

DIPLOMAZIJIA

DIPLOMAZIJIA ASTUTA
MALTA PAVILION
59TH INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION—
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA



ASTUTA



MALTA PAVILION 59TH INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION — LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA DIPLOMAZIJA ASTUTA

Commissioner: **ARTS COUNCIL MALTA**

Curators: **KEITH SCIBERRAS** (Malta) and **JEFFREY USLIP** (United States)

Artists: **ARCANGELO SASSOLINO** (Italy), **GIUSEPPE SCHEMBRI BONACI** (Malta), and composer **BRIAN SCHEMBRI** (Malta)

The Maltese Pavilion, titled *Diplomazija astuta* (*Cunning Diplomacy*), reimagines Caravaggio's seminal altarpiece *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (1608) as an immersive, site-responsive installation that overlays biblical narrative onto the present and the noetic onto the metaphysical. The collaborative effort of curators Keith Sciberras and Jeffrey Usli, artists Arcangelo Sassolino and Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, and composer Brian Schembri layers that which is said to have passed with *that which is still unfolding*, creating a palimpsest that uniquely operates within the realms of Caravaggio's altarpiece and contemporary visual culture.

By transposing the zeitgeist of the Oratory of the Decollato in Valletta, where *The Beheading* is situated, onto the Malta Pavilion, the curatorial team transports spectators into the compositional and thematic space of the painting, elevating the potential for art to lead us forward through our complex moment in time and offering the work as both an urgent forewarning and a conduit into the parallel and overlapping histories of Malta and Italy. *Diplomazija astuta* re-situates Caravaggio's immanent themes within modern life, prompting viewers to navigate a space where the tragedy and brutality of Saint John's execution is experienced in the present; the injustices of the past (and present) are reconciled; and shared humanist principles can be upheld in the future. The curatorial team posits that we are back in the time of John. For society to embody its future self in the present, the signal material of Modernism—*steel*—must be physically, metaphorically, and spiritually melted to create space for progress to occur.

Arcangelo Sassolino's kinetic installation is anchored by a monumental, freestanding solid steel plate, weighing sixteen tons and measuring 360 × 520 cm—the exact dimensions of Caravaggio's canvas—at one archway of the pavilion. As an austere industrial surrogate, the metal plane serves as a physical analog to Caravaggio's painting, creating a doubling across time and space as it recalls how viewers have experienced *The Beheading* in Malta since the early seventeenth century.



Diplomazija Astuta, 2022. Steel, water, induction and electric system, 600 × 1500 × 1500

Positioned throughout the exhibition space are seven water-filled square steel basins that echo the arrangement of the seven figures in Caravaggio's composition. Emulating the pictorial environment of *The Beheading*, the reservoirs represent the figures in the painting: John the Baptist, the executioner, Salome, her assistant, the jailer, and two prisoners. Situated above each pool is a computer-programmed system that feeds coils of steel into an induction machine whose electromagnetic field almost instantaneously melts the metal at 1500 degrees

Celsius, conjuring droplets of molten steel to fall from the ceiling into the basin of water below. Upon contact with the water, the bright orange embers hiss, cool, and recede into darkness.

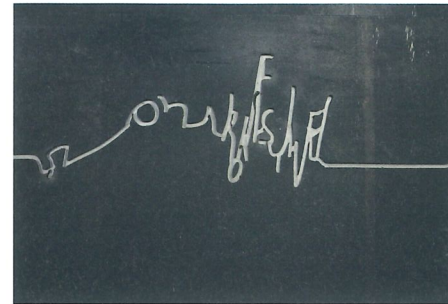
Taken as a whole, Sassolino's immersive, visceral environment confers biblical import on induction technology, imbuing the pavilion with an uncanny yet modern familiarity. We have walked into a contemporary experience of the Oratory of the Decollato, as well as into a twenty-



Caravaggio, *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1608. Oil on canvas, 360 × 520 cm, Oratory of St John the Baptist, St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, Courtesy of Foundation for St John's Co-Cathedral.

first-century iteration of Caravaggio's picture plane, *in medias res*. For Sassolino, *Diplomazija astuta* liberates metal from its solid form, revealing the potential of its liquid state. The molten steel embodies "living" time, expanding and radiating light at exceedingly high temperatures... until the light is reclaimed by darkness. *Diplomazija astuta* allegorizes the continuous cycle of agency and loss, the impossible and unstoppable flow of events—symbolized by evanescent intervals in which light is carved out of darkness.

On its other axis, the steel plate reveals Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci's *Metal and Silence*, a multilingual incision of text that weaves Aramaic, Hebrew, Latin, and Greek—together with those languages that compose the Maltese linguistic structure (Italian, Arabic, and English)—into the form of the artist's cardiac sinus rhythm. Schembri Bonaci culls texts from Ezekiel 37 and Psalm 139 to present the creation of humankind as a universal act. The words and letters incorporate multiple primordial spellings, incantations, and meanings: *osse, ossa, ossea*; form, *forma, μορφή*; humankind, *hominum, homine*; life, *vita, anima*; God, *Dio, Alla, Allah*. *Metal and Silence* conveys Schembri Bonaci's position on materiality and its *faktura* counterpoint, art, biblical narrative, politics, ideology, language, and life itself across diverse eras in human history: the birth of Logos from the scratched, scorched surface of the earth.



Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, *Metal and Silence*, 2022. Steel, overall dimensions: 381 × 520 cm

With a nod to the formal and conceptual structures of the Pillars of Melqart and the Rosetta Stone, *Metal and Silence* allows viewers to experience the struggle between words, silence, letters, and pauses. Schembri Bonaci's incisions into the installation itself—forming a sculpted ciphertext—propose a daunting salve that embeds knowledge beyond and within our grasp.

The composer for this project, Brian Schembri, interacts with the machine's output—falling fire—through a set of musical organizing principles. Schembri based his engagement with *Diplomazija astuta* on a number of musical works or their elements, including



"Ut queant laxis," the Gregorian chant attributed to Guido d'Arezzo in honor of John the Baptist; rhythmic motifs derived from Carlo Diacono's two hymns composed on the same Latin text; and Charles Camilleri's *Missa Mundi*. Guiding the timing and frequency of each descending ember and ordering the sequence in which the machines operate, Schembri challenges the installation to reinterpret his percussive score in aleatoric dialogue among itself, its various components, and the original composition.

With the principles of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals on climate change, environmental protection, peace, and justice in mind, the environmental consulting team for *Diplomazija astuta* calculated the total CO2 produced by the installation, in order to reduce it and then to offset it with the help of Carbonsink. It is the first sculpture that the international certification body DNV has recognized as carbon neutral, certifying the installation as environmentally conscious and ethically sound.

Through the shared vision of the artists and the curatorial imprint of Sciberras and Usli, *Diplomazija astuta* presents a new social contract: viewers encounter a transcendent and immersive installation in which global challenges can be seen with fresh eyes and injustices can begin to be reconciled. Through the re-presentation of Saint John's beheading in a contemporary sculptural language, biblical tragedy resonates with current world events, revealing the blind spots, miscues, and failures of the humanist project across millennia: deceit, culture copying, virtue signaling, media malpractice, and the weaponization of ideas.

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