and images of the paintings from the Museum’s collection are projected on them, their costumes act like a blank canvas.
Figure 119: Storyboard by the Rubberbodies Collective for the performance White Sea
Figure 120: Poster for the WildWorks Intervention at Gaasbeek Castle, 2013-2015
Figure 121: Map showing the journey created by WildWorks inside Gaasbeek Castle. It is divided into three sections telling the stories of three of the people who had once owned the castle and lived in it. 1st section tells the story of Count Egmond (1522-1568), 2nd section tells the story of Paul Arconati (1754-1821) and 3rd section is dedicated to Marquise Arconati Visconti (1840-1923)
Figure 122: Poster for the WildWorks Intervention at Gaasbeek Castle, 2013-2015, Exhibition Catalogue

Figure 123: *Tower of My Desire*, Gaasbeek Castle & WildWorks, Exhibition Catalogue. Image shows the beds where visitors could lie on and meditate at the end of their visit.
Appendix V: List and descriptions of artists interviewed and performances attended

Dates and brief descriptions of artists who were interviewed

1. Raphael Vella, interviewed on 13/09/2013
2. Norbert Attard, interviewed on 14/03/2013
3. Austin Camilleri, interviewed on 13/03/2013
4. Pierre Portelli, interviewed on 15/03/2013
5. Anton Grech, interviewed on 11/03/2013
6. Mercedes Kemp, interviewed on 05/08/2013
7. Jimmy Grima, interviewed on 12/03/2013
8. Mario Sammut, interviewed on 14/03/2013
9. Rebecca Camilleri, interviewed on 16/03/2013
10. Ira Melkonyan, interviewed on 16/03/2013

1. Raphael Vella is one of the founding members of START, a Maltese contemporary art group, specialising in site-specific interventions. He is an artist, writer and curator based in Malta. He obtained a PhD in Fine Arts at the University of the Arts London in 2006, and is currently a Senior Lecturer and Art Co-ordinator within the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta. His work as an artist focuses on philosophical issues related to textuality, religion, fundamentalism and the sublime, often working with the book as a medium.

2. Norbert Attard is one of the founding members of START, a Maltese contemporary art group, specialising in site-specific interventions. He graduated in Architecture from the University of Malta in 1977. He now focuses on a contemporary art practice that incorporates architecture, sculpture, photography, video and installation, to explore his major interests in places and their memories. In 1999 he represented Malta in the 48th Venice Art Biennale. He is based in Gozo, Malta and Berlin, Germany.

3. Austin Camilleri is one of the founding members of START, a Maltese contemporary art group, specialising in site-specific interventions. He studies art at the Accademia Pietro Vannucci in Perugia, Italy. He works in different media: painting, sculpture, installation and video and he has also created various stage sets for plays and operas. Many of his works focus on religious and political themes.

4. Pierre Portelli is one of the founding members of START, a Maltese contemporary art group, specialising in site-specific interventions. He studied Graphic Design at Swindon School of Art and Design in England and he works mainly in conceptual art and installation. He also specialises in set designs for theatrical productions and he designs books. He is a visiting lecturer at the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences at the University of Malta.

5. Anton Grech is one of the founding members of START, a Maltese contemporary art group, specialising in site-specific interventions. He studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence, Italy and he then furthered his studies at the Kunstaakademie in Dusseldorf, Germany where he was later employed as a teacher. He is now based in
Malta and he is a senior lecturer in Visual Arts at the Faculty of the Built Environment at the University of Malta.

6. Mercedes Kemp is a core artistic member of WildWorks, a multi-disciplinary theatre and visual arts company based in Cornwall, England. She is the associate director of community and research for WildWorks, which involves creating and maintaining relationships with host communities. Her method involves a kind of eclectic ethnographic research into a variety of sources: archives, libraries, local histories, old photos, local historians, local artists, musicians and performers, and a close observation of the process of memory and its effect on the values that people place on their environments. Since 2001 she has developed storylines and text for site-specific pieces in Malta, Cyprus, France, Belgium, Palestine and Britain. She is also a senior lecturer in Fine Art at Falmouth University, England.

7. Jimmy Grima is the artistic director of the Rubberbodies Collective, synonymous with visceral non-verbal site-specific performance projects, and Director of Tinyisland Studio. He worked with Kneehigh Theatre on the 3 Island project in Malta, Cyprus and Cornwall, with Mercedes Kemp and Bill Mitchell. He studied Theatre and Digital Art at Dartington College of Arts, UK. His role as the director of the Rubberbodies Collective in the development phase is to find the common thread which interweaves everyone’s vision of the performance. He claims that his work “is about dismantling and reconstructing as part of an ongoing investigation of the human behaviour.” He aims to provoke those who experience his art works into analysing the context in which they live, and to establish a connection with their subconscious.

8. Mario Sammut is one of the core members of the Rubberbodies Collective. He is a musician, composer, sound designer and music producer working within his Silent Studio and is signed with Ultimae Records in France. He studied classical piano and later upgraded to other electronic instruments, while enrolling for digital & analog electronics engineering. For the Rubberbodies Collective he composed a series of symphonic ambient compositions within which he connects contemporary ambient sound with classical instruments. He composed and collaborated on a number of films, theatre productions, dance projects, documentaries and TV series.

9. Rebecca Camilleri is a core member and performer with the multi-disciplinary artist collective Rubberbodies Collective, devising methodologies and approaches towards performance based art. She graduated in Choreography and Visual Arts Practices from Dartington College of Arts in the UK in 2010. During this period she also studied at Hochschule fur Schauspielkunst ‘Ernst Busch’, Berlin. She is also a visiting assistant lecturer in the Dance Studies department at the University of Malta.

10. Ira Melkonyan is a core member of the Rubberbodies Collective. She is a theater performer, and a scientist. She trained in the theater studios of Odessa in Ukraine, whilst simultaneously practicing biology and chemistry. In 2010, Melkonyan was awarded a Masters degree in Microbiology and Virology from the Odessa National University. Between 2011-2012, she studied in the European College of Liberal Arts, Berlin, concentrating on Philosophy, Art History, and Aesthetics. For several years she was a member of staff at the Pharmacy Department of the University of Malta and she is currently pursuing a masters in Theatre at Amsterdam University of the Arts.
List of START interventions attended before the start of the PhD

Reinterpreting Preti, by Norbert Attard at St. James Cavalier, Valletta, 1999
Tabernacle for Voyeur, by Vince Briffa at the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, 1999
“Uber”, pre- START Exhibition Portomaso, St. Julians, 2001
City Spaces, START Exhibition, Valletta, 2002
Borders, START Exhibition, Pinto Vaults, Valletta, 2003
Escape, START Exhibition, Old Prisons, Cittadella, Gozo, 2003
Caravaggio: Mostra Impossibile” Carafa Stores, Birgu, 2004
Blitz, START Exhibition, Couvre Porte War Shelter, Birgu, 2005
“Searching for Caravaggio” by Caesar Attard intervention between the Law Court and the Cathedral of St. John in Valletta during the Caravaggio Quote... Unquote
exhibition, Valletta, 2007
Body of Glass... After Caravaggio by Vince Briffa at the Auberge D’Italie, during the Caravaggio Quote... Unquote Exhibition, Valletta, 2007

Performances attended before the start of the PhD

KneeHigh Theatre
3 Islands Project: An Old Man with Enormous Wings, Birgu, 2003

Theatre Anon
Ospizio, Floriana, 2010

List of Performances attended for this research and their brief descriptions

1. The Rubberbodies Collective Interventions

White Sea, St. James Cavalier, Centre for Creativity, Valletta (2011)

One of the Rubberbodies Collective’s main areas of enquiry is the stories related to the sea which surrounds them, on the little island they inhabit. The performance White Sea was a 50-minute non-verbal visual theatre performance held at St. James Cavalier, Centre for Creativity in Valletta. It was performed by Ira Melkonyan and Rebecca Camilleri, props and costumes were created by Matthew Pandolfino, music was created by Mario Sammut and it was directed by Jimmy Grima. Based on stories from Valletta’s Grand Harbour and the Mediterranean Sea, researched by the curator of the Malta Maritime Museum, the historian Liam Gauci and Dr. Timmy Gambin, Maritime archaeologist and senior lecturer at the University of Malta, the performers brought back these stories to life through movement, visuals and music. I had worked at the Malta Maritime Museum with both Liam Gauci and Timmy Gambin on an EU funded project entitled MERCATOR before the start of the PhD, and I have had endless conversations with them regarding the use of performances as well as other initiatives on “breathing life” into the museum. I also had meetings with Jimmy Grima, Timmy Gambin and Liam Gauci in Birgu prior the performance. The performers immersed themselves into their stories and into their emotional worlds. Textless and left in a
fragmented and open state, as an observer during the performance, I could come up with my own interpretations of their work, as well as relate it to my own memories and research of the Mediterranean Sea.

This work follows another site-specific performance which I also had attended in 2010, when the collective used Dock No1 in Cottonera, an old shipyard built during the British era in 1848, which they converted into a temporary stage for their performance called 100.

Lore of the Sea. Immemorial Waters, Malta Maritime Museum, Birgu (2011)

This work builds on the collective’s previous performance entitled White Sea. For both performances the collective collaborated closely with the curator of the Malta Maritime Museum in Birgu, Liam Gauci, who shared with them the stories of the maritime artifacts inside the museum. The collective spent weeks merging their own personal stories and memories with the stories from the museum to create their site-specific performance. Their own memories of love and loss, happiness, anger, and frustration merged with the fragmented historical stories of the artifacts stored inside the museum, and of the sailors, corsairs, knights or merchants and their families who owned them or used them.

The event started at 8 p.m. at the Malta Maritime Museum with a 45-minute specialised tour of part of the collection of the Malta Maritime Museum by the curator Liam Gauci. The tour enabled the audience to also have an insight into the processes and the journey of the collective. The tour was linked to the performance as it focused on the objects which the collective used as a base for the visual-performance. The audience was then guided into St Angelo Hall inside the Museum, where the Rubberbodies collective performed their stories, through visuals, movement and to the sounds created by the sound designer Mario Sammut. The performers Ira Melkonyan and Rebecca Camilleri used objects from the reserve collection of the museum as their props and they gave their own interpretation of their stories, merged with their own personal stories, leaving them open for interpretation and using visual allegories and metaphors. The work was textless and fragmented, having various layers and multi-narratives, which allowed me as an observer to imagine various stories, also at times linking these stories to my own memories. As an observer and a participant, immersed in the performance, I felt like I was a participant in a ritual, immersed in a liminal state, in an in-between state between the historical tour by the curator and the drinks on the balcony of the museum over looking the Grand Harbour afterwards. As explained to me later during the interviews held with the performers, they were enacting in a way a “ritual,” through their silent repetitive movements, which enabled them to enter into their subconscious, re-awakening past memories and emotions. When I now look at the objects in the museum, I look at them from a different perspective- one which reminds me that people used these objects- people with feelings and emotions. Even though I do not exactly know what these feelings or emotions were, or what their complete stories are, I know that these objects have multiple stories to tell.
**Old Salt, Birgu (2012)**

*Old Salt* completed a trilogy of sea-inspired works by the Rubberbodies collective, following *White Sea* (2011) presented at St James Cavalier in Valletta and *Lore of the Sea* (2011) performed at the Malta Maritime Museum in Birgu. *Old Salt* was an open-air project, commissioned by the Malta Arts Festival between the 12th and 14th July 2012. The collective transformed a part of the port in Birgu into an outdoor theatre with the Grand Harbour acting as the backdrop of the performance. The work was once again inspired by Liam Gauci’s research on sea captains and corsairs of the 18th century. Most of the research was directly related to men and the sea, however, the collective decided to create a performance imagining the female perspective of these stories.

The performance told the imagined stories of the women which the sailors and corsairs left behind. It presented four women each carrying a story about their love and their life. As they waited by the shore, relationships developed and their secrets were shared in a fragmented manner. As the stories unfolded, I was transported into a surreal universe were the four women encountered creatures emerging from the sea. Tales were recounted through masks, illustrations, moving sea creatures and the classical sounds of string instruments. Once again the narrative was fragmented which allowed me to question, think and look for clues. It also allowed me to be active in the meaning making of past lives.

**2. WildWorks Interventions**

*The Enchanted Palace, Kensington Palace, London (2010-2012)*

From 2010 till 2012 Kensington Palace in London, run by Historic Royal Palaces hosted the “Enchanted Palace” - a multi-sensory intervention by the Cornwall based theatre company WildWorks in collaboration with a number of designers and artists such as Vivienne Westwood, William Tempest, Stephen Jones, Boudicca, Aminaka Wilmont and illustrator and set designer Echo Morgan. The intervention combined installation, films, sound, fashion and performance. The palace was undergoing extensive redevelopment and the curators decided to invite the theatre company and the artists to transform the palace into a stage, like some sort of Alice in Wonderland/fairytale dream-scape. Site-specific installations were created in the State Apartments for the promenade performance to take place, creating a game-like immersive experience inspired by the stories of the princesses who once lived there- Mary, Anne, Caroline, Charlotte, Victoria, Margaret and Diana. The artists shared not only the pretty aspects of these princesses’ lives but also those aspects which are more human and real. The artistic director for this work was Bill Mitchell, while the associate directors were Sue Hill and Mercedes Kemp, also in charge of community and research.

The visitor was given a map at the entrance and clues about the whereabouts of the key set pieces, thus creating a sort of an immersive game and curiosity about the space. The stories of the princesses were told in various layers and fragments, through the music, the installations, the projections and the lights. The narrative was rooted mainly in imagery and sound and each room had its own character. There were multiple stories told, all very fragmented, and audiences were taken on a journey, which was very
dreamlike— I would call it “liminal” like— because it was journeying a space between reality and dreams— between the real and the surreal. Intimate stories were connected with grand narratives like for example the toy soldiers could remind the visitor of childhood, while at the same time it is being linked to history, as well as to the wars happening today. There is, in a way, a fusion of past, present and future— the hanging clockwork dresses/ mechanical sculptures by Boudicca, for example, reminded me of time. There was also a presence of flight in the interventions— Victoria’s dress was made of hundreds of paperbirds and Vivienne Westwood’s dress was in a sweeping flight in the staircase— probably suggesting flights of freedom, and flights of the imagination. Some visitors to the “Enchanted Place”, who I have spoken to found the intervention shocking and difficult to understand, since it was not the traditional way of presenting stories. However, for myself, the journey intrigued me and the experience moved me. As Peter Greenaway, had once said, many people are still visually illiterate. Some people are used to having text and grand narratives told in large panels and audio guides, thus they might find it difficult to experiences historic sites from a more immersive, playful and interactive manner. These sort of immersive experiences require the participant to have a more active role, to question, and to fill in the gaps with their own imagination and knowledge in a constructivist manner. John Barnes, chairman the International Historic House Museum Association— ICOM Demhist, and the director of conservation and learning at historic Royal Palaces said that “making it was a challenge, an adventure and an experiment.” For me, the experience inspired me to research more about site-specific immersive performances, responding creatively and audio visually to the complex, fragmented stories of historic sites, and how they can perhaps transform the way we think about the past.

Once Upon a Castle, Kasteel Van Gaasbeek, Belgium (2013-2015)

From 2013-2015, Kasteel Van Gaasbeck, in Belgium hosted the intervention by the Cornwall based theatre company WildWorks who, in a similar manner as they had previously done at Kensington Palace in London, transformed the castle into a stage inspired by the stories from the castle. The curator Luc Vanackere, like John Barnes mentioned above, is also an active member of ICOM Demhist, who had co-organised the 12th Annual Demhist conference entitled “Catching the Spirit. Theatrical Assets of Historic Houses and their Approaches in Reinventing the Past”, held in Antwerp, Belgium, between 17-20 October, 2011. Mercedes Kemp, also interviewed for this thesis conducted weeks of research in the castle’s archives for the text to be transformed into scenic installations. Through the use of projections, installations, sounds by Joroen D’hoe, costumes designed by Tim Van Steenbergen, smells, as well as performers, during my visit I was immersed in a world halfway between history and fiction.

After walking through a scenic peacock garden next to a lake and a forest, upon entrance to the castle I was given a map, showing how the castles’ journey was devided into three main sections, each representing a different character from the history of the palace. There was also an introductory section— representing the theshold between present time and the time were the contemporary was responding to the past, as well as a concluding section inside the tower. I was also given four cards— one with a brief biography of the castle and three brief biographies/clues and line drawings of three of the historical characters who lived inside the castle. I had to first walk through “the Room of Shifting Time” – a reminder that the following rooms would be, in a way, a
journey back in time. As I walked through the castle the scenography inside each room exposed fragments from the lives of these three characters. The first section focussed on the historic character dating back to the 16th century- Lamoraal, Count of Egmont, a Knight of the Golden Fleece, who had purchased Gaasbeek Castle in 1565. He had eleven children and by 1568 he was executed at the Grand Place, accused of high treason for protesting against the cruel persecution of the protestants of the Low Countries. He was decapitated in 1568 at the Grand Place of Brussels and this first section of the castle had three rooms dedicated to him. The bed with the portrait of the beheaded nobleman over the pillows and the red flowers scattered on the bed were a reminder of his tragedy. The second section of the castle upstairs was dedicated to the Italian traveller and nobleman Marquis Paul Arconati Visconti, who inherited the castle in 1796. The installations inside these rooms depicted him as a flamboyant traveller inspired by his visits to Turkey and elsewhere, as well as an avid collector and writer, who eventually went insane. Projections, a hanging bed with a lot manuscripts tied to it were arguably the highlights of these rooms. The third character presented in the final section of the castle’s narrative was the unconventional Marquise Marie Arconati Visconti, who inherited the castle in 1876, and who spent her life living between the salons of Paris and the castle at Gaasbeek. She amassed an impressive art collection and she renovated the castle as it is now- medieval looking from the outside and in a neo-renaissance fairytale style from the inside.

For the final chapter of the castle’s narrative I had to climb up an old winding staircase to the top of the tower (entitled “The Tower of My Desire”) and lie on one of the beds looking at the projections and listening to the sounds. This section gave me the time and space to think about the journey I had just been through. After spending a couple of minutes lying there day dreaming about the history of the palace trying to put all the clues together and reconstruct the various fragments and layers, I walked back down the long spiral staircase and back out into the sunlight and into the peacock garden. The experience was dreamlike- multilayered, fragmented and thought provoking. It was an experience which, like most of the other performances described above left an imprint in my head. The interventions built up memories for me which I return to often, questioning and deconstructing as well as reconstructing their meanings. The installations and the performers helped in building bridges and connections to what I knew, what I have felt before, and to what I keep on learning and discovering.

3. Punchdrunk interventions


This promenade show, artistically directed by Felix Barrett, was a collaboration with the National Theatre in London. An old Paddington sorting office with around 100 rooms was transformed into a 1960’s Los Angeles film studio, exploring the darkness of the Hollywood dream, based on Georg Büchner’s tragedy Woyzeck. Büchner died before he finished the work and he just left a series of scenes with no order. Punchdrunk’s work, similar to the works by WildWorks, The Rubberbodies Collective and Theatre Anon also includes the creation of fragmented scenes.

I started the immersive journey by entering a lift which took me into the middle of the action, inside what seemed to be a real world film, an alternative world, a dream or a
hide and seek game. I was in an area full of bars with actors dancing and acting around me. The space was chaotic and it looked like a spooky old town, half WildWest, half 1950’s America. Like the rest of the visitors, I had to wear a white mask all the time except for the bar area where I could sit down and drink, socialise with the rest of the visitors and listen to the live band. I couldn't see everything in the show as multiple shows happened at the same time, however, in the bar I could discuss with the other participants what they had seen and what they understood of the show. There were around thirty characters in the show and there was no distance between the actors and myself. The massive space was like an intricate installation— a game where I had to figure out different clues. It was rather dark in all the levels and the feeling was one of being on stage with the actors, as if I were a ghost, able to follow any of the actors around, having total freedom and also being able to go behind the scenes, up and down the stairs and into the different sets. Every floor had a different immersive set, which was created with great detail: there was a desert on the top floor, a forest, a working cinema, a forest, bars, dressingrooms, bedrooms and more. It was an experiential, interactive, fragmented multinarrative show. The space had four levels— with different sets, and I walked to the different levels following the various characters.


The interactive, immersive show was aimed at six to twelve year old children and their families. It was 50 minutes long and I started the show by wearing a lifejacket. We were divided into a crew made up of navigators, midshipmen, ship’s watch and salvage pretending we were on board the HMS Adventure. We were asked to inspect a number of objects encased in a wooden mast and after they mysteriously disappear, we had to go on a quest in search of them.
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