

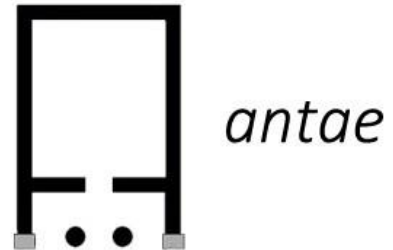
Light a Tie Up

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Light a Tie Up

Karen Elizabeth Steed

It is Friday night in April and I am in my kitchen, attending to last minute details on a spring supper of asparagus, lamb and strawberries, when the house is filled with the sound of glorious singing from the church across the road. All during the day, people across the islands of Malta and Gozo have been braving the patchy weather to walk the streets behind a church procession bearing aloft a statue of the Virgin Mary. This is *id-Duluri*, the day of Our Lady of Sorrows, the Friday before Palm Sunday, and the start of the saddest week in the Christian calendar, known as Holy Week. I'm not sure what they are singing in the church; it is a kind of melodic recitation, and it turns out that some parishes have decided against taking an old, and often precious statue of the Virgin out of doors into the rain and opted to say the rosary in the church instead.

I grew up in a house without a bible, but the story is a bit more complicated, as family history often is. My mother was raised a Catholic and my adoptive father came from a mix of Irish and Scottish ancestors, all steeped in the tradition of the soap-scrubbed, finger-pointing, guilt-mongering Protestant church, or at least, that's how it was described to me. The agreement in our house was that religion was not to be discussed as it might lead to bloodshed, or worse. But we still had Easter eggs, and chocolate bunnies, and indeed, I am planning to give my dinner guests chocolate eggs with coffee tonight. But why?

That's the sort of question that hops into your mind when neighbours begin to wish you *l-Għid it-tajjeb*. The pronunciation sounds to me more or less like "Light a Tie Up", and it means "Happy Easter". Holy Week is really an observation of the impending doom of Jesus, and his mother's grief, so "happy" is not entirely the right adjective, even if the week ends with the resurrection. Bunnies are surely happy things, though, aren't they? Egg-laying hares and little, yellow chicks are both symbols of the celebration of Easter Sunday, when all the sadness is over and Jesus rises from the dead. Some historians will say they are an adaptation of a pagan ceremony dating from 13th century Germany, celebrating the Spring Equinox and the Teutonic deity of fertility, Eostra. The Easter Bunny is nothing less than a unit of cultural inheritance, a 'replicator of a certain idea or complex of ideas'; according to atheist Richard Dawkins: a meme. So that'll be a serving of chocolate memes with coffee, then.

I was minded to look again at Dawkins's book, *The God Delusion*, after attempting to figure out why Easter seemed to be arriving so early this year. It's got something to do with the first Sunday after the full moon, and the Spring Equinox, and the Gregorian versus the Julian calendar (or, in some cases, the *revised* Julian Calendar). This, after taking a look at Wikipedia, which has a 26-page site devoted to the subject, including a Table of the Dates of Easter. All of which worked around to Dawkins' explanation of the meme as compared to the gene, and British novelist Julian Barnes's comment: '*The God Delusion* should be read by everyone from atheist to monk. If its merciless rationalism doesn't enrage you at some point, you probably aren't alive'.

It might be churlish to mention Dawkins, a committed believer in evolution, at the start of Holy Week, but he does offer a wide-angle view of the imagery on display in Malta at these high points in the Christian calendar, whichever calendar that might be. The problem is that if you

don't know what you are looking at, it all starts to look the same. I attended some lectures by Martina Caruana on the understanding of subject matter in (especially religious-themed) art, but I've also read some art history, and without that background I could not possibly have appreciated a certain angel that I still cannot get out of my mind, years later. We were visiting the Chora Monastery in Istanbul, primarily because I'd been reading about the impact of the painter Angelos on post-Byzantine art: he had been influenced by the mosaics and frescoes he'd seen at the monastery. I was determined to see his work but I became entranced by a single image of an angel.

There she was, flying along with a delicate shell on her back, like a conch shell, but so sheer and fleshy that it looked like the translucent pink of the inside of a womb with an embryo. She is an angel carrying a "snail", representing the entire universe in a spiral pattern, the "cosmos". If you look closely, you can see stars, the sun and the moon. She remains in my mind, flying along with all the universe as it was known at the beginning of the 14th century, and that knowledge built on even earlier foundations from the East. Richard Dawkins says: 'Beautiful music, art and scriptures are themselves self-replicated tokens of religious ideas'. Here, I'm inclined to say Dawkins sounds crotchety: should we strive to avoid beauty, just to escape centuries of reference?

But Dawkins isn't trying to tell *me* anything, is he? He's not trying to shake me out of some complacent acceptance of the imagery surrounding us here, in Malta, at the beginning of Holy Week. I'm the sort of person who needs to be told what's missing from Saint Agatha's tray. Dawkins is taking aim at people who have grown up surrounded by images of 'tortured saints', with cathedrals standing like sentinels on every city block, and hymns they can't even hear anymore, they've heard them so often. What do you do if you are a Maltese artist, looking for a new way to see what has been written and re-written a thousand times onto your soul?

I saw a similar problem for artists when my husband and I lived in the South of France. Every single contemporary artist picking up a paintbrush in Provence had to find some way to paint around modern masters. With rare exception, almost everything we saw in contemporary galleries looked like a bad imitation of something else: a muddy Cézanne or a too-busy Matisse, or a Picasso *sans* the talent, which turns out to be nothing at all, really. Artists in Malta don't have to fight through a thicket of images by the best names in modern art, but they do need to work under the weight of the century-long Counter-Reformation shock and awe campaign in art and architecture. It's a tall order and I've not seen a contemporary artist in Malta take aim at even so much as the 17th century, Calabrian artist Mattia Preti's murals on the vaulted ceiling of St John's scenes from the life of St John the Baptist.

What I mean is to create something with the kind of artistic rigour that earlier painters used to break the hammerlock of convention in their day. It cannot be easy when, as I say, you've grown up with these images engraved into your sub-conscious and reinforced by daily life even now, at the beginning of the 21st century. Then again, modern painters like Picasso didn't have to fight through the blizzard of images we are slowly suffocating under in this, the age of Facebook and instant news feeds. Would *Guernica* have had the same impact if we'd already been bombarded with smartphone reports and finally got bored with the story in 24-hour news cycles?

There is a rising tide of discussion about contemporary art in Malta, especially as we head into Valletta 2018, the year when Valletta will carry the banner for Malta as the European Capital of Culture. This was an idea originally put forward in 1985 by Melina Mercouri, then Minister of

Culture for Greece, who thought the new European Union should promote culture just as much as shared political boundaries and economic values; the first European Capital of Culture was Athens. The City of Valletta, or *Il-Belt Valletta*, as the traffic signs say, was declared a World Heritage site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1980, in recognition of some 320 historically important sites within the city limits of 55 hectares.

If discussion about contemporary art is rising in Malta, it is positively boiling over on the subject of the new City Gate project, designed by Renzo Piano. The Maltese call the gate *Bieb il-Belt*, meaning “door to the city”, and Piano’s design is the fifth such door to be built since 1569. Except, it isn’t really a door: it is a very modern looking, sleek breach in the bastion walls originally constructed under the supervision of Grand Master Jean Parisot de Valette. De Valette had successfully repelled the Ottomans in 1565, and he set about constructing Valletta the following year; Valletta is the first planned city in the world. Renzo Piano’s project includes a new parliament building just inside the City Gate, extensive work on the bastions and the trenches around the gate, and an open-air theatre called *Pjazza Teatru Rjal*. Not a single element I’ve just mentioned has escaped heated argument since the previous City Gate was demolished in 2011.

I’ll start with the easy part: *Pjazza Teatru Rjal* stands on the site of Valletta’s former Royal Opera House, built between 1862 and 1866 by E.M. Barry. The opera house was almost entirely destroyed by bombs in WWII, and it was the secret wish of many Maltese that, one day, it should be restored to its former glory. Instead, Renzo Piano has come up with a design that incorporates the still-standing elements of the ruin, with rather eerie classical columns and a good, solid base of rooms that still serve as changing rooms, toilets and a bar. Into the open space, Piano has installed 1,000 theatre seats and has networked the space with steel beams, so that it is modern, but with some flavour of the original 19th century building.

The problem is the open-air idea: it’s often too windy in Malta, or too rainy, or too hot, to appreciate a concert out of doors. Added to this is the peculiar Maltese fascination with fireworks, and lots of them, especially during the summer months. Thus, we might have a fine piece of solo work underway, interspersed with crash-banging and whistling doodles enough to give even a long-dead composer a turn.

I have been to a concert in Malta when the cellist stopped for a moment, listened to the latest round of gunpowder blasts and announced:

‘We will see who is stronger. Beethoven, or fireworks’.

Beethoven nearly won, that day. But there is still another problem with the open-air idea: sitting in the theatre, you can hear people strolling along the sidewalks to either side of the space. (In Piano’s original plans, this problem was supposed to have been solved by huge sails above the theatre, which would buffer noise and double as projection screens.) Instead, we hear people walking, talking, laughing in a bar, doing what people do on a lovely night in Valletta. And there are occupied apartments just across the street. Not everyone is a music fan and nor should they be expected to appreciate Beethoven or the Kronos Quartet at eleven o’clock at night when the hour of rest has arrived. People begin to bang their shutters in protest, the age-old signal in Mediterranean countries that enough is enough, and this puts something of a damper on the performance underway. But, as I’ve said, though it cost about six million euros and does not

incorporate Piano's most flexible and theatrical solutions, the Pjazza Teatru Rjal is the easy part of the debate about Piano's new City Gate. I'll even brush aside for now the question as to whether or not the government of Malta actually *needed* a new parliament building: let's just say yes to that one.

The main point of any argument about the new City Gate, the moment the gloves come off, is when talk turns to the actual shape of the gate itself, and the shape and finish of the parliament buildings which are designed to complement the gate and the bastion walls. If you look at the Renzo Piano 'Building Workshop' Internet site on Valletta City Gate, it makes sense: 'The first objective of the project was... to reinstate the ramparts' original feeling of depth and strength and to reinforce the narrowness of the entrance to the city, while opening up views of Republic Street. The new city gate is a "breach" in the wall only eight metres wide. The relationship between the original fortifications and those that have been reconstructed is made clear by the insertion of powerful 60mm-thick steel "blades" that slice through the wall between old and new'.

A newcomer to the city cannot help but be amazed by the massive walls, brought sharply into focus by the way Piano has cleared out the moat, or rather ditch, at the base of the walls, and by the magnificent steps leading up to fortified grand garrisons to either side of the gate, known as St James Cavalier and St John's Cavalier. The shapes of the City Gate and the new parliament building are equal to the sheer challenge of the bulk of the 16th century walls, which is a tricky feat to have managed, but even if two Maltese might agree on this aspect of the project, they cannot agree on the solid stone finish of the parliament buildings. Piano's site describes it thus: 'This stone has been sculpted as though eroded by the direction of the sun and the views around it, creating a fully functional device that filters solar radiation while allowing natural daylight inside, all the while maintaining views from the building. Each of these blocks of façade has been sculpted by a numerically controlled machine. The result is a stone architecture that is fitting for its historical context but also the product of cutting-edge technology'.

We'll skip over the various delays in the project, some of which were caused by the fact that the beautiful stone for the parliament building's façade was quarried in Gozo, but then shipped to Italy, where the 'numerically controlled machine' resides, then shipped back. Stone is heavy; shipment was expensive; costs overran, etc., etc. The problem is, and this is when we get to the nub of the argument, that the buildings don't have any windows. They've got some sort of peepholes, all cleverly arranged around stone outcroppings. This is contemporary as hell, anyone can see that, but here, I think, is where the Maltese lose it: bad enough that we don't know what the government is up to half the time anyway, now we've got to pass by on the main street of Valletta, going about our business, all the while knowing they are... *peeping* at us... through those *peepholes*!

The latest soothing proposal has been to move the *monti*, the rather rag-tag street market once over on lower Merchants Street, to nestle in and around the base of the new buildings. While trading in two euro brassieres, tin openers, and rubber bands, the hawkers will keep an eye on things and be able to report any government shenanigans, in the way of hawkers the world over. This would, essentially, destroy the clean-cut setting and lines of the project, and at least one of Piano's architects has been quoted as saying he was ready to cry, actual tears, at the news. The Maltese cannot be moved by tears; they've been through worse than the *lacrimosa* of an Italian architect. However, the argument has gone on simmer for a while and the *monti* has re-located to

Ordnance Street across the way, though the temptation to set up a stall on the wrong side of the street will likely prove irresistible.

But really, what has Renzo Piano done but simply try to find a way past the weight of history, to show us something new about things we think we already know so well that we don't even see them anymore? I thought about this, looking around at the first Valletta International Visual Arts Festival (VIVA). (Everything seems to be "international" these days, in the lead up to Valletta 2018.) I was interested in the outdoor installations, and started with one exhibit by the duo John Paul Azzopardi and Michael Camilleri, called 'Cause and Effect.'

Housed in a Plexiglas box, we were presented with what appeared to be a sort of sadistic contraption modelled on a dentist's chair, with blocks such as one might find in a medieval town square and leather straps perhaps inspired by an electric chair from an execution centre in the USA. There was a rather long-winded explanation for the installation on a plaque, and if I caught the gist of it, then apparently, we opt for democracy and thus willingly give up freedoms for public good and order. If this is how the average Maltese feels about democracy, it goes a long way towards explaining the parking habits of islanders, and several other occasionally law-enforceable matters, as well.

As mentioned, the tide is rising on discussion about contemporary art in Malta, which became evident when the long-serving general manager of the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, also known as *Spazju Kreattiv*, quit his post. The centre is located in the St James garrison and it is an important part of the art scene here, with regular exhibitions, a small theatre, and live screenings of foreign opera and theatre. The manager, Chris Gatt, appeared to have a few scores to settle on his way out, and described the artistic community in Malta as being 'by and large, hobbyists'. I found much of the reaction to Mr Gatt's comments fairly incomprehensible, though it was clear he'd stirred things up. One reporter wrote: 'Established artist Pawl Carbonaro said: "I'd like to tell Chris Gatt that when I put up an exhibition, *The Times of Malta* takes two months to feature an article about my work, and a write-up about Ċikku Nobody's work or Pawl Carbonaro's exhibit would be the same"'.

Part of my problem in trying to understand the stories that appear in Maltese newspapers and magazines is that the writers tend to overuse clichés and mix metaphors. I don't hear Maltese people speaking this way; they can be very direct in conversation. Mr Gatt was reported to have compared passion for art as 'a contagious disease that rubs off on people', which is an alarming comparison to make if you are a supporter of art and artists. 'The real problem is Malta has excellent vaccinations against the spread of this artistic disease! [sic] Vaccinations include the educational system, unscrupulous artists, and cultural or political entities that dilute the force of art by ignoring standards, putting everything on the same level'. Now, I can only assume that Mr Gatt said this, as it was reported as a quote, but what on earth is actually being said here? Does the education system work against the passion for art? And how, exactly, do unscrupulous artists, whoever they might be, 'vaccinate' against the passion for art? Further: are artists *diseased*? (Later, I managed to catch up with Chris Gatt, and he admitted to stirring the pot with his comments).

And so, back to VIVA, and the installations around the new parliament buildings, and the controversy surrounding contemporary art in Malta, and suddenly, there it is: the three-legged horse. I do not believe I have ever witnessed a bigger storm about any other piece of contemporary work in Malta in the nine years we've lived here. This installation is a bronze-cast,

equestrian statue called *Žieme* by an artist named Austin Camilleri. The Maltese word for horse is *żiemel*, so right away, you know something is afoot.

It is a beautiful work, strong, with contemporary lines rather than a classical equestrian statue meant to sit on a plinth in a park somewhere gathering guano. But in place of a left foreleg, the horse has a stump, rather reminiscent of the quadraplegic on display in London's Trafalgar Square some time ago (*Alison Lapper Pregnant* by artist Marc Quinn). (Footnote, that Trafalgar Square was completed by the architect Sir Charles Barry in 1845 ; E.M. Barry, architect of the original opera house in Valletta, was his third son.) But, *Žieme*: a beautiful, bronze horse, missing a leg!

Some of the remarks posted on sites in Malta were funny in a groaner sort of way: maybe it was made in China and a piece fell off on delivery; maybe the artist broke the cast and decided to call it art anyway; maybe he ran out of bronze; maybe he lost the leg, typical sloppy workmanship. I've never managed to find anything said either in defence or even to explain his work by the artist, but VIVA put out a short statement explaining that the sculpture took off from the simple premise that Malta, unlike other countries in northern Europe, 'has no equestrian monuments'. Apparently, the horse was meant to refer to Malta's historic links with other colonial powers, but its positioning in front of the new parliament building supplemented Renzo Piano's work with 'rich, additional layers of meaning'.

My own impression is that *Žieme* is rather brilliant, strong enough to stand up to the power of Piano's walls and de Valette's bastions, and the bombed-out opera house, and just about anything else you could throw at it. There it stood, dark against the milky limestone, utterly defiant, on three legs. A good metaphor, in this case, for the fact that the Maltese have withstood enormous challenges over the course of history, and they have managed it with grace and a power all their own. It should be there, still—what a talking point for Valletta 2018—"have you seen the three-legged horse!" But it is not there, it was taken away a few weeks after installation. I miss it still, though it has recently turned up in a contemporary art exhibition at Kalmar Konstmuseum in Sweden—I hope the Swedes don't decide to keep it!

There are high expectations in place for Valletta 2018, when Malta's new, national museum of art is scheduled to open. Called MUŻA—the Maltese word for 'inspiration' and a play on the word 'museum' within the Maltese expression *Mużew Nazzjonali tal-Arti*—this is an ambitious project that will be housed in the Auberge d'Italie on Merchants Street, originally built in the 16th century. The National Museum of Fine Arts, as it used to be called, was established in 1974 and was for many years located in another auberge on the other side of town. Pictures, sculpture, silverware, pottery and furniture owned by the museum are all part of a collection begun early in the 20th century by the National Museum's first curator, Vincenzo Bonello. As is the norm in Malta, plans to move the museum, re-vamp and re-name it have endured regular doses of scepticism and set-backs, but at this stage, it looks to be on course for completion sometime in 2018; the Network of European Museums Organisation will hold its annual conference at MUŻA later the same year. There is a strong element of community outreach in the design and programming of MUŻA. The project has incorporated 'Gallery Learning Outcomes', developed by the Leicester School of Museum Studies, so that visitors can expect to come away from a tour with interpretative skills and insight into what they've seen.

I met with Sandro (Alexander) Debono, the Senior Curator and MUŻA Project Leader, and thought to myself that I'd never met any living human being with such enormous brown eyes

before I realised I'd forgotten to remove my magnifying eyeglasses in the rush to make notes and keep up with his enthusiasm. 'MUŻA is not a project,' he said, 'it is a *vision*. It is an *equation* between arts and discussion.' What Debono means by this is that he's got his work cut out for him in terms of how he will re-connect the museum and its contents—spanning Malta's cultural history in the Mediterranean, within Europe and as part of one Empire after another—to artists, and the Maltese community at large, some of whom have never set foot in a museum.

First up is an exercise whereby eight or ten leaders from Malta's many communities will be asked to visit the museum to choose a picture or an item, and then explain why they have chosen it. Posters will be made of the selections, and the explanatory quotes will be displayed. I can see this will be an effective way to help people to see themselves in the collection—history is moving so fast these days that our stories are getting lost along the way. All museums these days are working with the same challenges to stay relevant. Debono mentioned that the museum has bought about 120 pieces of contemporary art over the past five years, so that there is a sense of "now" about the collection, too, though he acknowledges that the museum does not solve the ongoing problem of a permanent exhibition space for contemporary work.

It will be interesting to see how local artists engage with the museum. There is a long list of highly competent landscape and portrait artists in Malta, but contemporary artists have always had a hard time finding proper space for exhibition. Installation art, laser art, experiential art—none of this adapts to the "white cube" gallery long ago trashed by Charles Saatchi as a time warp imposed by museums from another age. A fellow named Mark Mangion has been staging contemporary exhibitions in 'non-art spaces' for several years both in Malta and abroad with the dual goal of creating a supportive community for young Maltese artists and getting their work recognised elsewhere. In 2017, he re-established The Malta Contemporary Art (MCA) gallery in Malta, currently housed on Felix Street in Valletta.

As it is, many artists in Malta get their first exposure through some of the smaller galleries dotted among shopping districts and residential neighbourhoods in Malta: the Christine X Art Gallery, Lily Agius Gallery, SO Galerie, Heart of Gozo, and the Palazzo de la Salle where the Malta Society of Arts was established in 1923 by the governing British—full name is the Malta Society of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce. Studio 104, a gallery on St. Lucia Street in Valletta, regularly features the work of Malta's better-known contemporary artists—including Austin Camilleri of *Žieme*—and encourages the art community with studio space and meetings.

But can artists and designers today expect to live in Malta and forge a successful career? A friend handed me a copy of a book titled *Uncommon: Malta + Gozo* (ed. by Emma Mattei, Jon Banthorpe; Miranda Publishers, Malta, 2011) that made me think it might be possible. This is a most unusual book, part of a series, with about 36 contributors from Malta and elsewhere. The editors have tried to bring out the more unusual aspects of living in Malta, with cultural references, walking tours to places you shouldn't be able to find, history, nature and neighbourhoods; it's an edgy theme with poems, essays, plenty of photography and some pieces I wouldn't have thought to include, on drag racing for example. The book is an artistic work in its own right, and I looked up one of the editors, Jon Banthorpe, to see what he had to say.

Banthorpe is director of Reasons For, an agency that provides art direction and creative solutions for print media, the web, film, advertising, 'and other stuff'. I ordered him a gin and tonic, but realised ice would be superfluous: Banthorpe is pretty cool. He's in his early forties (transl: the new early twenties), and I wondered if he was where he wanted to be with his career, living in

Malta. 'In some ways, my UK friends are envious,' he said. 'They've already been shoehorned into the job description "designer". I've had to be much more flexible to carry on in Malta, working on film sets, starting a magazine, writing, design, art direction, commercial work... but not enough to make me sick'. These days, Banthorpe is partner in an international computer-generated design group, and he's plugged into the Valletta PechaKucha Night, a social platform for creatives from all sectors that spans about 800 cities worldwide. I loved the presentation by a guy trying to tell us how a Moog synthesizer works: not. As Banthorpe says: 'You've got to get the joke to live in Malta'. I know he's right, though I can't say why.

Banthorpe and others in the creative community are all involved to one degree or another with BLITZ, a non-profit organisation that runs the only independent, artist-led art space in Malta. Housed in a 400-year-old townhouse on St Lucia Street in Valletta, BLITZ is a gathering place for contemporary artists, with a residency programme for those working in film, photography, performance, sound, immersive installation and digital platforms.

In 2016, artists in residence included Harry Sanderson, a London-based new media artist who works in the emergent field of 'caustic imaging technology' that uses algorithms and cloud computing to produce images from refracted light. As well, BLITZ featured the work of American artist Sister Mary Corita Kent, a former Catholic nun who developed innovative methods in screen printing, long overlooked for her contribution to the Pop Art movement. The 2017 residency programme started with Nikolas Ventourakis, a visual artist living and working in both Athens and London. Ventourakis likes to challenge assumptions and misconceptions that come about between photographs and their viewers. He decided the theme in Malta, given the fortress-like nature of the islands and modern-day culture of surveillance, would be: 'Rituals for Our Safety.' First up: a canon sitting on cement blocks on a residential street. What does it mean?

I meant to end this piece with a brief, artistic discussion of the fading of the African Tamarisk blossoms from pink to white, but then 400 people drowned trying to make the crossing from Libya to Europe. By the time I started to write about the tragedy of the 400, another 40 people had drowned and then 15 people were arrested in Sicily on reports they'd thrown a dozen Christian refugees overboard. This began to make headlines in the international news reports, when three days later, some 900 people drowned south of Lampedusa.

Today, I write to you that Malta has received 24 dead bodies, mostly young men in their early twenties, and one young boy of about 14, buried with nothing but their hopes and dreams intact. We are laying them to rest in an interfaith ceremony at the Addolorata Cemetery in Malta, and it is a very sad day indeed. *Id-Duluri*, we say again, so soon. By now, the international news reporters have also started to wash up on our shores, and we can see pictures of ourselves, and our little fishing boats, and our sun-blasted African Tamarisks, all over the networks. Easter seems a very long time ago. In fact, a lifetime for some.

Perhaps there is a contemporary artist somewhere in Malta, working on this *Guernica* of the 21st century. I hope the artist doesn't forget to include beauty in the picture.

Acknowledgements:

This is an excerpt from Karen Elizabeth Steed's upcoming book 'Malta: The Beautiful Hour—How a Generation of Movers and Shakers Has Created a Surprising New Arts and Culture Scene', to be published with Miranda Publishers October, 2017. It is 244 pages, with illustrations and index.