Yet there are times when a deeper need enters, when we want the poem to be not only pleasurable right but compellingly wise, not only a surprising variation played upon the world, but a re-tuning of the world itself. We want the surprise to be transitive like the impatient thump which unexpectedly restores the picture to the television set, or the electric shock which sets the fibrillating heart back to its proper rhythm. (Heaney, 1995)
Project Disintegration, an examination of art as protest and protest as art.

Master of Fine Art in Digital Arts
2016

A dissertation completed in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the conferment of the degree of Master of Fine Art in Digital Arts

Margarita Cotter
April 2016
Statement of Authenticity
University of Malta

Declaration

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Faculty: Media and Knowledge Sciences

Title of Dissertation: Project Disintegration, an examination of art as protest and protest as art.

No of words: 20,132

I hereby declare that I am the legitimate author of this dissertation and that it my original work. No portion of this work has been submitted in support of an application for another degree of qualification of this or any other university or institution of learning.

Signature of Student

Date
I would like to thank my long-suffering family, my parents, all my colleagues at Valletta 2018 and that ‘discerning watchman’, Dr Raphael Vella for his guidance and supervision.

I would also like to thank Liam Gauci and Dr Charles Xuereb for their part in the radio interview, Marthe Azzopardi and Reuben Spiteri and all those who took part in the workshops, Pawlu Mizzi for his insight, Albert Dimech for his help with the pastizzerija, and lastly, my accomplice in graffiti who shall remain nameless.
Abstract

This dissertation explores the uneasy relationship between protest art and a capitalist or neoliberal art market and examines the tension between more radical art practices that move outside the established art world and the art world itself. Through a discussion of various models and art practices, it questions whether political art can bring about enlightenment and social change, and asks what, if anything, the effect of political art on its audience and the world as a whole should be.

The practical section of the dissertation describes a project which puts forward a fictional premise that as a result of a two-tier European Union, Malta undergoes a cultural reworking and historical revision in order to persuade its citizens to leave identify with the culture of the Arab Region more than that of Europe and to eventually leave the EU.
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Introduction

“But there is no reason why the sensory strangeness produced by the clash of heterogeneous elements should bring about the understanding of the state of the world, no reason why the comprehension of the state of the world should bring about the decision to change it. There is no straight way from looking at a spectacle to understanding the state of the world, no straight way from intellectual awareness to political action. What occurs is much more the shift from a given sensory world to another sensory world which defines other capacities and incapacities, other forms of tolerance and intolerance.” (Rancière, 2008, p. 12)

In this dissertation, I follow Rancière’s ‘straight line’ from intellectual awareness to political action through a discussion of various models and art practices, to see if, as Rancière claims, political art can bring about only enlightenment, but nothing close to real and actual change in the world.

I explore the tension between independent, more radical art practices that move outside the established art world, and the art world itself and explore the uneasy relationship between protest art and a capitalist or neoliberal market. How can critical art exist in the context of the commercial art world, and what are the implications of using commerce and capitalism to disseminate critical art? I look at when the production of critical art crosses the boundary between ‘genuine’ and cynical, and how defined this boundary is, if indeed it exists. I also discuss how new media and increased connectivity have impacted on artists’ terms of engagement with their audiences and how this new relationship affects the art they create.
Many critical artists find themselves operating in a world that runs parallel to or outside of the dominant world culture; modern technologies allow these artists to create networks that run contrary to those in power. In this dissertation I argue that through various means, protest art resists through its acute consciousness of the different worlds in which it operates. Protest art attempts to exist in a space outside of conventional control, whether that control is physical, monetary or societal; it is in this ‘other space’ that dissent can be nurtured. I argue further that through its protest, political art very often attempts to create another reality to that which exists. Through this representation or remodeling, it holds a mirror to the real, flawed world, and allows the audience to see the world’s shortcomings for themselves.

I will look at how this awareness of and manipulation of different realities is used by artists to create what is at the core, not only of political art, but of contemporary art as a whole; what Mieke Bal calls the “affective impact” (2015, p. 157) that calls for action, without describing what that action should be.

Because of current instabilities in some areas of the Middle East, caused historically or in part by colonisation and a world with a tendency to centralise (cultural and physical) power, as well as an ongoing process of decolonisation and dewesternization of former colonies, many of the artists I refer to in this dissertation deal directly with difficulties in this region. Some artists refer to the control of Israel over Palestinian lands, some reflect the difficulties faces by migrants and displaced people, while others speak in more general terms about inequalities or instability.

The motives of the artists I discuss are not identical, indeed some are not even clear. But for the most part, they centre on affecting change and challenging the status quo by engaging directly and incisively with their audiences.

This will link with the practical part of my dissertation which takes its lead from the exploration of tensions that exist between Western and Arab worlds through the
creation of an alternative world. To be more specific, it uses an imaginary world that is only slightly different from the real one, to cast a critical eye on preconceptions that European society has of its Arab neighbours. Local Maltese society, history and culture, with varying degrees of influences from many different cultures proved to be a perfect mini-universe with which to play.
Contextual Review

Since for the purposes of this dissertation, I will be focusing on artists that use their practice to criticise the current social, political or economic status quo as they see it around them, I would like firstly to address the contemporary context in which they are creating. Most of the works I refer to date from the twenty-first century, therefore I will concentrate on the last two decades of history.

If, as Mignolo claims in *The Darker Side of Western Modernism*, the world order is becoming more and more decentralised, and to a certain extent, dewesternised after the age of colonisation, the disparate centres and powers around the world share the same economic principle of capitalism (2011, p. 32). If we take Mignolo’s definition of capitalism as “not only a domain of economic transactions and exploitation of labour, but of control and management of knowledge and subjectivities.” (p. 33) then the key word is “control”, control of economies, transactions and labour, but also of freedom, information, knowledge and ideologies and histories. It is the “control and management of knowledge and subjectivities” that critical and political art seeks to subvert, and maybe where it is best placed to do so.

Mignolo’s claim of the dewesternisation of the world could easily be refuted with the argument that western culture and power is more prevalent than ever before. However alternative and sub-cultures have also found a platform in the same globalisation that permits the prevalence of a monoculture; in simple terms, the internet which gives some power to dominant cultures, also gives freedom and smaller powers to those who wish to move in different worlds outside these prevalent cultures.
It is from areas, whether physical, virtual or conceptual that fall or put themselves beyond this control that a genuine resistance, no matter how minute, can come. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said brings hope to a near-dystopian world-view of inescapable control. He insists that “no matter how apparently complete the dominance of an ideology or social system”, there will always be pockets of networks and groups that it does not hold control over. And it is here that opposition can be brewed. (1994, p. 289)

This dominance can be implemented through physical force, as well as through control of media, internet or other means of communication, but in recent years, artists have been able to make use of new media to create and to communicate without necessarily being physically present.

Said continues: “Opposition to a dominant structure arises out of a perceived, perhaps even militant awareness on the part of individuals and groups outside and inside it that, for example, certain of its policies are wrong.” (Said, 1994, p. 289) If the world is becoming increasingly decentralised and more connected, then access to information and thus a more informed potential protest-base becomes more possible. In art practice terms, open opposition to control and exploitation can walk the line between accepted art practice and illegal mass protest. The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (Lab of ii) is an art activist collective that produces and coordinates large-scale protest actions which are thematically conceived and visually dramatic. Acts like *Put the Fun between your Legs: Become the Bike Bloc* (2009) at the UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen, or the impromptu *The People vs the Banksters* (2009) and the *Clown Army: War and Strategic Planning Room* (2008) are typical of their bolshy humour and ambitious thinking. Modern communication makes protest more immediate and more easily accessible; during a snowfall in London the group were able, through “a flurry of text messages and emails the night before”, to launch *The People vs the Banksters* (2009) in front of the Royal Bank of Scotland to challenge bankers to a snowball fight (Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, 2016).
The protest, which borders on a poetic or artistic act, is one that pushes the boundaries of what is accepted in art terms. On the surface, the act involved some protesters throwing snowballs as bankers – a juvenile show of bravado. But the undercurrent of intelligent dissent, as well as the creation of an alternate reality, could make it worthy of the title of ‘art’. In any case, John Jordan, co-founder of Lab of ii, points out the futility of asking whether an event is an act of art or protest: “If I’m talking to a bunch of activists in a squat I might call what we do art activism, or activism. Or if I’m talking to the Prague Quadriennale I’ll talk about it as a radical form of scenography. Or if I’m speaking to water engineers I’ll discuss it as environmental work. So it’s just about framing.” (as cited in Gorman, 2015, p. 18). Jordan is claiming that terminology is not important; what counts is the final form and the final effect. However, sometimes it seems that for the art world, all that matters is the terminology, and to explain an act as art will allow it to become so.

Acts like the Lab of ii events serve to counter pessimistic proclamations like that of Chomsky talking about the Occupy protests in New York; “To have a revolution – a meaningful one – you need a substantial majority of the population who recognize or believe that further reform is not possible within the institutional framework that exists. And there is nothing like that here, not even remotely.” (2012, p. 59). A substantial majority there may not be, at least not in New York, but imagination, creativity and energy as well as wide-spread support, can go some way towards an effective protest.

In his book, Politics of Indignation (2012), Mayo is not alone in referring to direct and physical large-scale protests that have taken place in global centres in recent years. He claims that politics was put back in the hands of democracy through global public dissent in cities around the world, spreading protest and indignation further around the world (2012, p. 1, 2). While this dissent may be visible, it is interesting to note how the internet and online communication was instrumental in the dissemination of information around these protests. In other words the protests took place simultaneously and real-time, on the streets and online.
And since the process of decolonisation and dewesternization of former colonies is still an ongoing, and sometimes an oscillating process, many of the artists I refer to grapple with issues and difficulties in regions or countries that are going through this process. If, in the last twenty or more years, the effects of neoliberalism have been, as Chomsky puts it “harmful to the general population and beneficial to a very small sector” (2012, p. 63), then the reactions of artists as political activists can be seen as a counter to oppression and conflict.

Recent conflicts and the resultant mass-displacement of populations (in 2015 alone, an estimated one million refugees entered Europe (BBC News, 2016)) can come into play and can have an effect on culture and dialogue in Europe, if not further afield. In his book *Migrancy Culture Identity*, Iain Chambers (1994), points out that all displaced artists from global South to global West are political, because they all serve to lessen the strength of the dominant voice (1994, p. 19). This is a dangerous claim however, since it comes close to the assumption that these artists will always be labelled with their ‘non-western’ tag. Mignolo’s statement that artists from particular regions will always be expected to talk about their homeland (2011, p. 119) is still a valid warning, but many artists reject this labelling. Adel Abdessemed, for example, does not accept the mantle of ‘Middle-Eastern artist’ - he is from Constantine, Algeria, but has spent much of his life in Europe. Abdessemed states it clearly: “I do not live between two cultures. I am not a post-colonial artist. I am not working on the scar and am not mending anything” (cited by Center, 2014). Abdessemed’s work deals with meta-politics; power struggles and the realities of existence on a grand scale, and does not pinpoint specifics; take *Sept Frères* (2006), for example, or *L’avenir est aux fantômes* (2011 – 2012). However one of his works, *Hope* (2011 – 2012) does speak on something more concrete. The work is an abandoned boat found in Florida Keys, filled with cast resin sculptures of black garbage bags. The boat speaks of a journey, probably clandestine, and its name jars with its sorry, dilapidated state. The implications of the garbage bags are unclear; are they replacing people, passengers’ hopes, or their destination? Whichever it is, the implication is a harsh one. The work ‘hope’ implies a better life or some expectation of a better future, but it seems that hope is what caused the ship-
wreck. “Hope is the only negative thing in the world,” Abdessemed has said; “We don’t need hope. What we need is truth.” (cited by Nathan, 2016)

The Art World
“A special kind of sub-universe” is how Martha Rosler (2010, p.12) describes the art world; she is not alone in this diagnosis.

Julian Stallabrass, always quick to point out the hypocrisies of the art world, occasionally sees this apartness in a positive light; in an article called Off Their Trolleys, he describes the “zone of freedom” in which contemporary art can exist, apart from the constraints of the real world. Although the art world operates within the capitalist system, it appears to function freely and apart from it; “The message is that art is a law unto itself, unaffected by the demands of private patrons, religion, business and the state” (2004, p. 38). Maybe ‘appears’ is the key work in this statement; contemporary art may appear to exist apart from everyday norms, but the world in which it is housed, is very much part of a commercial, capitalist world. And indeed, further into his article, Stallabrass admits “the use of art as servant of business and the state” (2004, p. 39), and half-heartedly offers the creation of anti-capitalist art as an antidote to this condition.

In This is Not Art, Jelinek describes how the artworld’s adoption of neoliberal values and its replication of neoliberal structures has led to the demise of its independence; the new dominance of the art market, as well as the artworld’s embrace of a funding structure that requires private money in order to secure private funding ensures that the interests of private sponsors are inevitably taken into account when creating or curating (2013, p. 17). She holds neoliberalism responsible ultimately for “hierarchy and systemic exclusion, mediocrity, private monopolism and monoculturalism cloaked in values of freedom and a distorted idea of individual responsibility” (2013, p. 18) – quite a charge. A more ‘generic’ protest art can be in danger of falling into an ideological trap, discussing general terms such as good and evil, rather than dealing in specifics that may offend a
particular sponsor. With the right degree of scepticism, this fear could be seen to be played out in the 2015 winner of the Turner Prize; Assemble. The London-based collective work across the fields of art, design and architecture, but could equally be described as community workers or informal town-planners; their recent work with the residents of Toxteth includes the refurbishment of ten derelict terraced houses, saved from demolition by local residents, with low-cost materials and handmade architectural elements (Assemble, 2016). While their work is laudable and will, no doubt, make a difference to the communities they work with, Assemble’s ideologies are non-threatening, in that they are positive and empowering towards a community, rather than critical and railing against the systems which put the community in a helpless and hopeless situation in the first place. So the nomination and award could be seen as a win-win choice for Turner Prize; a community work, sufficiently outside the traditional art practice definition to be seen as avant-garde, but not likely to offend any private sponsors or political benefactors.

Others choose to challenge this status quo directly and actively oppose choices made by galleries; Gulf Labor is a coalition of artists that campaigns to protect workers’ rights during the construction of museums on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi – a complex which will include the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and will eventually become the world’s biggest cultural district. The coalition stages interventions, raises awareness through publications and confronts the institutions directly to further its cause (Bogos, 2015). This is where artists come into direct contact and conflict with the art, political and international worlds; as Downey says in *UnCommon Grounds*, “The precarious nature of global labour is not only a situation to be investigated by artists, but also, it appears, a structural necessity for elements of the art world to continue to develop and capitalise upon structural investments in culture”. (2014, p. 27) By protesting, the coalition is holding the industry in which artists work to account, and objecting to injustices carried out in their professional name.

Still others work outside the art world framework and use networks, peer support and an online presence to support their art practice. Superflex is an artists' group
founded in Denmark in 1993 by Jakob Fenger, Rasmus Nielsen and Bjørnstjerne Christiansen; their *Power Toilets* (2011) recreate the bathrooms of the executive offices in JP Morgan Chase’s headquarters in New York and install them in various diners and small restaurants, making them open to the public. The exact replica allows a bemused user to experience the same privilege as an executive, down to the wallpaper and light fittings, while a small plaque outside tells the user of the toilet’s stylistic origins. The project uses the toilet as an equalizer; like death and taxes, excrement is inescapable. By making the toilet accessible to anyone, the project either brings the JP Morgan executive down to the level of everyman, or elevates the man on the street to the level of financial superpower worthy of a $25bn bank bailouts. The presence of excrement in the work is unavoidable, and a link between it and the executives is the next logical step for the viewer-user. This is a different kind of active audience participation; the viewer becomes a ‘user’ in a very real sense (Superflex, 2016).

For the purposes of this essay, I would like to refer to use Gregory Sholette’s description of the artworld, “By the term art world I mean the integrated, transnational economy of auction houses, dealers, collectors, international biennials and trade publications that, together with curators, artists and critics, reproduce the market, as well as the discourse that influences the appreciation and demand for highly valuable artworks” (1973, p. 18). And opposite this art world, I would like to place the increasing number of artists who work apart from, opposed to, or in an uneasy relationship with it.

*Defining Critical or Political art*

I would like to define what I mean by critical or political art, and how far I wish to extend this definition. For if we extend Seamus Heaney’s claim for poetry to visual art, and describe it as “a re-tuning of the world itself” (Heaney, 1995), then it becomes difficult to identify where the line between political and non-political lies. If the artist’s purpose is so suggest a ‘re-tuning’ of the world, the implication is that
somewhere, something needs re-tuning or improvement, and making art, without even trying, becomes a political act.

And while some, like Lucy Lippard deride the all-encompassing inclusion of the personal in the definition of political, it could be argued that it’s precisely because every human transaction has an element of the political embedded in it, that art about anything can be a ‘re-tuning’ of the world, and can, therefore ‘re-tune’ the world pitch by pitch. Lippard says that “The personal is only political when the individual is also seen as a member of the social whole.” (1980, p. 36), and delineates the boundary with this definition.

In his essay *Commitment*, (2003), Adorno digs down to the motive or ‘commitment’ of the artist and the work or art itself; “A work of art that is committed strips the magic from a work of art that is content to be a fetish, an idle pastime for those who would like to sleep through the deluge that threatens them, in an apoliticism that is in fact deeply political.” (2003, p. 177). He gives weight to work that has a purpose and seriousness, while dismissing art for art’s sake as frivolous and introspective (although he also says that the act of excluding politics is of course political in itself). Adorno goes on to say that “Committed art in the proper sense is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions – like earlier propagandist plays against syphilis, duels, abortion laws or borstals – but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes”. (2003, p. 180). So for Adorno, the function of art is not to educate in a propagandising way, but to question what might be a status quo at an altogether deeper level.

Does this mean then, that any art that refers to something specific rather than something universal or theoretical automatically becomes propaganda? Not at all; but it could be said that the distinction lies in the directness of the message or somehow in the means in which that message is conveyed. Mieke Bal puts is better, with the explanation that art can speak to the viewer without being didactic or prescriptive; this attribute is “the strong affective impact that compels agency
without prescribing what the agent must do”. (2015, p. 157). Art does not tell the viewer what to think or how to act, but is no less political for that.

Adorno hammers the point home: “It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men’s heads.” (2003, p. 180).

To define every interaction and every art practice as political however, would leave the terms of engagement of this dissertation so broad as to be unmanageable and without meaning. So in this essay, I would like to focus on overtly political or dissident art that specifically criticises a social and political status quo, and which, through visual, audio-visual, installation, community or other means, attempts to re-tune the world a little by challenging a reigning power or hegemony.

**Genuine Art or Commodification – is this a silly question?**

In his essay comparing Dewey and Adorno’s views on politics and art (2005), Lewis argues the point that “even were genuine or real artistic expression to appear, there is no way in which these might sustain themselves otherwise than as private pleasures or as products whose potential powers to change and open the political realm have been vitiated by their commodification” (2005, p. 5). In other words, while art, (or what Lewis describes as ‘real art’ rather than propaganda or Adorno’s artifacts) can be a vehicle for political thought and democracy, its audience is so limited, that this vehicle is doomed to go unused, and its state as a commodity, rather than a tool for action. There is some truth in Lewis’ pessimistic stance; the paradox is that if art is thus commodified by the art world, then how can what Lewis calls ‘genuine or real artistic expression’ be understood for what it really means without being stifled by the art world in which it is shown?

To analyse Lewis’ point further, we can look at two extremes of political art; the small under-the-radar act of subversion described by Sholette in his essay *Dark Matter* (Sholette, 2005) and the large-scale, excruciatingly self-aware so-called
Bemusement Park, *Dismaland* (2015) in the UK. (The unintentional link between these, the subversive act of graffiti and the meteoric rise of Banksy is interesting in this context.)

Sholette describes how in what Negt and Kluge call the “proletarian or counter-public sphere” the working-class fantasy provides “necessary compensation for the experience of alienated labour process” (1973, p. 10). The isolated acts Sholette refers to have a taste of the innocent or fauve about them; their perpetrator may not even call himself an artist but individually creates the genuine art work in touch with the real experience and unsullied by the art world. The subversive graffiti included by street artists engaged to add realism to a scene of popular television series Homeland in 2015 is a beautiful example of this; their messages ranged from ‘Homeland is racist’ to ‘Homeland is a joke and it didn’t make us laugh’. Interestingly, the content of the graffiti was not checked by producers; the Arab script was included as a decoration or another visual on the set (Phipps, 2015). The artists were asked to provide a decoration, but what they produced in reality was art that did, for a short while, ‘re-tune’ the world by subverting a popular medium to their own end.

What emerges if we compare this unstructured network of subversive acts with the machine that was *Dismaland*? *Dismaland*’s deliberate rebelliousness and popular appeal jarred with the subversion it claimed to champion. While it thumbed its nose at the establishment, it was unrepentantly part of that establishment itself. Its deliberately unhelpful staff and difficult booking system were no more that the branding of a project and the inclusion of hugely commercial artists such as Damien Hirst, Mike Ross and Jenny Holzer, made it seem all the more like a soulless art show than perhaps the anti-biennale set itself up to be. The concentration of such a large number of political pieces in one venue diluted their individual impact. And while ‘jaded’ seems to have been the effect that Banksy was aiming for, the too-thick irony, satire and self-awareness only served to cancel each other out and make it seem more like an underwhelming exercise in apparent political-hipness than a radical stance on the status quo. Not even the more spontaneous protest of
the Palestinian artist Shadi al Zaqzouq for being exhibited alongside Israeli artists freed the project from its manicured veneer (Green, 2015).

Is, then, underground ‘dark matter’ protest art more meaningful than art endorsed by the state or by the art market? You could say that the act of not accepting the system is part of the art-work itself; the process of struggle and non-conformism and disruption becomes a kind of performance piece around the piece. The art then becomes a vehicle for non-conformist behaviour, a tool rather than an ultimate aim.

Non-conformism and disruption can find a ready tool in new media and ever-easier and ever-faster means of communication and dissemination. Art becomes accessible to a much larger and broader audience than ever before; not only is it more accessible, but it is far more immediate, making it real-time and thus more relevant to struggles taking place in the here and now.

Maybe Banksy’s Dismaland was deliberately (or unwittingly) making the point, succinctly put by Stallabrass that “Without the hope for large-scale transformation, critical art often declines into cynicism, violent lashing out, grim humour or nostalgic whimsy” (2000, p44), for it seems Dismaland deliberately adopted all these qualities.

*Can the Artwork Change Something?*
I would like to take a closer look at the motives of critical or political art, and at the relationship between art and politics. Adorno sees art and politics as inseparable; it is impossible for art to exist apolitically, since it is inextricably linked to the world in which it is produced; “Art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived” (1997, p. 6).

Rancière goes on to speak about the “sensory form of strangeness … prompting a change in perception” (2008, p. 11). Again, it is this ‘strangeness’ or ‘break’ - that something unexpected - which can cause a discomfort in the viewer, and confront
them with something that causes them to rethink a preconceived idea. The ‘aesthetic break’ (2008, p. 11) is part of the work; a deliberate misleading to guide the viewer to a brick wall or a chasm that can’t easily be crossed.

A poetic act of subversion is that of Francis Alÿs in The Green Line (2004). In an earlier version of the work (or part of the same work), The Leak (1995, 2002) Alÿs walked the streets of São Paolo dribbling blue paint from a punctured paint can, leaving a trail behind him as he walked, endowing a temporary, unimportant act with a sense of permanence and significance. He repeated the act with green paint in 2004, but in a completely different context; along the pre-1967 border between East and West Jerusalem. (Ferguson, 2007, p. 52) The meaning of the work changes with a different colour and context, and while the act remains the same, additional layers of meaning are leant to it by its new historical and political backdrop. Alÿs said of the act, “I had reached a point where I could no longer hide behind the ambiguity of metaphors or poetic license. It created a personal need to confront a situation I might have dealt with obliquely in the past” (as cited in Ferguson, 2007, p. 52). Despite Alÿs’ claim that the work deals with the situation directly, the work contains no formulaic message; it’s not clear if by trailing the line along the ‘old’ border, Alÿs is telling authorities to go back to this perimeter, or maybe if he’s calling on normal citizens to follow him in his walk and retrace his steps. Or maybe he is simply drawing attention to borders in general – emphasising their fragility through a thin trickle of paint. The work certainly provides the ‘strangeness’ that Rancière describes; the sight of a tall, thin Belgian-Mexican walking past Israeli checkpoints and trailing a line of green paint behind him, must have been strange if nothing else. But the act is, at the same time, deliberately pointless; its futility is part of the process.

In the search for the point of political art, maybe it’s important to remember what Rancière tells us; that aesthetic experience does not produce “rhetoric persuasion about what has to be done” (Rancière, 2008, p. 11). It does not seek to teach, or offer a step by step guide entitled How to Get Out of this Mess. Rancière tells us that art has a political effect “to the extent that the loss of destination that it
presupposes disturbs the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations” (Rancière, 2008, p. 11). So we assume that in contemporary art, there is something like a ‘loss of destination’; the viewer thinks this will lead somewhere, but in fact, the aesthetic experience leads somewhere else or even nowhere at all. The viewer thinks that the work will guide, symbol by symbol, as in a Dutch 17th century painting, to a logical conclusion, but this guide simply doesn’t exist. And because it doesn’t exist, because of this loss of destination, the viewer is disorientated and is forced to come to his/her own conclusions.

Some artists choose to bring the spectacle closer to the real world, by making their art practice into a representation of an institutional structure; The New World Summit, founded by Dutch visual artist Jonas Staal in 2012, hosts parliamentary summits to those places outside democracy. The 2014 Summit in Brussels invited 20 stateless political organisations to a parliament inside the Royal Flemish Theatre. Central to the summit was “the question to what extent the concept of the state is still capable of representing and protecting a peoples’ right to self-determination in the 21st century” (New World Summit, 2016) and participating organisations included the Kurdish National Congress, the Pirate Party, Iceland, Euskal Herria Bildu and the Ahwazi-Arab Alliance. The action itself explores at what level art can operate as a political instrument and create an alternative political space where none can exist on an existing political platform. This work is slightly different from radical mass protest like that of Lab of ii, in that it seeks to recreate something that should be taking place. Rather than creating a work at, for example, the European Parliament, Staal chooses to create an alternate version, and to show something that might, in an alternate universe, be possible.

Unlikely Bedfellows: Biennials and Politics

In a similar context of self-awareness (or cynicism), Dominic Green highlights the contradictions in 2015’s Venice Biennale; All the World’s Futures. He points out the apparent anomaly between the biennial’s centre-piece; the continuous reading of Karl Marx’s Das Kapital directed by Isaac Julien, while Julien himself was at the
same time commissioned by Rolls Royce. Green calls the Biennale’s vision ‘selective and falsified’ and ‘divorced from reality’. Divorced from reality it may be, but perhaps the art-world is happy to live with the contradiction of Marxism sitting cheek by jowl with Rolls Royce, as long as the artist is aware of the irony in which he finds himself working.

“What keeps mankind alive?” was the title of the 2009 Istanbul Biennial. The conceptual framework of the biennial elaborately asks if the question posed by the Brecht song is not equally important in the twenty-first century; “Aren’t today’s questions about the role of art in instigating social changes equally pressing as they were in the 1930s, when the Left confronted fascism and Stalinism? Or do we really consider them today to be solved within an all-encompassing system of cultural industry and its contemporary malformations, confined to art genres, predictable as cultural trends, and profitable for the purposes of marketing?” (Istanbul Biennial, 2016). The statement goes on to assert the need to rethink “the role of artistic endeavour in the conditions of contemporary capitalism” and describes a method of “creating a certain political-aesthetic puzzle that could stimulate us to properly formulate the problems of the present”.

However the Resistanbul Committee of Socialist Realism were unimpressed with this apparently self-aware stance, and replied with an open letter to the organisers in which they stated: “We have to stop pretending that the popularity of politically engaged art within the museums, magazines and markets over the last few years has anything to do with really changing the world. We have to stop pretending that taking risks in the space of art, pushing boundaries of form, and disobeying the conventions of culture, making art about politics makes any difference. We have to stop pretending that art is a free space, autonomous from webs of capital and power. It’s time for the artist to become invisible. To dissolve back into life” (Eclectic Tech Carnival Istanbul, 2009). Shooting down any pretentions, they say that making art about politics makes no difference to the status quo, to personal or global social injustices and decry a need for direct protest in place of restrained and

Nor have other biennials come out as independent or innocent; from the Istanbul festival, to the Sydney Biennale of 2014 that was criticised for accepting the sponsorship of Transfield Holdings, a company which manages services in Australia’s offshore detention centres. The biennial eventually cut ties with the company (Special Broadcasting Service, 2016).

Interestingly, Manifesta 10 went ahead in St Petersburg in 2014, despite protests due to Russia’s anti-gay laws as well as the country’s incursion into neighbouring Ukraine. In a statement, the biennial’s curator Kasper König said that cancelling or moving the festival would play directly into a ‘cold war rhetoric’, and that Manifesta 10 was “a platform for critical engagement where complexities and contradictions are allowed and explored” (Kirsch, 2014).

Again, through acts of protest against the established platforms, artists and others are objecting to actions carried out by the art world with go against their principles.

Which Came First, the War or the Art?
In 2012, the Paris-based artist collective Peeping Tom conducted a survey of the art scene in Beirut, interviewing numerous artists, curators and cultural operators, and eliciting responses and reactions to some of their comments. A recurring theme throughout the responses was the questioning of the use of conflict as a raw material for artists. Artist Lamia Joreige is particularly thoughtful and challenges this questioning, saying “Everywhere in the world, and at all times, there were artists that rode waves and exploited subjects such as war, traumas, gender, identities, etc. This is not new, but this should never prevent us from looking at interesting and serious works produced on these same subjects, yet which are driven by reasons that are absolutely not concerned by the market” (as cited in Peeping Tom’s Digest #3 Beirut, p. 104).
Her compatriot Magali Ghosn here pinpoints the danger of tokenism, saying that artists, by necessity, should “remain alert to how the rhetoric of conflict and the spectacle of revolution is deployed as a benchmark for discussing, if not determining, the institutional and critical legitimacy of these practices.” (as cited in Downey, 2014, 17,18). Conflict in a region, he says, can serve to increase its newsworthiness, further fuelling narratives of Middle Eastern conflicts revolving around extreme ideologies and primitive philosophies.

Joreige’s work often uses mapping or archiving techniques (for example, Autopsy of a City (2010), Under-writing Beirut (2013)) and walks alongside the conflicts in Beirut, making sense of the situations that conflict brings about – displacement, pain or the loss of a normal order. Her work frequently links the object (a personal object, an artwork or artifact) with the human experience, whether through testimonials, or installation work. Objects of War (ongoing) consists of six screens showing testimony of violent conflict in Lebanon, Joreige’s home country. Each witness uses an object, which subconsciously acts as a mnemonic device, as a starting point to describe their experience of the war; Joreige says that “the aim is not to reveal a truth but rather to gather and confront many diverse versions and discourses on the subject” (Joreige, 2016). The project is open-ended; Joreige says she will continue to collect testimonials as long as people who experienced the war are willing to speak about it; in its breadth and longevity, the project becomes an archive of the disparate experiences of conflict in Lebanon. In some ways, the work also serves a therapeutic purpose; through the testimonial process, participants may attempt to make some sense of their experiences; the artist becomes a sympathetic listener to coax a story from the starting point of an object (Galluci, 2016).

A difficult question arises here; how much can an artist continue to draw on conflict as a raw material? To suggest an artist will be glad of conflict in order to supply more inspiration would be misguided, however war, it seems, can fascinate - and therefore provide - an audience. Using war as a sole protagonist in a work of art
automatically grants it the ‘war-torn’ stamp, and consequently the interest in this work is intimately (almost exclusively) linked to its country of origin – the source of the conflict.

One should not forget, of course, that artists experiencing conflict directly have first-hand experience of its hardships; cynicism and reluctance to discuss conflict, may be the luxury of someone who has never experienced it. Syrian artist Khaled Barakeh uploaded an album onto his facebook page entitled *Multicultural Graveyard* (2015), containing photos of six children who had drowned along with 150 other Palestinian and Syrian refugees off the coast of Libya in August 2015. The photos were shared over 100,000 times, and inexplicably disappeared and later reappeared on facebook (Mirzoeff, 2015) - that aside, the very act of sharing the images indicates an empathy with, or a sense of responsibility for the children in the photos and a determination that they will not be forgotten by the world.

An equally immediate testimony of a war experience is that of Zaher Omareen, London-based artist, researcher and activist; *Syria Pixels* (2015). In it, thirty-five one-minute films recorded by Syrians on their mobile phones are brought together and shown, again, on mobile phone screens. The films, that are unedited, show footage from refugee camps, and normal daily life, but also include a piece of choreographed modern dance (Wolkoff, 2016). The work is more immediate than an archive; Omareen says that since 2011, ordinary people, journalists and filmmakers used technology to document events, and that without this technology their voices would not have been heard (YouTube, 2016). In fact, Omareen suggests that the use of mobile phones to record immediate footage has given rise to a new aesthetic, unique to the region. This work seems more a curation of works than the work of an individual artist, but it uses direct testimony, and the unedited recording of lives lived within a conflict to point out what is happening in Syria.

So now the question is which came first, the war or the war aesthetic? Art based on war is nothing new; art has long been used to glorify, and sometimes to justify war. But since images of the realities of violence are readily available to the public, it
may be that because these images no longer shock, art practice must find alternative forms of representation to, in a way, satisfy the viewer.

An artist whose work deconstructs overused and clichéd images of a people living with conflict is Palestinian Larissa Sansour. Sansour uses a sophisticated satire to represent the situation in which Palestine and Palestinians find themselves. *Nation Estate* (2012), is a satirical short sci-fi film and photo series, showing a supposed perfect answer to the conflict; one huge high-rise building houses the whole Palestinian population. Each floor houses a different city – people are shown moving from city to city in an elevator, while the entire building is surrounded by Israeli military watchtowers. The slick, polished aesthetic of the film gives it a surreal quality; everything in it is overly clean, with an otherworldly look. Sansour says that the supposed convenience of living in a high-tech county-building soon gives way to the feeling of being in a prison; the work implies that if a real solution is not soon found for the conflict, then eventually, something as ridiculous as this, will be the only recourse left. People are tired of seeing the same images from Palestine; sci-fi allows her to re-engage with the topic with a different approach (Boube & Paganelli, 2016).

Similarly, *A Space Exodus* (2009) shows the Palestinians travelling to outer space in search for a land for their nation. The astronaut (Sansour herself) is shown planting the Palestinian flag in a gesture that references the first moon landing, while she proclaims “One small step for a Palestinian, one giant leap for mankind” Sansour, 2009). Through her work, Sansour makes an oblique reference to the Palestinian situation; the moon-landing is deliberately silly, the flag unlikely, and the atmosphere bemusing. But while the usual scenes of bombings and collapsed buildings are absent, the sense of displacement is not; there is an urgency and a sense of desperation about the act – a people having to resort to finding a homeland on another planet are very obviously disposed of their own home here on earth.
Recounting the Unrecountable

There are some instances, and some world events that prove almost too awful to tackle through art. Žižek and Rancière both tackle the act of the retelling of a terrible event. Žižek recounts the anecdote of a woman in a concentration camp, asking another to ensure that their experience is told to the world; “Realistic prose fails, where the poetic evocation of the unbearable atmosphere of a camp succeeds” (2008, p. 4). By translating the events into another form, that is, retelling it, the injustice is at once made more understandable. Its retelling makes it simultaneously more bearable, but more unbearable; more bearable because it is being retold rather than relived, but more unbearable because its retelling pays witness to that fact that the event took place and so cannot be erased.

Rancière evokes a similar scene, describing others who relate the facts of the Holocaust; they are not relating them in order to tell the viewer something he does not already know. “He who testifies in a narrative as to what he has seen in a death camp is engaged in a work of representation, just like the person who sought to record a visible trace of it.” (2011, p. 91) This work of representation is the same as that which Žižek describes – the event (in this case, the Holocaust) does not change or diminish through being told or represented; what changes is the event in the mind of the audience and the narrator – in our case, the viewer and the artist. How the artist chooses to represent such an event is up to them, but what Rancière is exploring is the artist’s motivation in doing so.

If critical art pursues its aim through showing the very thing which it seeks to end, Rancière challenges the showing of what he calls the ‘intolerable image’ (2011). What’s the point of showing such intolerable images? We know terrible things happen, and yet we allow them to keep happening, so what purpose does showing intolerable images have? Rancière ascribes it an almost therapeutic purpose; the telling or hearing of the intolerable experience has a value for those who have lived through the experience, as well as those who are now being told about it. The former finds an affirming value in having their experience related in a way in which,
they, perhaps, were unable to do. The latter finds another layer of meaning in having the experience related; knowing it happened is not the same as hearing it from someone it happened to (Rancière, 2011, p. 83).

There is obviously another link in the chain here also; the person who is doing the telling – in this case the artist. And in the act of showing this intolerable image, we presume that there must be a value or experience for the artist himself. This act of telling is evident in many artists’ work; the act of recording, mapping or archiving can be seen as a therapeutic act; the artist records atrocities to ensure they do not go un-noted, and maps or archives a left-behind homeland to try to capture something that may be lost irretrievably.

Rancière describes the experience of a barber recounting what happened, again in Auschwitz; he doesn’t want to, but he carries on - “He has to simply because he has to. He has to because he does not want to do it; because he cannot do it (2011, p. 91).”

Is art then, the only thing that can express trauma effectively? The family, and the mother-figure, appear frequently in memories of a country left behind by exile, or damaged by war: Bissane al Charif’s work Memoire(s) des Femmes (2015), reminiscent of Mieke Bal’s Nothing is Missing (2006 – 2010) but in reverse, looks at life in exile, and records women talking about their former homes in Syria. The images that accompany the women’s voices are non-descript and non-intrusive – deliberately so, since al Charif says she simply wanted to let the women speak; “I just wanted to put these women there, one after the other. We all left. This is what we’ve lived through when we did” (as cited by Berning Sawa, 2015). The women have covered long distances, and in some cases, gained more independence as a result of their new situation. Their stories are personal, and their personal testimony touching sometimes in its banality. The women talk about their aspirations for the future, but the presence of the conflict that caused them to leave is a constant throughout the films.
Since works like this are, by their nature, non-prescriptive, we could ask, like Žižek if making use of a representation through art, risks us falling into a “contemplative attitude” that will somehow preclude us from acting on what we are seeing (2008, p. 5). And here we come back full circle to Adorno and Bal’s stance that art should specifically not incite or recommend a certain action and should always maintain “the strong affective impact that compels agency without prescribing what the agent must do” (Bal, 2015, p. 157). Art does not tell the viewer what to think or how to act, but is no less political for that. Žižek is possibly too quick to dismiss an artistic representation as something that will only be contemplated for its own existence and for its own aesthetic or monetary value without a thought to its subject or inspiration. The conflict exists, but the “contemplative attitude” he describes, can, over time, distil into a form of action.

As with Bissane al Charif’s work above, the artist can create an intolerable image without the directness of Auschwitz. Mieke Bal’s film about the mothers of migrants Nothing is Missing, (2006–2010) for example, is testament to who she describes as “a group of women never talked about, not documented, completely erased from our cultural awareness” (2015, p. 146). The women are all mothers of migrants and are filmed talking to their migrant son, daughter, grandchild or child-in-law. The viewer is invited to sit in a room resembling a sitting-room to walk the women speak; through the layout of the television screens, the women sometimes appear to be speaking to each other (Bal, 2016). The image does not have to be direct and unmediated in order for it to have an effect upon the viewer; the intolerable can work on the heart as well as the eyes.

In the introduction to Uncommon Grounds, Anthony Downey describes the work of Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal. Bilal had a camera surgically inserted into the back of his head which recorded an image every minute for just over a year and streamed them live to a dedicated website – 3rdi (2010 – 2011). Bilal describes his work as that of a storyteller; the work is a platform for telling a story by regularly and objectively captures images that Bilal is constantly leaving behind (Wafaabilal.com, 2016). This unmediated dissemination of images is characteristic of art practice
using new media; the act of creating, is simultaneously an act of recording, as well as an act of archiving; all three are inseparable in this case. Downey also refers to an almost therapeutic element in the work; through the act the artist strives to make sense of his past and the past of his country (2014, p. 14).

Bilal’s work can be seen in a similar light as those described by Rancière in that Bilal is not relaying the images in order to tell the viewer something he does not already know. Bilal is testifying as to what he has experienced (as are the women in al Charif’s and Bal’s work). The work also contains an element of confession, as the artist is forced to lay his life bare because of the camera’s omnipresence. It’s surgically attached to him – he can’t remove it and edit out parts of his life; the camera and live stream are part of his body and he carries his audience around with him. The online viewers that see Bilal’s experiences serve to validate them; they were not recorded once streamed, so only the viewers can confirm that they happened at all. In a strange way, the viewers know more (or at least, they know something different) than Bilal himself, since the camera was not pointed in the same direction as he was. The viewer follows Bilal in a strangely inverted way; in a car, the camera points out of the rear window, not the windscreen, and on the street, it sees those walking behind the artist. This inversion causes a strangeness; practicalities apart, why did the artist choose to show what was happening behind him rather than in front of him? Maybe the camera behind the artist absolves him of a certain responsibility – he can’t be expected to know what’s going on behind his back; as he leaves his home country he can’t take responsibility for everything he is leaving behind. Or maybe it points, more innocently, to a life left behind as the artist travels across continents to a new home. There is a poignancy here; the camera is looking back at a previous life, unwilling to leave, while the artist faces resolutely forward.
The Artist as Public Figure

On Thursday the 17th of September 2015, artists Anish Kapoor and Ai Weiwei led a walk across London in sympathy with refugees around the world. The artists each carried a ‘tatty, grey blanket’ to symbolise the needs of the world’s refugees. The walk may have been particularly relevant for Weiwei who had only just regained his visa which had been seized by the Chinese government and had been accused by the British Home Office of not declaring criminal convictions. “We walk in solidarity with all those hundreds of thousands walking across the world, but it is a walk in sympathy and empathy” says Anish Kapoor to journalists – a commendable message, but who’s really listening? (Reuters, 2016). The act was reported by the international press and given some prominence, with Ai Weiwei using the opening night of his high-profile London show to ask the public to join the walk.

At almost the same time, the EU Parliament backed an emergency proposal to relocate 120,000 asylum seekers from Italy, Greece and Hungary; a backing in record time of the proposal made only eight days earlier on the 9th of September (European Parliament, 2016). Were the two acts related? Of course, in that they both addressed an extreme humanitarian crisis. Did one act influence the other? Probably not, since the two happened almost simultaneously, although it would be heart-warming to think that both acts stemmed from a basic human instinct to provide aid and solidarity to fellow humans in need. But maybe with acts like this, artists do not expect to change the world. ‘The walk’ did not claim to have achieved anything, but was simply an act of solidarity, carried out in empathy, and as an appeal ‘to open our hearts’ (Reuters, 2016).

The act was a generous, almost poetic one, in solidarity with some of the world’s most vulnerable people. But it is interesting to note how the artists used their own celebrity that has come about as a result of their work, rather than their work itself. Neither claimed that the walk was a work of art in itself – it was, quite simply, an act carried out in front of the media, to draw attention to an issue. Celebrity, here, was the key. It may seem facetious to wonder if the walk does indeed ‘qualify’ as a work of art, but the question does raise other questions such as ‘is it not art,
because the artist says it’s not?’ or even ‘does every public act of the artist qualify as art?’

*Free vs Not-so-Free Artists*

At this point, I would like to look at the ‘right’ (for want of a better word) of the artist who lives and works safely in a democracy to comment on or protest against an issue, political or cultural, that is far-removed from his/her world.

John Jordan, creator of the Lab of ii: “We have a massive privilege living in the West, we are able to do forms of civil disobedience and not be shot and not be put in jail for the rest of our lives and we have to use this privilege” (as cited in Gorman, 2015, p. 18). Granted, it may be easy to take a stand against the Rwandan genocide, for example, but how ethical is it to use this subject to build a body of work? Is it ok to use the eyes of a genocide survivor, as Alfredo Jaar does in *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996) to produce a work, contribute to a career, and ultimately create a show in a gallery or museum context? Does the fact that Jaar is not Rwandan, that he did not live through the genocide himself make his statement less effective? Or is compassion a simple gesture of humanity that can transcend borders and nationalities to ‘humanise the genocide as one million instances of grief’ (Moore, 1998). Perhaps a more relevant question would be what effect did the work have on those caught up in the Rwandan violence, and, if the answer is none, then what function does it perform?

It may be easy to forget, however, that art and its creation continue in during times of conflict or upheaval. In an article on *In Place of War*, a project which researches and supports artists and creative communities in sites of conflict, project founder James Thompson says that when travelling to Sri Lanka in 2000 during the civil war, he was intrigued to find an active, vibrant theatre community and in hindsight wonders why people presume all creativity and art would stop in war zones (as cited by Bainbridge, 2013). Thompson describes what took place in Cairo during the uprising in 2011, saying “there was this incredible meeting of great unrest with
social media and art, and that’s very interesting, because suddenly artists have huge new audiences and people are communicating and sharing work in different ways.” The reclamation of public spaces through graffiti and the uploading of protest videos onto social media served as an immediate call to revolution during that time.

Some artists use their freedom to enable those who are perhaps not as lucky as them. In a gentle and thoughtful act, Palestinian artist Emily Jacir approaches the personal testimony of the individual from a different perspective through her work Where we Come From (2001 – 2003). Thanks to her American citizenship, Jacir was able to ask fellow-Palestinians living in exile, “If I could do anything for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?” and to act out their wishes – these range from placing flowers on a mother’s grave, drinking water from a home-village, or playing football in the street. The work describes the tasks that are carried out through photography and text, and includes notes on the artist’s experiences through the project (Binder & Haupt, 2016). The symbolism of carrying out the exiles’ request is strong; it is both an act of solidarity, and an expression of displaced freedom. One Palestinian is free, the other is not, simply because of a passport. The act is also a subversive one; it implies that no matter how strong the repression, someday, somehow, someone will find a way around it.

On the other side of the world, artist Ai Weiwei has been protesting against the regime in his native China for over twenty years. In her article on Alison Klayman’s film Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry (2012) Danielle Allen pronounces his work ‘straightforwardly political’, but describes his use of the blogosphere to publicize his political petitioning as both an artistic and a political act (Allen, 2012 p. 24). Referring to his decision to return to China from the USA in 1993, Allen continues this duality and describes Ai’s voice as both that of an artist and that of a citizen; since the artist is protesting about the politics of his own country, his work, naturally enough, is personal and political at the same time. Allen also asks if Ai’s efforts make any difference to the regime he critiques so unerringly; that remains to be seen, but as a strong, dissident, constantly online presence, his actions must at least constitute a thorn in the regime’s side.
Worth looking at also is the particular case of exiled artists who comment on their homeland while living outside it. The very fact of their exile places the artist in a very different position from both those looking at a country foreign to them, and those living and working in oppressive conditions. In his essay on belonging and borders, Frederick Bohrer quotes the once-exiled artist Mona Hatoum as she says “There's always the feeling of in-betweenness [...] that comes from not being able to identify with my own culture or the one in which I'm living” (in Belonging and Globalisation, 2014, p. 31). This perpetual outsider-state can provide the artist with a different perspective on the subject of their dissent. In practical terms also, it can allow an artist to make their voice heard without the same fear of repercussion that might be felt in their home-country.

Artists frequently seek to make sense of events as they unfold; digesting image after image and regurgitating events in a format that has meaning, although not necessarily one that is less intolerable. Bouchra Khalili’s Mapping Journey (2008-2011) documents the routes taken in clandestine journeys undertaken by migrants. It consists of eight video works to map an alternative cartography of the Mediterranean area, based on 8 clandestine journeys. The project confronts singular minorities’ paths and the normativity of the cartography, revealing the underground and hidden geography that clandestine roads produce (Galeriepolaris.com, 2016). There is no overt suffering in the work; the form is sparse and almost factual. But the facts represented, and the experiences these facts imply and no less effective for that.

Similarly, Mona Hatoum’s Map (1998) reflects the futility of borders and the fragility of global structures in a borderless map of the world laid out in clear glass marbles on the floor. The suggestions it makes are immediate; that with the slightest vibration, the world will start to shift and fall apart; that with one footstep, tectonic plates might break up and reconfigure the whole globe. Hatoum says of the work: “At the same time, the work was very menacing. I like it when things are attractive and forbidding at the same time; both seductive and dangerous. The
marbles made the floor hazardous, because you could slip on the glass balls and fall down.” (Hatoum, 2014).

The Spectator or the Audience

In talking about political art, it is also interesting to speculate as to who its intended audience is. If, as Lippard says, “Effective propaganda obviously has to be aimed at a specific audience, not just shot into the air to fall to earth we know not where” (1980, p. 38). But with an audience in mind, does political art then become outright propaganda? And if art should be created simultaneously and exclusively by and for the artist, how can art be created with an audience in mind? Does ‘art’ become propaganda as soon as the artist creates for an audience and with the purpose of persuading them of something, rather than creating viscerally in response to an injustice?

Rancière talks about the spectator rather than the audience; “But it is always a question of showing the spectator what she does not know how to see, and making her feel ashamed of what she does not want to see, even if it means that the critical system presents itself as a luxury commodity pertaining to the very logic it denounces (2011, p. 29, 30). There is an element of guilt involved, and an uneasiness in the juxtaposition of the ‘luxury commodity’ and the image of suffering.

Rancière continues and asserts that showing an intolerable image may have an opposite effect upon the viewer, and may cause them to turn away from the image altogether. He pinpoints what he sees as the key to a call to action; “For the image to produce its political effect, the spectator must already be convinced that what it shows is American imperialism, not the madness of human beings in general (2011, p. 85)”. Firstly it is a sense of responsibility for that which is being shown (in Rancière’s example, it is a collective responsibility for that carried out by American Imperialism. Secondly, the work must evoke a sense of guilt. But here is Rancière’s catch; if the viewer can assume responsibility and feel a sense of guilt, then
presumably they already felt responsible and guilty already, and so, the artist only truly communicates with those who already sympathise with a given cause.

*Art as call to Action*

Mieke Bal describes Doris Salcedo’s work *Plegaria Muda* (2011); “They do not tell stories; they just ‘are’, touching the visitor with hair-raising horror while remaining mute, immobile, silent as the grave” (2015, p. 157). The work as Bal describes it is almost the inversion of the ‘intolerable image’; so little is said that the intolerable comes about because of a suffocating silence.

The work consists of a series of coffin-shaped tables, each with a layer of soil and an upturned table on top. Stalks of grass grow up through neatly-drilled holes in the tables. The silence of the work, its abstract nature, and its deliberate lack of imagery or emotion create a suffocating atmosphere that intensifies its allusions to death and suffering. Its surgical, unemotional nature is chilling; the denial of tears or blood is palpable; in describing the piece, Bal refers to “victims de-humanized when their bodies could not be retrieved, buried, mourned, because the violence was denied.” (Bal, 2015, p. 157) The muteness of the coffin-tables, and the ‘wrong’ nature of the upturned tables speaks of an injustice that cannot be resolved; beyond simple representation, the work speaks of a global violence, that is carried out stealthily and in secret.

The work is so abstracted from its subject, that while it has a chilling effect on the viewer, it is in no way prescriptive or didactic. This is the opposite of a show-and-tell; it doesn’t show, doesn’t tell anything; it is in this silent space that the uneasiness grows. As Bal says, “This is art - not committed journalism, not politics, not propaganda. Yet there is a reality behind them, or inside them: the reality of mass murder, of which the palimpsestic superposition of other acts of mass present, in the aftermath of which we live and enjoy great works of art (2015, p. 157).
A similarly abstracted work, Alfredo Jaar’s *Lights in the City* (1999) places a value on individuals living in homeless shelters in the city of Montreal; every time a homeless person enters one of four shelters, they can push a button connected to the Cupola of the Marché Bonsecours nearby, and a 100,000 watts of red light will flash in the Cupola (Alfredojaar.net, 2016). The flash of light is a recognition, the red colour a call for help, and the proximity of the Cupola to the shelters (500m) accentuates the difference between rich and poor. But the work does not spell out its message for the viewer; there are no emotive or distressing pictures, no photojournalist’s images; the red light flashes and sends out a signal, but it’s left up to the viewer to make what they will of that signal.

Writing in a publication stemming from *Informal Meeting*, a meeting of curators and programmers from the Arab World organised by the Young Arab Theatre Fund in Leuven in 2015, Federica Bueti looks at what drives the artist to make art in the face of increasing difficulties and exhorts the artist to ignore the cynicism that surrounds some parts of the artworld. She says “Even though art practices might be embedded in an exploitative capitalist logic, even though the future might not seem too bright, apocalyptic accounts of this condition by themselves not only fail to generate pragmatic answers to the question of what can be done, they also actively discourage the search for them” (2015, p. 48).

In *The Art of Disobedience*, an IETM publication on art and politics, Dan Gorman tells us that interest in the work of artists in areas of conflict has risen in recent months and years. He cautions somewhat against this saying that “This work runs the risk of ascribing too much power to art, whereby it is seen as a potential panacea to the ills of the world, with the power to resolve deep socio-political and economic issues.” (2015, p. 5). Maybe it’s that balance that we need to find, between non-questioning belief, and world-weary cynicism that will allow political art to exist. And, according to Said, it will always exist, in areas that, whether physical, virtual or conceptual that fall or put themselves beyond a dominant control. “No matter how apparently complete the dominance of an ideology or social system, there are always going to be parts of the social experience that it
does not cover and control. From these parts very frequently comes opposition, both self-conscious and dialectical.” (1994, p. 289).

So, it seems that political art is all about worlds. It’s about existing in alternative worlds, functioning outside of dominant worlds but commenting on the real, imperfect world. Sometimes it’s about creating a substitute world, or comparing one world with another. Other times it’s about recording this world, or bearing witness to someone else’s world. In my practical work below, I create an alternative world; a quasi-real version of contemporary Malta that could have come to exist. This world is not necessarily a better or worse world than the real world, but suggesting it as a possibility serves to question some preconceptions and fears that contemporary European society may have about other cultures, which, after all, are simply different versions of the real world.
Practical Work

The Western political artist, safely ensconced in a free democracy, must sometimes be faced with a dilemma. For the political artist could find themselves at a loss, feeling uncomfortable with the prospect of commenting on injustices far away from home, but finding local wrong-doings facile in comparison. So, a Maltese artist can, for example, comment on power and politics, as Austin Camilleri did with his Żieme in 2014, but the argument is general and does not refer to a specific event or misdeed. Likewise, in my work, a subject to ‘criticise’ does not always come easy. Political criticism can seem too partisan, specific injustices too specific, while more insidious controls like self-censorship seem to pale in comparison with drone warfare and cluster bombing across the Mediterranean.

In the case of a lack of a problem, does a problem have to be found? Without a crippling economic crisis, or a post-industrial city identity crisis, does something have to be brought in to create some angst?

Over the past five years and more, while the eyes of the world have been on the events unfolding in the Mediterranean Region and in the Middle East, Malta has been strangely unaffected by the violence going on around it. Migrant routes, particularly since the outbreak of war in Syria, have shifted towards an overland journey through mainland Europe. And terrorist attacks from Islamic fundamentalists, have, so far at least, been focused on large, central cities, rather than an “insignificant” island on the edge of Europe.

At the same time, the seemingly inexhaustible debate on the exact amount of Arab blood considered acceptable in the otherwise Catholic veins of the Maltese public (Vella, 2015), was heightened with Malta’s hosting of a summit of the Heads of Government of Commonwealth countries, as well as a preceding summit on migration between European and African Heads of State, both in November 2015. Anthropologist Elise Billiard says that following centuries of foreign rule, “the
Maltese people must not rediscover their singularity and common identity” (2015, p 116) but this reinvention of tradition or authenticity is constantly coloured by various agendas from politics, class, economics and pragmatism.

The November 2015 summits will be followed in 2016 and 2017 by a summit of the International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies, and Malta’s Presidency of the Council of the member states of the European Union respectively; all three involve a cultural programme of some degree and promise (or threaten) an opportunity for some self-examination of the Maltese identity and a reinvestigation of the cultures the country most identifies with and aspires to.

Following closely on the tail of these three years is Valletta’s title of European Capital of Culture in 2018 (Valletta shares the title with the town of Leeuwarden in the North of the Netherlands). This title is awarded by the European Commission and the host country, following a bidding process between cities. The title of European Capital of Culture, considered one of the Commission’s most successful cultural initiatives “is designed to highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe, celebrate the cultural features Europeans share, increase European citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural area and foster the contribution of culture to the development of cities.” (ec.europa.eu, 2016)

The Valletta 2018 Foundation was set up by the Maltese government to bring the city from preparation stages all the way to the implementation of the title and to plan for its legacy in the following years. The Foundation falls under the Ministry responsible for Culture, and works closely with other government entities including the Arts Council of Malta.

It is through my work here, coordinating the Cultural Programme of Valletta’s title year, that I have been able to see the arts in Malta be given additional government support, while simultaneously being used to project an image of Malta during these large-scale summits and events. Art as diplomacy or country-branding is nothing new (although the terminology may be), but what is interesting in this case is Malta
positioning itself as a contemporary European state, while being forced to admit to its linguistic, genetic and geographic links to its close Arab neighbours in the Mediterranean. This self-racism and consequential guilt manifests itself in certain paradoxes; Malta is feverishly proud of its links with the Knights Hospitallers of St John, but at the same time is happy to boast of the Semitic roots of its language. Similarly, Malta is indebted to St Paul for its conversion to Christianity, but conveniently glosses over the country’s subsequent invasion by waves of Arab invaders and the effective depopulation of the islands during the 9th Century. The Maltese are no strangers to the fascination of the North European visitor with the country’s mix of origins and exotic tongue.

In the process of the development of its cultural programme during 2018, the Valletta 2018 Foundation is monitored and advised by a panel appointed by the European Commission. In a public report to the Foundation in September 2015, the panel made it clear that it would like Valletta 2018 emphasise its Mediterranean culture and acknowledge the context of its geographic position:

The panel welcomes the greater emphasis being placed on dealing with migration issues including the strand "Exiles and Migrants" and the information given about how the ECOC deals with minorities, and finds interesting the approach of including minorities in communities not directly linked to origins but more on interests, in a fluid manner, to foster integration and the intended collaboration with SOS Malta.

Recommendation 6: Valletta 2018 should develop this new project strand as a key element of its overall programme for 2018 and start working on specific projects. It should make use of this strand to increase its cooperation with partners from around the Mediterranean Sea... (European Commission DG Culture, 2015, pg 6)

More central European cities are struggling to accommodate or integrate large numbers of refugees and migrants while simultaneously assuring local populations
that their livelihoods and safety will not be threatened. Europe is caught between its humanitarian duty and right-wing pressures, both claiming stability, prosperity and the overall benefit to humankind as their main concern. Malta, however, is in the peculiar and, some would say, suspicious, position of seeing a huge drop in numbers of migrants coming to its shores, with just under 100 arriving in Malta during the first nine months of 2015 (Dalli, 2015).

The obvious must be said here; that the Western idea of an ‘Arab world’ with a single, homogenous culture does not exist, just as the West is not home to one, unvarying culture. The Arab language, much quoted as a unifying factor, varies hugely from country to country. Religion cannot be taken as a measure of Arabness either, when several Arab countries have large populations of other beliefs.

It is on this apparent mismatch that I have based my practical work; an agenda from the European Commission to acknowledge conflicts in the Arab world and to welcome and treat with respect refugees and cultures from that region, in contrast with a small island close to these conflicts, but which remains staunchly European and fortified in its outlook. The well-intentioned policies of tolerance and inclusivity seem, in a Maltese context, to deliberately over-emphasise the country’s ethnicity, Mediterranean-ness and ‘Arab-ness’, and ignore local party politics in the country’s very particular context, when Malta itself has yet to agree on what or how strong that ‘Arab-ness’ is. Added to this is the well-intentioned, but not always proven belief, that culture and creativity can have a positive effect on conflict, and Project Disintegration was born.
The Premise

I based my practical work on a false premise. This false beginning was mixed with pieces of true and invented histories, real-life interventions, false and real media, all presented as documented truth.

The premise is as follows:
The year is 2068, and certain classified files from the European Commission have been declassified and released to the public. One of these is the file on Project Disintegration, a controversial initiative that spanned the early decades of the 21st century. Displayed are objects relating to the initiative; newspaper cuttings, audio-visual material, documentation, posters, school-books and other material. As part of the two-speed Europe initiative, certain countries, particularly those on the peripheries of Europe, were encouraged to appropriate the culture of neighbouring continents, in order that they would later be coerced into leaving the European Union altogether.

In an elaborate process of systematic narrative-spinning and the rewriting of particular histories, the small Mediterranean island of Malta was used as a test-case for the initiative. Over the course of almost ten years, the diminutive island-state was slowly convinced of the veracity of its Arab origins, and encouraged to leave the EU to align with nearby Arab states. The then European Capital of Culture project, which was originally created to share a common European culture among member states, was appropriated by the European Commission’s DG for Disintegration to push the Arabification agenda in Malta, since the country’s capital held the title during the year 2018. Through a programme of sensitisation, re-education and intercultural marrying, the island’s population was actively encouraged to identify with its Arab neighbours.

If the process in Malta was successful, peripheral and less economically viable states would then be targeted; in the long run, these would no longer be a burden on central Europe, and the EU would continue as a stronger, more focused entity.
The material exhibited comes from files dating to 2018, released to the public in 2068. It is not clear from the material if the initiative was successful or not; its result is kept deliberately ambiguous.
Methodology

While researching for Project Disintegration, I looked at various sources, including history up to recent times, EU policy, and the contemporary international and local media. Historical studies were a source of inspiration in their uncertainty and in the debate that certain claims are able to stir. Nobody, it seems, can agree on whether Malta was depopulated for almost two centuries, or if, as the Paulines, would have us believe, a staunch tribe of Christians managed to stick it out to preserve the faith of the island (Vella, 2015). Newspaper articles, sometimes inspired by local xenophobia also proved interesting, with the journalist’s agenda sometimes being exposed in the comments section of the online version by the quoted sources themselves (Diacono, 2016).

History and Fiction

In history I found a number of interesting stories. In his paper on the Collegium Melitense, Carmel Cassar describes an initiative by the Jesuit Curia and the Holy See at the end of the sixteenth century, to exploit the Maltese language’s similarity with Arabic, and to set up a school of Arabic on the island, in order to use Malta as a base into the Levant; “In 1554 Ignatius Loyola realized Malta’s great potential as a stepping-stone for building contacts with the Muslim Maghreb (2015, pg 443). The story takes an almost comic turn as the Jesuits’ plans are foiled with the discovery that the local clergy did not know how to read and write Arabic and were not enthusiastic about learning to do so. Their faith in the ability of the Maltese to communicate in the Arab tongue, however, remains strong, and over the next century or so, many Maltese are sent to Northern Africa, and as far afield as Ethiopia as missionaries. It seems though, that by the middle of the seventeenth century, the Jesuits’ policy had changed, and eventually, Rome ceased to see Maltese speakers as potential missionaries in the Arab world (pg 456).
I wanted to use the history quite specifically, and only change parts that needed to be changed. So, where it was true that an Arabic College was built in Malta at the end of the 16th Century (inconceivable to modern Maltese who think that the country was Roman Catholic since St Paul set foot on it over two millennia ago), I merely played with the reason for this college, not the fact that it existed in the first place.

Another source of strange history was that of the Bellanti Family, Mgr John Joseph Bellanti, who, in the early 1800s, formulated an Arab alphabet for the Maltese language (Felice Pace, 2010). Felice Pace tells us that it was only on 18 December 1921 “that the alphabet was standardised definitively, barely a year after the Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti (Society of Maltese Authors) was set up to devise an alphabet and orthographic rules for the language.” (pg 187), and some versions of the alphabet used Arabic letters for certain sounds (pg. 188). Bellanti’s document Avvertimenti per la ristorazione della lingua maltese, written in 1829, “was not just a linguistic proposal. It was, possibly even more, a cultural vision” (193); Bellanti created an alphabet, but also hoped that the connection between both cultures could be strengthened by the link formed by the Maltese language.

Then there is the case of Giuseppe Lipari, a Sicilian sailor based in Malta in the late 1800s (Gauci, 2016, 191). Lipari was enslaved in Istanbul, freed after eleven years, but consequently captured again on Lampedusa. Enslaved, this time in Tunis, Lipari, sensibly enough, converted to Islam, after which he became a ‘Christian of Allah’ and was treated far better. Lipari, Gauci tells us, was not alone in his pragmatic conversion, and a certain flexibility in this regard was accepted as a reality of life (192).

Lastly there is the story of Abbot Vella the Maltese protagonist of Leonardo Sciascia’s Il Consiglio d’Egitto (2009) who, in 18th century Sicily, alters the meaning and significance of an old Arabic manuscript for his own political and financial gain. What’s fascinating in this context is the fact that the novel is based on a true story
(Rizarelli, 2007, pg ); the Maltese priest actually created a small Arab-style fiction of his own in an example of truth being far more cynical than fiction.

Other Media
Another source of material came in the form of newspaper articles, particularly one claiming that ‘Maltese feast names give clues to island’s Muslim history’ (Diacono, 2016). But as mentioned above, it was the comments section of the online newspaper that proved far more interesting that the content of the article, with none other than the author’s source historian himself commenting and refuting the contents of the article (maltatoday.com, 2016). Calling the article a ‘tattered hypothesis’, Charles Dalli, claims that much is left out of the theory posed, including the context of the Mediterranean as a whole, and the Malta’s disputed histories. Which begs the question, why did the author have the agenda he did; was it simply sensationalism, or was there something more sinister involved? This invented hidden agenda is included in the final work.

A ‘phenomenon’ of recent times has been the rise of the Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin (Maltese Patriot’s Association), and their visibility in local media through sporadic protests. In January this year, the group replied to a protest by local Muslims at the lack of space for prayer, with a cynical protest of their own, distributing pork sandwiches to their members (Times of Malta, 2016). These actions and their subsequent media coverage were interesting also because of the opposing opinions that were aired on comments pages and social media.

Popular Culture
Food has long been seen as a symbol of culture, and in a drive for intercultural dialogue and tolerance, is often championed as a vehicle that can unfailingly bring people together in friendship and hospitality. Orientalism can easily prevail here, and stories of refugee women happily cooking for their Western host countries abound as examples of true integration. Discussing the Maltese identity and its
reflection in food, anthropologist Elise Billiard sees ‘traditional Maltese food’ as an identity marker between social classes (2006, pg 120). Billiard cites the difficulty in finding original Maltese dishes; the islands were for centuries dependent of the outside world for food, and so adapted other cuisines to become its own; “Maltese food is an eccentric mixture of different cultures from the ham of England to the pastizz.” (pg 119) She says that references to North African or Arabic cuisine are inconceivable for some Maltese, who identify strongly as non-Muslim and non-Arabic, and that these links have somehow been constructed by some sectors of society in order to identify with a Mediterranean culture or diet.

I also looked into the Maltese attitude to Muslim women and the hijab, through the work of sociologist Nathalie Grima. Her research found that Muslim women in Malta feel far more visible than their male counterparts, because of their hijab; one woman involved in her study points out the paradox that the hijab is meant to be worn for modesty and to blend in with the crowd, but wearing it in the Western world has precisely the opposite effect (Grima, 2011, pg 80).

*Is this Really Political Art?*

There were several layers behind Project Disintegration. Perhaps they were not as strong or as urgent as many of the works discussed in the contextual review above, but I believe that some of the themes touched upon are broad and pervasive enough to warrant exposure.

The first was the politics of the European Commission that in a sort of innocent well-wishing, attempts to deal with situations far beyond anyone’s control. As a migrant ‘crisis’ hits Europe and is labelled as such by the right, the Commission promotes tolerance and integration through an effective tool: culture.

This brings us, I think, to the second layer of the work. Whether it is the European Commission, historians, anthropologists, Europeans or the Maltese themselves, the attempt to label Malta ‘European’ or ‘Arab’ is futile, because ultimately, Malta, like
any other country, is just itself. Agendas can be pushed, links for political or economic gain can be forged, (Malta’s links with Libya in the eighties, and local political parties siding with one ‘world’ or the other are the obvious reference here) but cultures can be slow to change and not even the might of the European Commission can convince Malta it’s something that it’s not.

Ultimately, the work, on a very basic level, points a finger at our own prejudices and ridicules the magnification of differences that in reality are insignificant. At the same time, it makes a reference to a sort of self-racism within Maltese society, where elements of Arab influence are edited in or out as the context requires. Lastly, the work also highlights differences, but in a way, I hope, that questions whether these differences matter at all.

The work, by its nature took on different forms. At times I found myself cutting graffiti stencils, at others, putting together and filming ‘workshops’ or sticking up illegal notices in the middle of the night. I took care not to cause permanent damage to buildings and made sure all those being filmed were conscious of the premise of the filming. I even deliberately misspelled the name of the Planning Authority, and gave the architect a ‘Joe Borg’ name, so as to lessen any accusations of forgery. In this, the work was, perhaps, not radical, although I didn’t feel that these precautions lessened its impact; the graffiti was on concrete temporary blocks instead of original stone or paintwork, but it was still visible to passers-by for example.

Furthermore, I could argue that the method suited the message, in the sense that the work was not protesting against extreme abuse or violence; rather it was meant to bring to light certain anomalies or hypocrisys that exist in contemporary local culture and narratives. Therefore a less obvious approach seemed to fit what the work was trying to say.

In his essay on Maltese identity reflected in contemporary local art, John Baldacchino makes an observation that fits well with this project; he says that
“Pretty much like the Greeks, the Maltese share the predicament of a past that has been rammed into their consciousness from birth. The Maltese imaginary is haunted by a ‘history’ which, it is claimed, gives them an identity that is more often than not, accepted in full, only to be rejected in later adolescence.” (2008, pg 183)

There is an element of this acceptance of a history in Project Disintegration; the identity that Baldacchino says we never had and so could not have lost could easily be the Arab identity that Project Disintegration is trying to instill in the local population.

As the work developed, I was aware of an affinity with the work of a few local artists. An obvious similarity exists between Project Disintegration and Bettina Hutschek’s Maltese Confabulations (2014). Confabulations is a far more whimsical and almost romantic, however the strong sense of playing with reality and of creating an uncertainty of what is real and what is invented exists in both works. Another contemporary shifting of Maltese cultural realities exists in Emanuel Bonnici’s collection of works Métamorphoses (2012); a telephone box merged with a gardjola, and a goddess of fertility with a fast-food burger combine ideas of identity, alien cultures and a capitalist society to form a slick version of an alternative reality.

While I felt an affinity with the works of these artists, I am unaware of any local artists working with an activist or strongly subversive tone in Malta. Perhaps the nature and size of the country preclude any such behaviour, or perhaps the quality of life is still sufficiently tolerable for most people so as to render such actions pointless. In December 2014, a certain Ivan John Grima Hammet donned a brand new black suit and, with a shovel, cement and some buckets, proceeded to fill potholes with cement. He was soon arrested for his trouble, and I wonder if he himself would call his actions a work of art, but apart from some individual street art pieces, this is the closest I have seen to a sort of artist citizen action locally. Reasons for this could be a relative comfort of Maltese life, mentioned above, or a possible ‘self-censorship’ in a country that is so small that no public act can be carried out anonymously.
**Will it Change Anything?**

The graffiti and false planning permission notices were important to the work; it was here that a public reaction was elicited, and an element of risk was involved. The result was by no means clear; I wondered, for example, if the first person to come across the planning notices in the morning would not just take them down and carry about their business, rather than making a fuss about it.

The graffiti was deliberately given a positive meaning, to test a European public that does not understand it – would it immediately be viewed negatively because it was in Arabic, where the same message in English or Maltese may have been received positively? I even took care to choose non-threatening colours; pink for ‘love’ and baby blue for ‘peace’. There is a nod here to the artists who included their message on the set of the Homeland series, with a more modest version of their use of the perception of Arab script as a decoration rather than a language.

I wanted the work to somehow, as Adorno says, “to work at the level of fundamental attitudes” (2003, p. 180) and to show that a text in Arabic does not necessarily have to be negative or threatening. And in order to do this, it was essential that the work somehow made contact with the general public and was not only confined to an exhibition space.

This was how I wanted to re-tune the world just a little.

**The Work**

The work itself took the form of different items – documents, photographs, film clips and newspaper cuttings, displayed as if they were a real, informative exhibition. Each object was displayed with a small, informative note beside it, with the text contained in each keeping up the pretense that this was a real, historical exhibition.
Planning Permission Notices

These were designed as fake planning permission notices apparently posted by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority. I identified the six theatres that were subject to a theatres audit by the Valletta 2018 Foundation, and used these, as well as a few other prominent theatres, on which to attach the planning permission notices. The proposed amendments in the notices were all the same and included:

(j) a change of use to the proposed amended building from a theatre to a mosque;
(ii) internal alterations and;
(iii) the addition of a minaret to the roof of the building.

The requests for alterations were designed to be read clearly, and to include the potential ‘buzzwords’ mosque and minaret. The notices looked as realistic as possible with a MEPA logo, a fictional reference number, and a ‘Joe Borg’ for an architect. The title of the Planning Authority was misspelt, saying ‘Planing’ instead of ‘Planning’. The date written on the application was later than the appeal date, and was given as 27th March 2016; Easter Sunday. Thus, at first glance and without paying too much attention, the signs would appear real enough, but upon closer inspection, the obvious deception would soon be clear.

Fig. 1 One of the planning permission signs affixed to various theatre façades
The signs were put up late on a Sunday evening; nobody, not even the police, who were parked near one theatre, did anything to interrupt the process, although a woman outside one abandoned theatre (the Rialto in Bormla) commented positively, saying she had always wanted to see it restored. The public reaction to the notices was surprising and extremely interesting, as was the difference in reaction between different localities. By the very next day, the notices had caused consternation in Bormla, with the Planning Authority contacting the police to investigate the case. Later on the same day, the Labour Party claimed that the hoax was a plan by the opposition to discredit the plans for the educational institution, the American Institute of Malta being built nearby. Other theatres took longer to notice the sign, with the signs remaining attached to the façade of the Salesian Theatre in Sliema for around 48 hours afterwards. Other theatres seemed to do the sensible thing and simply took down the signs without making any fuss. All the local papers took up the story, with various theories being put forward as to the reason behind the notices. The Malta Independent was contacted and invited to take part in a further hoax, taking the story further, but this offer was politely declined; the subject was considered “too sensitive” (private conversation on 29 March 2016).

![Fig. 2 Genuine newspaper articles reporting on the fake MEPA notices.](image)
The material created, ie photographs of the theatres with the notices affixed, was then used to create a false newspaper page. A downloaded page of the Times of Malta was doctored to announce the plans for the mosques, including positive reaction from local stakeholders. This, along with the newspaper page described below and a radio interview formed the ‘media’ section of the final exhibition.

**Fig. 3 The sign still on the façade of the Salesian Theatre two days later**

**Fig. 4 The false newspaper page reporting on the planned conversion of six theatres into mosques**
**Graffiti**

I thought a lot about what the graffiti should say, and for a while I considered a Superflex-style 'white's out' rhetoric. After some thought, as well as some caution, the graffiti simply spread the more positive messages of 'peace', 'love' and 'happiness', written in Arabic. Any reaction against graffiti in Arabic would be neutralised and exposed as ignorant if the meaning of the words were to be explained. Coincidentally, the graffiti was planned for the weekend following the bombing attacks in Brussels on the 22nd March 2016 and in a way, the act of putting up these positive words in several localities in Arabic served as some kind of acknowledgement that the attacks were the work of extremists and not of the Muslim community as a whole.

*Fig. 5 One of the graffiti stenciled onto a wall in San Gwann*
The graffiti attracted far less attention than the planning permission notices, however some images were shared on social media a few weeks later.

![Fig. 6 A facebook acquaintance sharing a photo of the graffiti, unaware who the artist was](image)

Only one was deliberately damaged, being scratched off a stone wall, but most, at the time of the exhibition, are still in place.

![Fig. 7 ‘Peace’ scratched off a wall in Gzira](image)

The images of the graffiti were also used to create a false newspaper article. This took the form of a feel-good story describing the phenomenon as a ‘graffiti bombing by apparently Arabic-speaking pacifists’.
Workshops

Photography and recordings as false documentation made up a large part of the work. Some, like the workshops, were completely staged and manufactured, while others, like the newspapers mentioned above, were created from the sum of different parts. I organised a series of ‘workshops’ to be filmed and photographed as part of the project. These were populated by actors – the leaders of the workshops were local Muslim women who were aware of the purpose of the activity. The ‘workshops’ were planned to include;

i) a lesson in how to put on and wear a hijab, including the different styles and colours that can be worn;
ii) a henna tattoo lesson;
iii) a cookery demonstration – falafel, meatballs and mint tea.

The workshop room was ‘dressed’ with some Arab-style props – a tandoor, some Moroccan lamps and some preserved lemons. The footage was eventually edited into three 10-minute documentation style films that would resemble
documentation collected by the ECoCs and other cultural organisations of their activities; the editing was kept raw and the sound purposely unrefined.

Fig. 9 Several shots of the workshops being filmed

There were possibilities of other workshops, for example, a shish-smoking lesson, or chess or backgammon lessons. However I chose to focus on activities more usually associated with the female realm, since very often it is the female world and its relative freedoms that is so often used as a differentiator between Western and Arab cultures. The hijab is used in the Western world, not only by media, but also in public policy-making, sometimes in a misguided attempt at ‘freeing’ Muslim women, sometimes in security crack-downs, and at other times as a political tool. A US Military White Paper, Countering Violent Extremism, revised and updated in July 2015, states that “Weakening the hijab phenomenon is pivotal to stopping the growth of Islamism at the ideological level”; the wearing of the hijab is discussed in the paper as a ‘phenomenon’ that can contribute to the ‘passive terrorism’ among Muslim populations (Fenstermacher, 2015, p 72). Meanwhile, the jury is out on the question of who is the more repressed; the Muslim woman who is forced to cover herself from head to toe to keep her safe from the male gaze, or the Western
woman who is forced to bare herself from head to toe to be available for the male gaze (Diab, 2010).

The food workshops were an obvious choice; as discussed, food is an integral part of any culture, and can serve simultaneously as a signifier and enabler of that culture.

A henna tattoo workshop was chosen for several reasons. The henna tattoo as part of the wedding ceremony is sometimes more often associated with Indian or Indonesian traditions; here it added another layer of cultural misappropriation to the cultural mix; henna tattoos are often appropriated and worn at music festivals, without much attention paid to their cultural significance. The henna tattoo is also an illustration of a certain exoticism associated with Arab cultures – it is conjures images of bridal ceremonies and celebration.

What was interesting about the workshops was that although they were filmed purely in order to film the false recordings, the process involved hosting ‘real’ workshops. So the participants who were, in fact, engaged as actors became genuinely interested in the different cultures they were being introduced to. The women were especially interested in the types of clothing that they were invited to put on – they compared the colours of their dresses and hijabs which came from different parts of the Arab world. The henna tattoos elicited lots of questions about the patterns, styles and method of application. It seemed that almost everyone at the workshop expected the henna patterns to have some kind of cultural or spiritual significance, when, in fact, they were told that the tattoos are used purely for decoration. The food was, inevitably, popular, again, with participants genuinely trying to remember tips and recipes to try at home.

Maltese Muslim Barbie
Following on from the hijab idea, I borrowed a theme from blogger Haneefa Adam. Adam created Hijarbie – a Barbie doll that wears stylish outfits all incorporating the hijab - in reaction to the lack of representation of her culture in the Barbie world.
(Revesz, 2016). In the spirit of the work, I renamed the hijabi Barbie, and called her Barbie Maltija – a hybrid of Arab and Maltese culture, smiling sweetly as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Perversely, the most suitable Barbie doll in the shops was dressed in a mini-skirt and vest-top - leaving her in this outfit supplied a good juxtaposition with her patterned head-dress.

Barbie Maltija is intended for dissemination around the Maltese islands through toy shops and schools. However, as the small information panel in the exhibition explains, Project Disintegration is unable to secure the copyright for the doll, and Barbie Maltija is shelved until a later date. Whether this was truly a copyright issue, or if her mini-skirt proved too provocative for Project Disintegration, we’ll never know.

![Barbie Maltija with her hijab and mini-skirt](image)

*Fig. 10 Barbie Maltija with her hijab and mini-skirt*

**Pastizzerija**

In order to achieve the combination of local culture and an ‘Arab’ version of it, I chose the quintessential *pastizzerija* found on every street corner in Malta. A local *pastizzerija* agreed to take part in the photo-shoot, which essentially changed nothing about the shop, except for the food on display.
Syrian food, ironically not dissimilar to the pastizzi themselves, was placed in the display of a local Sphinx branch; kibbeh, fatayer and mhammara, along with the more familiar falafel, formed part of the display. Moroccan tea was placed in glasses on the counter, mimicking the Maltese tradition of drinking tea with condensed milk from a glass. Alongside the tea was a small detail – a jar of preserved lemons that might be on sale in such a shop. Lending a somewhat haphazard feel to the food display, the proprietor enthusiastically placed the labels in a completely random order; the only label that was placed correctly was ‘pizza’.

The proprietor was happy to take part in the charade, sampling some of the food, while locals came along, expecting to buy their usual pastizz and pizza. They were reluctant to take the risk, however, and despite the food being offered for free, many went away empty-handed.

The images which were ultimately exhibited were chosen to depict the normal set-up of the pastizzerija, with other snacks and sweets on sale, posters on the wall and a cigarette machine behind the counter. Some photos show close-ups of the display counter, with their erroneous labels, while others depict the shop’s customers that evening.
Fig. 11 Setting up the pastizzerija with Syrian street food

**Colouring Book**

Pedagogical material was an important element of the material created, since the education system is used frequently by ECoCs - Valletta 2018 included - as a tool with which to reach a large number of children with a particular message. Since the majority of Maltese schoolbooks portray Arab rule in Malta as a dark period (Barbara, 2013), the subject material obviously needed to portray a positive message. A colouring book was created that contained the simple message that Malta is part of the Arab world. Called Id-Dinja Għarbiża u l-Arkitettura Tagħha (The Architecture of the Arab World), the book contains drawings of typical architecture from Arab countries such as Morocco, Libya, Palestine and Iraq. The trick here is, of course, that Malta is included in the list of Arab countries. The images that were eventually used were sourced online; some depicted typical, Arab-style archways and minarets, while others included a more realistic scene. Syria, for example, is represented by a demolished, bullet-ridden street, while Palestine is shown with an image of a lesser seen Jerusalem. The scene representing Malta is an image of the
village of Kalkara, not altered in any way, but which, in the context of the book, and with its crowded, rectangular shapes and palm-trees, looks almost Arab.

![Fig. 12 Some drawings of Arab architecture that formed part of the colouring book](image)

**Children’s Drawings**

Continuing on from the colouring book and the workshops, a scenario where children would create their own version of an Arab Malta was imagined. These paintings, complete with craft-style glued-on sand and glitter, brought together elements of both cultures in innocent and unsophisticated images. They depicted scenes such as de Vallette and Dragut hugging each other on top of Valletta’s bastions during the Great Siege, or the skyline of Malta complete with onion-shaped minaret. St Paul is depicted travelling to Malta by camel, while the Maltese festa is given an Oriental twist.
Radio Interview

At the beginning of the project, I had wanted to create newspaper articles that somehow combined historical details with sensationalist headlines. The genuine excitement of a fictitious historian revising history through new findings would combine an element of absurdity with the ingenuity of Sciaccia’s Abbot Vella. However, the medium of print and a long, detailed article wasn’t ideally suited to this, and a more suitable format of a radio interview was used. Even better, the interviewees weren’t fictitious; Curator of the Malta Maritime Museum Liam Gauci and local media personality and historicist Dr Charles Xuereb both agreed to take part. The combination of expert knowledge and a willingness to completely invent material contributed to an interview that covered topics from Maltese surnames to the local pork trade in a way that a newspaper article could not have done. The discussion centred around 2018’s Carnival celebrations depicting a strong bond between Dragut and La Valette, but also included in the conversation was a claim that St John’s Co-Cathedral in Valletta is to be converted into a mosque.
**Mapping and documentation**

As in every nationwide project, the DG for Disintegration is sure to have relied on a map of Malta and Gozo to keep track of its projects and their reach around the Islands. It was important to the overall collection of material that the impression of a real, working office was given. Thus, a map was created which was purportedly used by the office, complete with scribbles, notes, highlighter pens, coffee-stains and tears. The notes scrawled on it refer to the projects in the exhibition; the theatres are marked on the map, as are the communities which took place in the workshops. European Commission post-its were also stuck all over the map, which was obviously a well-used tool during the project.

*Fig. 14 Work in progress on the Project Disintegration map*

**Letters**

Internal letters and memos were also created to give the impression of a working office. Luckily, the European Commission’s logo and brand guidelines are easily downloadable, so creating a false letterhead was a simple process. Care was taken to adhere to the European Commission’s brand guidelines to ensure authenticity, while the letters’ content referred directly to the projects in the exhibition.
The Exhibition

Since the exhibition format was central to the concept of the work, the design and detail of the exhibition became as important as the work being shown. A clean look with a museum-style design was adopted, to continue the illusion of a ‘real’ exhibition. The space allocated was part of a roughly circular area with a diameter of about 9 metres. A curved wall forms part of the space however this could not be used since, from a height of about 2 metres, it steps gradually down to ground level, leaving very little available space. The simplest, cleanest option was to build a structure which mimicked the curved shape of the existing wall, while also using the latter for support.

![Image](image_url)

*Fig. 15 The exhibition space available*

One serendipitous element of the space was a palm tree which stands in the building. Despite the danger of over-exoticising the space, a palm-tree slap-bang in the middle of an exhibition claiming Arabification was too strong a temptation, and the tree was incorporated into the ‘feel’ of the space with an area of fine desert sand placed around it.

Most of the material was two-dimensional and therefore could be displayed directly on the wall. For two three-dimensional pieces, niches were built into the
panels, while a small shelf was attached to one to hold the colouring book. A rectangular hole was cut into a panel against which the television screen was placed, to give as clean a look as possible, while the two headphones were hung from hooks on the panel.

![Illustration of panel layout and planned structure](image)

*Fig. 16 A front view of each panel layout and top view of the planned structure*

Five large panels formed the exhibition space; eventually, these naturally divided the material that was to be shown. The sections were not formally titled, but each panel was allocated a section of the material as below:

Media – this included the newspaper articles and radio interview;  
Pedagogy – this showed the Barbie Maltija, the children’s paintings and the colouring book;  
Workshops – here the screen played with video footage of the workshops;  
Food – this was a display of the pastizzerija event  
Office – this highlighted the work of the Project Disintegration office.

In order to place the material and to build the structure efficiently within the time allocated, the layout was pre-planned in detail beforehand, with nothing left to chance.
Fig. 17 The layout for each panel in more detail

Fig. 18 Layout planning on a blank wall
The text that accompanied each item or group of items was written to keep up the pretence, with a tone that seemed to give an insight into Project Disintegration’s methodology. Below are examples of three of the descriptions.

“Local media was enlisted almost immediately to aid Project Disintegration. These newspaper articles are an example of how the Times of Malta was used to keep the public abreast of the project’s developments, using a positive tone throughout the process.”

“The Maltese Barbie was a Project Disintegration prototype that never made it to the market due to copyright issues, however the doll was planned to project an image of a modern ‘Barbie Maltija’, combining a Paceville style with a more modest head-covering.”

“Project Disintegration took an inclusive, participatory approach to culture replacement. Workshops on various aspects of Arab culture took place frequently at community centres around Malta. This footage is taken from documentation relating to some of these workshops, covering head-coverings, food and henna tattoos.”

While working on the final versions of the material gathered and their display, I felt I had to face a possible inconsistency in format. That is, if, as the premise argues, the material is really on display in 2068, wouldn’t it be shown in a far more high-tech format than it is currently? This argument, had, in part, to be answered with the obvious argument that it’s impossible to know, or even, imagine, what tools will be available to the exhibition curator in 2068. Also however, the ‘real’ feel of the exhibition was important to its documentary arguments – it was important to show the ‘real’ Barbie or the ‘real’ European Commission letters to somehow prove that Project Disintegration actually happened. The presence of actual documents and artefacts was also important to the feel of an exhibition, perhaps within a museum whose remit is to collect and display these documents and artefacts.
In order to retain a contemporary or neutral environment, I made the exhibition space as clean as possible (palm tree notwithstanding); overall, the space was intended to give the impression of a clean, modern exhibition space, with a tiny nod to the irony contained within the material it’s exhibiting.
Reflective Discourse

Sciascia’s Abbot Vella creates two works of art, one from an existing manuscript, and one completely fabricated, but both offering an alternative version of reality. Eventually, the artist in him wants to be recognised and he admits to his forgeries, and as he awaits his arrest, he begins to remember the Malta of his childhood. As he reflects, he thinks;

“Only the things of fantasy are beautiful. And memory, too, is a fantasy . . . . Malta is nothing but a poor harsh island and the people are as barbarous as when St Paul was shipwrecked there. Only, being in the sea, it allows imagination to venture into a fable of the Moslem and Christian world, as I have done, as I have been able to do . . . . Others would say history, but I say fable.” (Sciascia, 1996, pg 192)

This description of Malta, and indeed the whole story of Abbot Vella, brings together much of what Project Disintegration came to represent. Eventually, the project came to symbolise something that could have been, but that somewhere over the centuries, and even as late as recent decades, just missed the chance of coming into being. Of course, the project still forms a comment on the Maltese identity, or lack of it, and the country’s apparent reluctance to admit to an Arab inheritance, as well as an over-emphasis of that same Arab influence by some cultural organisations outside Malta. But without meaning to, the resulting work created a world where colourful messages of peace cover empty walls, where children’s paintings are full of colour and happiness, where bishops welcome mosques in their constituencies, and where people are happy to try new food and clothing from other cultures. But, just like Abbot Vella’s forgeries, this world does not exist, and Project Disintegration was just a fabrication.

Following my research into the Arab history of Malta and after gathering relevant information, I felt I had a good overview of how I could put this together with local
culture in order to create an imaged version of Malta. At times, I was disappointed that not all the stories and histories found during this process could feature in the finished material, but I feel that it still contributed to the layers of meaning in many of the individual pieces. Indeed many of the pieces acquired an unintentional meaning after their creation; the t-shirt in the pastizzerija photos, for example, telling us ‘It’s your choice’, or purple image of a sphinx on the wall of the Sphinx taking on a new significance in the new context we gave it. The children’s drawings also acquired new meaning as they were created; the bright colours and sequins used as part of a children’s activity lent them an exotic feel and seemed to imply that an Arab Malta would be much more colourful than it is now. Just like Barbie Maltija, whose accidental combination of hijab and mini-skirt give her an edgy look, these drawings combine an exotic colour with a local solidity to form an even better world.

The development of the project took my work down routes where it hadn’t been before; I found myself spraying graffiti in the middle of the night, and causing planning scares around the country. These parts of the project were admittedly fun, but they also felt essential to the overall body of work; it would be pointless to wonder about how works of dissent or citizen action would be received without putting them to the test. And lest we think that Project Disintegration did create a perfect world, we would do well to remember to note that on the 9th of April 2016, the anti-immigration Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin confirmed that they will contest the next general election (Diacono, 2016).

I was aware as I was working, that at times the work didn’t make sense – there were some slight gaps in its narrative, or places where more than a small suspension of disbelief was necessary to continue the narrative. But this lack of clarity and slight sense of something not-quite-right was part of the work – that ambiguity where parts of it are real, parts of it might be, and parts of it are definitely unreal was what I wanted to achieve. I purposely did not agonise over a confusion of different Arab cultures, which includes over 20 countries; this confusion was, in a sense, part of the argument being made.
Conclusion

Political art often exists between worlds. Sometimes it exists in an established gallery world, at others it appears on the streets and on the margins, but then sometimes it exists in both worlds at once. Alongside these ‘real world’ contexts, political art frequently imagines a parallel universe, one which reflects on the status quo around it. Sometimes, it presents a better reality, or an ideal alternate being. At other times, it can present a reality that is not so different from the existing world, but which, in its subversion, shows up what exactly is wrong.

Whether it’s the Lab of ii creating a snowball fight with bankers on the streets of London, or Wafaa Bilal recording scenes behind him every day for a year through a camera in the back of his head, political artists seem, not only to function somewhere outside the accepted dominant world, but also to play with the realities and irreals of other, parallel worlds. In presenting alternate realities, political artists aren’t doing it innocently. It’s not a representation of a perfect world meant to be emulated, because nothing, unfortunately, is ever that simple. Art deals with possibilities and alternatives which speak to the real world in which, quite often, there are very few alternatives.

Like Abbott Vella in Il Consiglio d’Egitto, political artists manipulate the world for their own purposes; Larissa Sansour creates a world in which the Palestinian nation has travelled to the moon, while Banksy has created another world in the form of a physical parody of a fun park. The collective, Assemble, on the other hand, have quite literally created a new world, by working with a community to build one. There are more; Superflex’s world in which they beg “Foreigners, Please Don’t Leave Us Alone with the Danes” (2002), or the New World Summit which creates another alternative for the political world – all these invoke the idea of other worlds and possibilities existing alongside ours.
What, then, is the point of political art? What does it create these new worlds for? I’d like to go back to what Rancière tells us; that aesthetic experience does not tell us what should be done. Art is political “to the extent that the loss of destination that it presupposes disturbs the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations” (Rancière, 2008, p. 11). By disturbing and disrupting the world – by being subversive, political art can attempt to create a new reality.

I’d like to leave the last word to Alfredo Jaar. During a public lecture organised by the European Graduate School (2016, Valletta), Jaar gave an arresting presentation on his work and on an artist’s attempts to make sense of the world around us. When asked to justify the fact that he earns a living from commenting on social injustice, Jaar, visibly irritated, answered with a rhetorical question that simultaneously encapsulates the dilemma of political art, and reduces that argument to insignificance. “What would you have the artist do?” he asked, “Should we say nothing?”
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