

An Introduction to the Narrative

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Maleth / Haven / Port—Heterotopias of Evocation

The thematic title of the curatorial narrative is inspired by the island of Malta itself, its historical origins and its spatial presence in contemporary reality within the Mediterranean Sea. The word derives from one of the possible interpretations of the origins of the name of Malta; Maleth. Maleth, a Phoenician word, evokes the primeval origins of the island's existence and literally translates to Haven or Port, a quality the island inspired to all that traversed the waters of the Mediterranean Sea through the ages and that continues to withstand throughout the island's history.

The locus taken over by the Malta Pavilion within the building of the Venetian arsenal, transforms into a haven, a port for the different works of art that will be hosted within it, exploring the notion of heterotopia providing a challenging array of contemporary interpretations of homeness / (un) homeness.

As a structural setting to host the curatorial concept and created art works, this narrative proposes the construction of a space within space. A setting structured within the arsenal space, that functions as a lateral constructed space, a home within an empty shell, a vessel / raft within the sea. Based on the concept of created space and enclosure strongly bound with the notions of Heterotopia and Haven, and inspired by primeval constructed forms drawn from the history of Malta and the Mediterranean sea, the works will be exhibited in an enclosed space of limited light and controlled sound to maximize the viewing experience and excel the immersive quality of the pavilion.

Border-traversing, and alterity, both spatial and semantic, as mentioned by Foucault, are all facets of the complex historical and social phenomena that have strongly shaped our histories especially those of the Mediterranean world. Here, such histories seek to materialize

within the different personal narratives the participating artists choose to share with the Biennale international audience.

According to Heidegger, displacement has always been a reality of history, a destiny of the human condition. The course of one's life, seen as development of a personal social narrative which bears a present, a past and a future, comes to an abrupt end, which in a single violent act alters (makes hetero) all that would have been of an anticipated future.

This alteration of the natural course of an expected future bound to a certain topos and home, becomes currently an ominous phenomenon that fits to what Walter Benjamin would have called divine violence. As it is evident few factors can impact personal lives, as profoundly as displacement, this discontinuity of ones presence at a certain topos upon where its personal history had been drawn and acted out concentrically around the notion of homeness.

This abrupt place–distraction that forces one in becoming a Refugee, a Migrant, a Foreigner, are all outcomes of such a violent interruption capable in most times to challenge or abolish the haven of homeness, forcing one into a hybrid shadow existence of drifting, not- belonging and ultimately not–Being. In such a state, humans seek refuge and new forms of re-interpreting homeness, a state of evoking Heterotopias, spatial approximations of conscious utopias, according to Foucault.

Under the title, of *Maleth / Haven / Port–Heterotopias of Evocation* artists and creatives from Malta and from Cyprus, two of the most important islands of the Mediterranean Sea, that share a parallel historical past come together here, to realize this curatorial narrative, in an effort to decipher the notion of homeness (haven) in transition, as this, is currently experienced in the Mediterranean sea.

This curatorial narrative seeks to transform the Pavilion of Malta at the Venice Art Biennale of 2019 into a Pavilion of the Mediterranean world, bringing forward to the international creative community an innovative curatorial scenario of a national pavilion going beyond one's country literal borders, expanding into a semantic spatial existence.

‘Between my Country and the Others,
there is a Sea—
But flowers negotiate between us
as ministry.’

Emily Dickinson,
“Between My Country And Others”

The Maltese Geographical and Historical Context

Sited at the very centre of the intersection between Europe and Africa, the island state of Malta is marked by its own geopolitical reality in the turbulent Mediterranean Sea; a historical meeting point of cultures, embodying a steadfast negotiating table for shaping the evolution of the many complex facets of the societies of the region.

Being a port that gives refuge to such richness of cultural diversity has been at the core of Malta's multi-layered history since antiquity, a reality that has engendered such coexisting contradictions as native steadiness and itinerant transience, popular insularity and welcoming cosmopolitanism, phobic resistance and customary affability; a dichotomy that also reflects the island's own specificity as it exists as both a fixed and heterotopic (philosophical) harbour space simultaneously.

Malta's heuristic role as a "spatial laboratory" for the nurturing and recontextualisation of the realities brought about by this ancient act of 'harbouring in microcosm' forms the philosophical foundation of Malta's Pavilion *Heterotopias of Evocation*; where the space acts as a renewable structure of cumulative interventions, a haven that is shared by, and which also links the curator, the artists and the public.

Defining Heterotopias

Michel Foucault (1967:4) asks: "As for the heterotopias as such, how can they be described? What meaning do they have? We might imagine a sort of systematic description—I do not say a science because the term is too galvanized now—that would, in a given society, take as its object the study, analysis, description, and 'reading' (as some like to say nowadays) of these different spaces, of these other places. As

a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live, this description could be called heterotopology.”

Foucault argues that “[t]he heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible’ (1967:6). This description resonates with the distinct (dis-) connectedness characteristic of island states. Furthermore, Malta although a tiny island has welcomed different cultures for thousands of years, going back to the Neolithic period, and the first inhabitants are believed to have originated from the nearby island of Sicily. Thus, we can see how migration has played a crucial part in the history of Malta and it still does.

Foucault (ibid.) maintains that: ‘Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time—which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time.’

The oldest free standing structures in the world dating back 5,000 BCE are located in Malta and this attests to the propensity of such minute island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea to accumulate time. While it has undergone huge development, Malta still retains places that evoke a certain historicity. Places that arrest time and transport us to a distant past which is still inscribed in the island’s sun soaked coralline stone. Being an island, Malta has been both open to new cultures and insular at the same time. Foucault (1967:7) argues that “[h]eterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable.” Since ancient times, harbours played an important role in connecting the island with the rest of the world.

The Malta Pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale of 2019, seeks to re-evaluate the notion of harbour in the 21st century by literally recreating a space within a space divided into further sections or ports of call. Each artist, appropriating a harbour which acts as the contact point between the viewer and the overall themed narrative. Echoing Foucault's (1967:8) words, this internal delineation of space functions 'in relation to all the space that remains.' The exhibition space is confronted as an 'open box' which doubles as a floating barge and a 'harbour of harbours'. The proposed setup's function 'is to create a space that is other, another real space' (ibid.). Malta is renowned for its natural harbours which have played a major role in the island's history at the intersection between Africa and Europe. Here we seek to reconstruct and reimagine the symbolic notion of a harbour by playfully presenting alternatives to the historical definition of the term.

Engaging an Audience

The proposed "open-box" structure evokes the island's characteristics namely it being open yet insular, fortified but accessible, (dis-) connected, and a port haven. The exhibit setting allows for a spatial re-configuration of the Pavilion that entices the viewer to cruise around the "open" space and enter into a harbour—three in all. Each harbour is appropriated by an artist namely—Klitsa Antoniou, Trevor Borg and Vince Briffa. Thus, the audience may decide which port to call into first since there is no fixed route. Visitors may enter from one side and exit from another side as they deem fit to create a flow. This transforms the Pavilion into a transitional space intended to resist fixedness, a concept that resonates with Malta's historical and actual state of affairs.

The restricted spatial delineations inside the built structure evoke Malta's diminutive size where everyone has to negotiate their own space due to

the island's high density which is constantly increasing. The diversity of the artistic work on display within this constructed space resonates with Malta's rich cultural legacy perhaps disproportionate with its size.

The proposed Pavilion allows for movement and relocations. The audience will be encouraged to move around and to go with the flow. The structure also serves as a shelter, a containment, whereby visitors may move from one "port" to another to experience the different facets of Malta in the form of artistic work.

‘A ship in port is safe,
but that’s not what ships are built for.’

John A. Shedd,
“Salt From My Attic”