



STATE OF THE ARTS

MALTA NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM 2024

RENEWING COMMON PATHWAYS

REPORT

24TH & 25TH OCTOBER 2024
UNIVERSITY OF MALTA - VALLETTA CAMPUS



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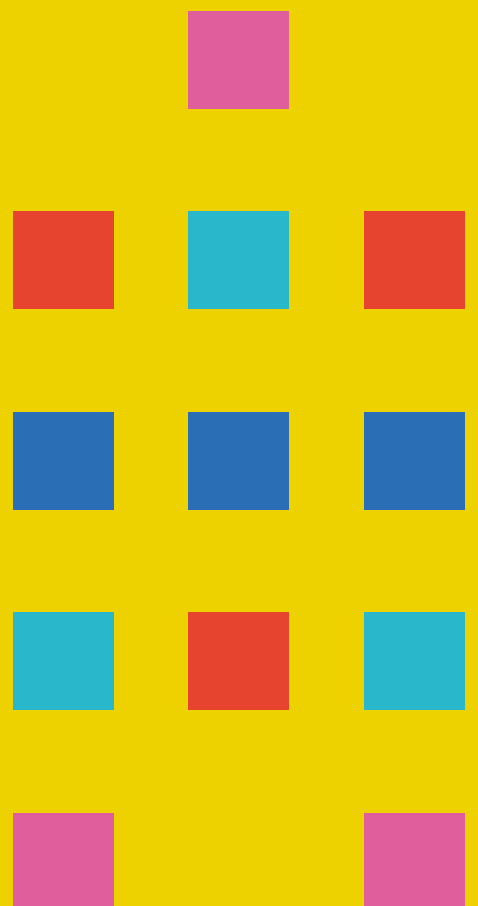
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PREAMBLE



PREAMBLE

The third edition of the State of the Arts Symposium, hosted at the Valletta Campus, involved active participation from artists and creative practitioners in shaping Malta's cultural and creative sectors (CCS) through Arts Council Malta's (ACM) efforts. This year's edition, entitled *Renewing Common Pathways*, addressed the practice of commoning through the arts and culture. The thematic content of the symposium was finalised after ACM issued a public call for those interested to share their thoughts on what topics they felt were important to discuss regarding the State of the Arts. The feedback received informed and inspired the symposium's programme. The symposium featured the launch of the Charter for the Status of the Artist, which was signed by the Public Cultural Organisations and the Council.

Minister for National Heritage, the Arts, and Local Government Owen Bonnici stated: "It fills me with pride to witness the third edition of this important cultural symposium, which has truly become a cornerstone in shaping our creative sectors. This national event is playing a crucial role in laying the foundation for future generations of artists and creatives, leaving a lasting legacy on the cultural landscape.

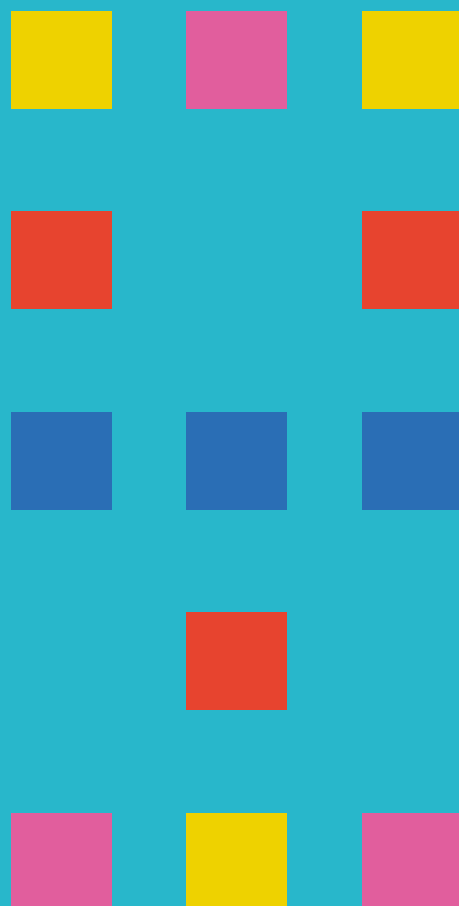
"The State of the Arts Symposium is yet another tangible step in this government's enduring commitment to cultural growth. Through such initiatives we continue to fulfil our electoral promise to foster growth and inclusivity in this sector, fostering a meaningful dialogue that helps shape the direction of Malta's cultural sector while strengthening our heritage."

Executive Chairman Albert Marshall made reference to the fact that "this symposium plays a crucial role in facilitating these conversations, providing the platform where these key elements of our national strategy come to life in direct engagement with stakeholders. Our focus remains on empowering communities, enhancing education, and ensuring accessibility to the arts for all, and the launch of the Charter for the Status of the Artist will undoubtedly serve as an excellent foundation to continue furthering these aims. Through collaboration and dialogue, we are driving the arts in a direction that's not only inclusive but also reflective of the diverse needs of the cultural landscape. It is this ongoing commitment that allows us to build a more resilient future for Malta's creative sectors."

Chief Operations Officer, Funding & Strategy, Mary Ann Cauchi stated: "As we continue the journey towards implementing Strategy 2025, this symposium serves as a vital space for fostering intersectoral synergy and ensuring that our policies are shaped by meaningful consultation with artists and creative practitioners."

The launch of the Charter is one of the priorities highlighted in Strategy 2025 and is inspired by the UNESCO 1980 Recommendations concerning the Status of the Artist and its further developments and supports and advocates for working conditions in which artists and cultural and creative practitioners can create and flourish in pursuing their ideas and aspirations. Preceded by a thorough public consultation process, it provides a dynamic frame of reference for any legislation, policy, or initiative which directly or indirectly impacts artists and the cultural and creative sectors, ensuring that any action is aligned with the ultimate long-term vision of elevating the status of artists in Malta in line with their tangible value to society.

INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

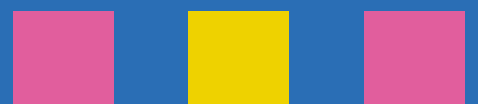
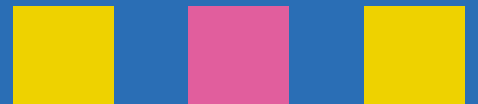
The two key questions guiding the process were:

1. How can our actions and thinking impact structural changes?
2. How can structural changes impact our individual realities?

The following six questions addressed specific areas of reflection and action:

1. How can a practice of commoning sustain the socio-economic status and working conditions of creatives?
2. How can commoning processes challenge the current limiting and limited art funding structures?
3. How can spaces and infrastructure become more available, accessible, and affordable through commoning practices?
4. How can shared values and an ethics of care open up access to a wider group of practitioners with different needs and experiences, leading to better equity?
5. How can a process of commoning provide a wider variety of art forms and practices, relevant to more diverse audiences?
6. How can a practice of commoning unify and consolidate efforts towards the development of formal and non-formal learning?

OVERVIEW OF STRUCTURE



OVERVIEW OF STRUCTURE

Day one featured interventions from Abigail Mallia (Director and Producer, Take Two), Bianca Elzenbaumer (Director, Brave New Alps), and representatives from Arts Council Malta (ACM) and the Ministry for National Heritage, the Arts, and Local Government. Following the call to action, the Charter for the Status of the Artist was launched with a presentation from Adrian Debattista, Head (Strategy) at ACM and Glen Calleja, Executive (Creative Entrepreneurship) at ACM, which demonstrated the principles and articles that constitute the Charter as well as its purpose.

This was followed by a signing ceremony involving Public Cultural Organisations that established their commitment to upholding and promoting the principles of the Charter. The day proceeded with a series of fishbowl conversations, where artists Lenn Cox, Floréal Comte, Alisha Doody and Erica Muscat, and art worker Katrien Reist- van Gelder focused on the socio-economic status of artists. Panel sessions, led by artists who were selected after a public call, took place in the afternoon.

The second day of the symposium opened with interventions by John Mallia (Director, Mediacoop), and a discussion about the Cultural and Creative Practice Survey (CCPS) by Karsten Xuereb, Executive (Research & Statistics) at ACM, jointly published by the Council and the National Statistics Office, which provides a detailed examination of the demographics and conditions pertaining to cultural and creative practice.

This was followed by a panel conversation about access and accessibility in the arts world, featuring contributions by Deborah Falzon (Cofounder, Dance Beyond Borders), Alexander Farrugia (Director at the Culture Directorate), Allison Zammit (Research and Policy Manager, Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability), Britt Jurgensen (Cofounder and director, Homebaked CLT) and Greta Pace Buch (Facilitator, Creative Coach, and Communications Mentor).

Further panel sessions continued throughout the afternoon, followed by a call to action by Joe Gatt (coeditor of *Aphroconfuso*). The symposium came to an end with a closing address by Mary Ann Cauchi, Chief Operations Officer (Funding & Strategy) who referred to the Charter signing, as well as the various action points that had emerged during the two-day discussions, especially the vital act of commoning, and fostering discussions rooted in shared realities and lived experiences. Participants reflected on and embraced their collective struggles while celebrating the successes within their diverse backgrounds. ACM reiterated its commitment to advocating for the commons within the CCS, expressing gratitude to all participants while looking forward to continuing these important conversations.

Keywords (selection)

- Access and accessibility
- Commoning practices
- Communication
- Socio-economic welfare
- Status of the artist
- Sustainability

Opening the Day's Conversation

Caring for Common Infrastructures **Introductory Invitation to Reflect by Bianca Elzenbaumer,** **Director, Brave New Alps**

In a world increasingly marked by global crises—such as the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, and the climate change affecting various countries around the world—how do artists and designers interact with the commons?

Bianca Elzenbaumer is one of the cofounders of the design practice Brave New Alps and of the community academy La Foresta, both based in the Italian Alps. The group focuses on participatory design projects that empower people to reshape social, environmental, and economic issues, aiming to eliminate precarity and create more inclusive communities. They also work to bridge the gap between rural and urban areas.

Her 40-year research plan focuses on supporting and creating community economies and commons starting from the places she lives in. Thanks to the past fifteen years working in this area, she believes society can thrive by creating common infrastructures that support a wide range of diverse modes of life.

In 2017, twelve years after the practice was created, a former office at the Rovereto train station was transformed into a community academy where local changemakers could work together on their ideas. This year, with €5 million in EU funding from the European Urban Initiative, they are transforming unused spaces in the train station into a public-civic hub to support the ecological transition of their territory.

Commons vs Capital

The commons care for the community and its people and share the commonwealth, whilst the capital has one group of owners who have exclusive ownership of a property and make a profit through exploitation and oppression.

Feminist economic geographers, namely Katherine Gibson and the late Julie Graham, have shown that economies have always been diverse and people can sustain themselves in different ways, such as through care for family members and friends, informal loans, and bartering. Mentioning the use of the iceberg model, Elzenbaumer highlighted the fact that while society often focuses on visible economic activities, the invisible aspects—such as familial support and informal networks—are equally vital.

Breaking out of individualisation and seeing possibilities (almost) everywhere

“What starts small as an individual struggle can actually connect us to bigger issues of our territorial needs, of what our city needs.”

Elzenbaumer highlighted the challenges faced by artists and encourages them to openly share their struggles without shame. She believes that by sharing these experiences, artists will realise their challenges are part of broader systemic issues affecting the entire community. This understanding can foster solidarity and collective action to improve their circumstances.

She also encouraged artists to create with the resources they have available now, rather than waiting for the perfect conditions. “It’s important to learn to see possibilities and make them happen.” Drawing inspiration from Elsa in Frozen, she suggested artists to adopt a proactive mindset—like Elsa, who simply makes things happen—but in a collaborative manner through the “magic powers” of co-creation.

“Let’s work on trusting each other, trusting the world, and taking the plunge. The world will meet you even if you have the craziest idea. You will be able to co-create amazing things. We really need common pathways, and artists are well-positioned to make things happen.”

Questions that followed the intervention by Elzenbaumer

Nikki Petroni: How does the association bridge rural communities with city communities?

The bridging happens by taking workshops to the villages, so they create together. With city communities, the bridging takes place by hosting students, artists, and researchers from the cities in the association’s residencies. They are taken on walks and given workshops. We engage them in our thinking. We take power off each other if we do not collaborate.

Abigail Mallia: When people engage and disconnect from individualisation, how is growth affected?

A growing sense of self-efficacy. You get a sense that you can move things in the world, that you can actually change things, no matter how small.

SUMMARY / HIGHLIGHTS



SUMMARY / HIGHLIGHTS

Day 1 - Fishbowl Conversation: The Socio-economic Status of the Artist

The session moderated by Abigail Mallia explored the socio-economic status of artists. The panel members, all coming from different backgrounds and having different experiences, shared insights into programmes and structures impacting their work and lives. Mallia introduced the fishbowl discussion concept and the speakers, namely Alisha Doody, Lenn Cox, Floréal Comte, Katrien Reist-Van Gelder, and Erica Muscat. Panellists shared their experiences with support systems for artists, including Ireland's Basic Income for the Arts pilot scheme, the Netherlands' Broedfonds (Bread Fund), and France's Intermittents du Spectacle. Each speaker highlighted how these schemes allowed them to explore their creative potential, take risks, or even shift to different career paths within the arts. Erica Muscat, for example, shared how a COVID-related wage supplement enabled her transition into dramaturgy and writing.

As the discussion evolved, the panellists were invited to share the benefits and limitations of these schemes. The main benefits outlined were the opportunities to take risks as well as the freedom from dependence on 'employment' and money-making ventures to sustain their lives.¹ Participants noted that expressing solidarity and fostering trust within the artist community are important benefits, although this sense of commonality may not always be universally experienced. The conversation, in fact, also touched upon problematic aspects such as isolation generated by a sense of stigma towards selected artists and broader societal perceptions hindering the implementation and the continuation of such schemes, as misconceptions about artists' roles persist at the political and public levels.

Alex Weenink, an actor and theatre-maker based in Malta, brought well-being and burnouts to the table as he shared his experiences with exhaustion due to financial pressure, questioning how artists can sustain both their health and work quality. Panellists agreed that burnout is widespread among creatives and discussed the need for stronger support systems and more collaborative approaches to address the issue. The panellists noted that community-building as well as a shift from the 'hobbyist mentality' could alleviate some of these pressures.

The following interventions reflected on how structural issues, including socio-economic privilege and societal undervaluation of the arts, impact creative careers. The socio-economic privilege inherent in pursuing a career in the arts was mentioned as well as the fact that, without financial security, many are unable to afford unpaid work or gradual progress in their fields. In a final comment, Mary Ann Cauchi emphasised the importance of progress within the arts sector despite the ongoing challenges, framing the current struggles as part of a larger journey.

¹ The finding from the CCPS 2024 that employed persons (any employment) practicing cultural activities grew from more than 65K in 2019 to almost 100K in 2023, spending 12.7 hours weekly, and that those employed spending time in creative activity doubled from around 15% to more than 30%, is interesting in this light. While the figures themselves may provide a positive perspective, they may also confirm the dependency on other employment.

The session highlighted the need for supportive, inclusive policies as well the need for a break from individualisation and a shift towards togetherness. Commoning was referred to as a solution to help artists survive and thrive. Participants acknowledged that while significant progress has been made in the past years, persistent issues remain, including the need for broader public understanding of the arts' value in societies.

Fishbowl Conversation in Greater Detail: The Socio-economic Status of the Artist

Lenn Cox

Community Organiser, Artist, Educator, and Board Member, Broodfonds Arnhem

Floréal Comte

Performing artist, France's model for the intermittent artist status

Alisha Doody

Socially Engaged Artist and Educator, Ireland's Basic Income for Artists

Abigail Mallia

Conversation Moderator

Erica Muscat

Stage and Screen Actor, Writer, and Dramaturg, Malta's COVID-19 Wage Supplement for Artists

Katrien Reist-van Gelder

Art worker, State of the Arts and SamenDurable

Moderator Abigail Mallia kicked off the conversation with a brief reflection on Bianca Elzenbaumer's opening intervention, highlighting the shift towards 'community' and 'body'. She then explained the fishbowl concept and proceeded to introduce the panel members.

Alisha Doody from Ireland is an artist and educator based in Dublin who is highly interested in ethics and care, as well as marginalised communities. She was selected to be part of the Basic Income for the Arts pilot scheme in Ireland. Lenn Cox is a community organiser, socially engaged artist, and educator from the Netherlands, who has been researching alternatives to neoliberalist way of life through art practice and education. She is interested in the concept of how practice can counterbalance the dominant systems that are part of our lives and ingrained in our bodies. She is also part of the Broodfonds Arnhem (Bread Fund) scheme, a voluntary collective of self-employed people who support each other financially in case of sickness. It is a scheme based on care, solidarity, and trust. Floréal Comte from France is a performing artist who has benefitted from the Intermittents du Spectacle unemployment insurance scheme, offering the opportunity to artists to research and explore their potential professional pathways while receiving a basic income.

Katrien Reist-Van Gelder is an art worker who is interested in the role of art in society. In her introduction she commented about how the arts are at the point of change, adding that, however, many artists are not up to date, and thus end up being reactive to systems. She added that if we want to change systems, we first have to be aware of them. Erica Muscat—actor, writer, and educator—spoke about the relevance of people finding their own voices, whether this is done within the community or within policy. She added that if we forget to question the 'why', we would not be able to ground ourselves in the 'how'. She spoke about how the COVID wage supplement scheme, which was introduced as a measure to support artists throughout the COVID period in the Maltese islands, helped her explore other areas. This was, in fact, when she decided to move into dramaturgy and scriptwriting. The wage supplement provided her with the financial support and the time to make the shift.

At this point, Abigail Mallia asked about the benefits of the different schemes mentioned. Doody explained that the Basic Income for the Arts pilot scheme gave her the opportunity and the time to take risks. Muscat added that the supplement for her was an opportunity. Here she referred to the fact that most of her students, when faced with a question about what they want to achieve in their future, reply that they want to make a living and fear precarity. Whilst acknowledging precarity as a difficulty, she advocates for balance in all that we do. From her end, Cox commented that the Broodfonds address accessibility issues with the local healthcare insurance systems. She explained how the system relies on a strong element of trust and how all participants are expected to put in a fixed amount of money per month, which people benefit from in case of sickness.

Abigail Mallia commented on how this requires a shift in mentality—the ‘I’ to ‘we’ shift—and made a link to Van Gelder’s previous comments about the need to ‘shift’. Van Gelder then added that the relevance of these schemes is highly related to the contexts in which they operate. For instance, the social security system in Belgium is well developed and therefore there is less urgency for something like the Broodfonds to exist. Still, she commented that the level of trust is commendable, giving an actual example of how trust, in her own professional experience, has also supported her when in need. Mallia turned to Comte to get some insights about the Intermittents du Spectacle scheme. He commented that the scheme gave him a sense of “legitimisation” as a young person who had just graduated while still providing the opportunity to network and do other things. The income at the time gave him the opportunity to rest and to understand the administrative aspect of his profession. He also had the time to take classes and connect with people. Most importantly, it also gave him a sense of ‘security’ and allowed him to stay in Paris, which is a hub for arts and culture.

The conversation turned to the problematic aspects of these schemes. Doody said that although the Basic Income scheme “legitimised” her practice, it also made her feel very guilty about those who did not manage to get the scheme. She felt that because of this factor, the scheme was frowned upon by many and the artists receiving the scheme were negatively labelled. This, in turn, led the artists receiving the scheme to not communicate about the fact that they were part of the scheme; what should have been a commoning experience ended up being a highly isolating experience. There is a certain difficulty related to speaking publicly about the arts, as ideas about the arts and artists at political level are misconceived.

Referring to the launch of the Charter for the Status of the Artist, Van Gelder said that in Belgium there was a similar process which was also characterised by considerable political pressure. It was a positive move, which was also met with significant backlash by those claiming that artists are lazy and other similar comments. She said that the need for such a system was evident but the assumptions about artists made the continuation of that conversation very difficult. Doody agreed, saying that this backlash was exactly why the artists who were part of the scheme became so silent about it.

It was a tense moment, and it was clear that the artists’ work was not being respected. Van Gelder added that, in general, people see this as an issue of priorities, and therefore a public justification of why the government is supporting artists—and not other sectors—is important. Research shows the needs of these tools, but political and sometimes public pressure opposes resource allocation to artists through such schemes. She added that the reconnection of artists with societies is highly relevant to address value. This is something that artists themselves need to work on.

The empty seat was taken over by Alex Weenink, an actor and theatre-maker based in Malta. Weenink tackled the issue of burnout and recounted his current personal experience of having to take on all the projects that he can for financial reasons. He said that this state of exhaustion is shedding doubt on whether he is capable of producing good artistic work at the moment. Indeed, his final question was: how do we create systems that help artists make the best possible work and stay healthy? In response, Cox asked whether Weenink is part of a community and whether he is supported enough by others. She explained that it takes time to find a good supporting system, and that, moreover, it takes time to establish your own systems. It is very much about slowing down and understanding your own parameters. To this, Doody added that having a supporting community frees up time. Muscat added that the common idea that, somehow, burnouts are what make us good artists is a fallacy. This constitutes a paradox of the general hobbyist attitude. This mentality needs to be challenged before we can talk about sustainability and longevity.

Maria Galea, an arts advisor, curator, and current president of the Malta Entertainment Industry and Arts Association (MEIA), then took the seat. She noted that the focus of this conversation is the value which creatives bring to society. She added that we are constantly trying to prove the value of our creativity and that that is a problem in itself. We are the ones allowing these questions to be put forward, she argued. She added that creatives are part of every other system and the question which we should ask is how to make certain systems understand their value. Maria Galea also mentioned the issue of well-being, noting that unfortunately she had also experienced burnout herself. As creatives, we tend to do multiple things simultaneously, with isolation furthermore being a key factor. There is, in general, an individualistic approach, and we tend to ignore the importance of working together, meeting and sharing.

Nikki Petroni, Executive (Education and Development) at ACM, stepped in and referred to Erica Muscat's question with regard to students, namely, what do you want to be and what makes money? She said that the system is exerting immense pressure on everyone at a very young age. However, most of the artists and creative practitioners still opted to go into the arts despite being told that this is not a viable option. She then asked, "what made you take that decision, regardless of the obstacles?" Maria Galea intervened, stating that it ultimately is about being true to oneself and feeling fulfilled. Choosing this career path has helped her to be in line with her own vision for her professional life.

Luke Camilleri (Funky Monkey) took the seat and spoke about his own challenges, which are very similar to the experiences which Alex Weenink previously shared. He stated that he knew that he had to give up a number of different things but there are systems which do not work, making it difficult for artists to cope. There is a general lack of structure, he commented, and while a number of things are improving, there is still quite a way to go. Despite being part of a number of different communities, he still feels isolated and alone.

Arts psychotherapist and artist Jeanette Fiott commented that there are people who end up being between spaces, having to find the 'space' they belong to. She specifically referred to her practice which brings together psychology and the arts as an example. Where does one belong here, she asked. She stated that it is important not to exclude anyone and to recognise these in-between spaces so that systems are inclusive. To this, Abigail Mallia added that there is a larger 'we' that we need to ring in and which we are all part of.

Martina Camilleri, a creative practitioner interested in social practice, added that the stressors affecting us are a common denominator. In this context, she mentioned arts on prescription as a potential support. She added that it is important to build bridges with other sectors where practitioners can interact and engage with various institutions that address health and well-being, finding common needs where artists and practitioners can intervene and contribute.

Bjorn Bonello, Executive Secretary of the Northern Regional Council, added that a lack of people and resources is a common problem across sectors. He said that Maltese people generally find it hard to work together, adding that we should speak about every aspect with honesty and pragmatism. Although Malta is a small country, there are numerous opportunities; yet, some think these opportunities are not relevant to them. Bonello also said that young artists should take a gradual approach to their career, adding that funding is still an issue at times, especially for the larger events.

Francesca Zammit, a freelance cultural operator, stepped in, adding that she has always felt that being an artist is a socio-economic privilege. Referring to the previous comment by Bonello, she said that if one's parents are not financially stable, one cannot afford to take things gradually and work pro bono. She said that it is barely realistic to pursue arts as a career at this point in time if one has this kind of background. Zammit added that we need to include the narratives of people coming from difficult socio-economic backgrounds.

Maria Blanco, Cultural Officer at the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, intervened briefly to comment about the importance of inspiring the next generation and of bringing artists to schools.

Mary Ann Cauchi concluded the session by stating that ACM is there for all the sectors. She added that it is important to remember where we are coming from as well as the huge leaps which the sectors made in these past few years. This puts the difficulties and challenges in a context. Cauchi concluded by stating that we need to embrace the difficult times and move forward.

Day 2 - Panel Conversation: Access and Accessibility in the Arts World within a Context of Diversity

John Mallia

Conversation moderator

Deborah Falzon

Cofounder, Dance Beyond Borders

Alexander Farrugia

Director (Culture), Culture Directorate

Allison Zammit

Research and policy manager, Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability

Britt Jürgensen

Cofounder and director, Homebaked Community Land Trust

Greta Pace Buch

Facilitator, Creative Coach and Communications Mentor

Moderated by John Mallia, the panel discussion focused on access, inclusivity, and empowerment in the arts, identifying both systemic barriers and grassroots solutions for achieving meaningful engagement. A central theme was the tension between top-down approaches and grassroots participation. Deborah Falzon of Dance Beyond Borders highlighted her organisation's focus on integrating asylum-seeking women and children into local communities rather than isolating them in camps. By providing logistical support, such as transport and communication tools, her work enables coproduction rather than passive participation. This practical approach echoed Britt Jürgensen's insights from Homebaked Community Land Trust, where local ownership of cooperatively run spaces empowers residents to reclaim agency over their neighbourhoods. Together, their perspectives demonstrated how grassroots efforts can transform cultural spaces into catalysts for community growth.

Accessibility extended beyond physical integration, as speakers addressed the diverse barriers faced by marginalised groups. Allison Zammit from the Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability stressed the importance of sensory-friendly environments and policies that address invisible disabilities. Her call for inclusion complemented Falzon's emphasis on integration but also exposed gaps in existing frameworks.

Similarly, the first audience member to take the floor, Raffaella Zammit from the Gabriel Caruana Foundation, critiqued Malta's car-centric infrastructure, highlighting how suburban and rural residents are often excluded from city-centred cultural events. Both argued that inclusivity demands systemic change, from programme design to the broader infrastructure supporting access.

The conversation also explored systemic elitism within cultural institutions. Alexander Farrugia, Director of Culture, called for policies that bridge the divide between 'high culture' and everyday experiences, framing cultural access as a universal right.

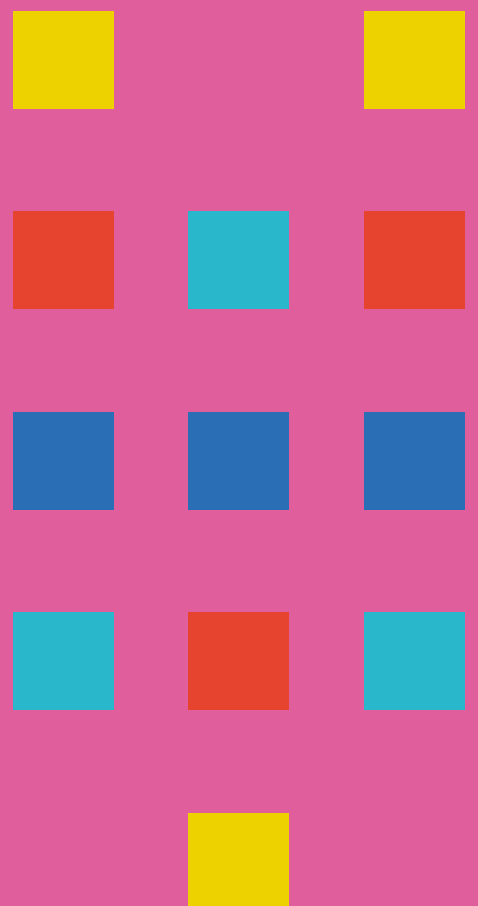
His critique of institutional elitism was mirrored by Josephine Burden, who questioned whether institutions can truly empower communities without acknowledging their vulnerabilities. Burden's reflections linked to Matthew Sultana's concerns about financial barriers, particularly in Gozo, where free cultural initiatives sometimes fail to provide sustainable support for local artists. Both Burden and Sultana underscored the need for systemic accountability and long-term strategies that prioritise community benefit.

Education emerged as a key tool with which to address these challenges. Daniela Peresso (journalist/researcher) advocated introducing classical art forms into local communities to foster appreciation and participation, while Greta Pace Buch highlighted the role of discomfort in personal growth and understanding diversity. Their perspectives reinforced the idea that inclusivity is about access and creating spaces where diverse voices can contribute authentically.

Despite the varied contexts, the panellists converged on a shared vision, namely that of fostering collaboration and rethinking traditional engagement models. The arts sector can address systemic barriers and build a more inclusive cultural ecosystem by aligning policies with grassroots needs and empowering communities to cocreate cultural spaces. From practical actions, such as equitable transport and sensory-friendly programmes, to broader systemic shifts, such as policy reform and education, the conversation offered a hopeful path forward.

Ultimately, the panel demonstrated that while challenges remain, collaborative, community-led approaches can transform the arts into a space of genuine empowerment and accessibility for all.

PARALLEL SESSIONS



PARALLEL SESSIONS

Parallel Session 1: Placemaking and Cultural Rights

Format: Workshop

Presenters: Regional Councils Cultural Managers James Hamberger (Eastern Region) and Naomi Galea (Gozo Region); Executive Secretary Bjorn Bonello (Northern Region); KT Thomas (freelance artist); and Arts Council Malta's (ACM) Regional Cultural Manager Nicole Borg.

The workshop discussed placemaking, the right to culture, the work being done in the arts by the regional councils, and finally ended with a matchmaking session. The three Regional Councils participating in the session outlined some of the main themes as follows.

Eastern Regional Council

James Hamberger noted that the Eastern Regional Council is celebrating its designation as Region of Culture 2024. The council's philosophy is to collaborate with everyone—individuals, local councils, and organisations—while shifting focus from large festivals to transforming spaces into cultural places. As part of its community outreach, the council visits a different locality each month, working closely with individuals/NGOs/local councils on small-scale projects engaging with specific segments of the community.

Hamberger emphasised that after the Region of Culture designation ends, the council will continue building on the knowledge and experiences gained, ensuring a sense of continuity between the regions of culture.

Northern Regional Council

Bjorn Bonello mentioned that one of his main priorities is to foster a sense of community in a region where, in some localities, third-party nationals make up over 50% of the population. The council has reached out to artists and creatives in the region, inviting them to complete an online form to help promote their initiatives in connection with upcoming projects.

Bonello acknowledged that coming from outside the cultural sector, he faces challenges in building connections and navigating the scene. To overcome this, he is exploring new forms of art, such as providing exposure for children and starting with modest interventions rather than large-scale events. His focus is on introducing diverse cultures to increase awareness and understanding among local communities. However, he admitted that these initiatives have had limited success so far.

While Bonello believes there are opportunities, he also noted the challenge of securing funding, which he hopes to address through European Union grants.

Gozo Regional Council

Naomi Galea explained that cultural managers in regional councils act as a bridge between artists, local councils, and the central government, ensuring that cultural initiatives benefit society as a whole. Through partnerships with the International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism (IGCAT) and the EFFE Seal for Festivals & Regions by the European Festivals Association, regional councils foster cross-community collaborations and projects, focusing on knowledge sharing and networking with national and local stakeholders to build a lasting cultural legacy. This includes identifying community issues and working on long-term solutions.

Looking ahead, Gozo has two major events on the horizon: the European Region of Gastronomy 2026 and, potentially, Gozo: European Capital of Culture 2031. Galea stressed that pursuing these titles will create platforms that drive job opportunities, foster policy change, amplify local voices, and help safeguard cultural traditions.

Intervention by KT Thomas

A British multifaceted artist who has lived in New York and whose practice has linked her to Gozo, she shared her experience of working there, highlighting both rejection and support. She noted the positive changes since the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the increase in opportunities for shows across all levels. She encouraged participants to connect with local community groups and collaborate on projects. "Develop yourself through your individual groups. Seek out art centres and explore opportunities to work with children, especially those with special needs. Art is vital for marginalised communities." Thomas also recommended that artists offer workshops as a way to exchange ideas, learn from others, and gain new perspectives on creative practices.

Questions fielded by Arts Council Malta

What comes to mind when you think of creative placemaking? Write 3 words. A total of 37 responses were gathered.

Connection; better living space; community-led; rights; opportunity for creatives; cocreation; multidisciplinary; innovative; communities; space; togetherness; dialogue; engagement; vibrancy; networks; sharing; inclusive; involvement; direct connection; bridging entities; built heritage; rights; stakeholders; jobs.

How satisfied are you with the right to culture? (1 was the most popular)

1. Moderately satisfied
2. Satisfied
3. Not satisfied
4. Very satisfied

Borg asked for feedback from those who declared that they were not satisfied.

Francesca Zammit: There is still a lot of fragmentation. People still need to come together more. There's a benefit to have a lot of cultures in one country but it feels fragmented. Look at this symposium: not everyone is here. There needs to be more accessibility.

Bjorn Bonello: Money is always an issue. Getting international artists to Malta, what is the longevity of that? It stays up there and doesn't trickle down.

Christine Xuereb Seidu: There are five galleries in Tas-Sliema. Addressing regions and councils: "Involve us. Put us on the map of your activities. Galleries are free of charge. We are not asking for money. I feel this is reducing what art is. We have tried to work on this aspect but the local councils do not seem to be interested."

Bjorn Bonello: Different government entities tend to become territorial and show off work so it's difficult to collaborate.

Mro Colin Attard: I believe Gozo has its own needs and commons. I'm afraid many times we are not looking into these things. What is pertinent for the north of the island isn't pertinent for the south of the island. This is something that the regional councils need to take care of. The general feeling among the major Gozo stakeholders is that they are fed up with the bureaucratic process required by the Arts Council Malta.

It also seems that NGOs are not highly regarded and yet the voluntary aspect is the driving force. It feels like we are castigated for having volunteers. The government prefers to have people employed but value needs to be given to volunteers. If they take away the voluntary aspect of the Aurora, they will take away its identity.

Amateur theatre 'tas-Sala tal-Kappillan' is very important for our communities. What is lacking is evaluation. No one comes to evaluate the projects to decide if they should be given more help.

Bjorn Bonello: We focus on crowd-pullers but we should focus on the smaller activities that have more longevity and impact. Public money has to have added value.

Marcon Borg Caruana: It's important that we see where we're coming from. Now there are actual cultural managers within the regions. Sadly, the regions also do not feel connected to the community because they have other remits which sometimes take priority before culture. Unfortunately, culture and the arts are taken on a superficial level. Where is the grassroots approach? To reap the benefits of Valletta18, we reached out to the people, the NGO, the Duttrina. We were the voice of the foundation that made the event possible. Having percussions being played in the square is not enough. What do the people really need? Where is the tax money going? How is it being used? How are quantifying the impact of the events? Will they leave a legacy?

Matchmaking session

Participants were assigned to the groups below:

Gozo Region & KT Thomas: heritage innovation, opportunity, and accessibility

Northern Region: demographics and diversification of knowledge

Eastern Region: resource sharing and audience engagement

Most important comments from the matchmaking session with the Eastern Region (attended by rapporteur):

Francesca Zammit: Best audience engagement in disenfranchised communities – ask them what they want to see. Not an easy process. They won't trust you as they won't know you.

Charmaine Zammit: If people are not aware that they can create, they won't create. Art should also be a healing process for all humans, not only done for money.

Francesca Zammit: Art can be used as a tool in various forms—activism, education, healing. Student artists are in Opening Doors Association because they want to create but some of them come there to socialise.

Melanie Erixon: You should feel what the community wants but artists should have the ability to express themselves.

James Hamberger: There is a lot of competition. A lot of things going on.

Francesca Zammit: I never saw it as a competition. Do activities which are not there, but you need to research first and spend months mapping things out.

Parallel Session 2: The Future of Work in the Arts

Format: Interactive roundtable discussion

Moderator: Nikki Petroni (Arts Council Malta, ACM)

Participants: Clayton Micallef Grimaud and Erica Falzon (National Skills Council, NSC)

Summary

The session featured a workshop-style setup designed to provoke discussion through targeted questions. Its main objective was to gather feedback from participants on the state of skills in the Cultural and Creative Sectors and to explore solutions for addressing any identified issues. Following a round of introductions and an explanation of the work which both Arts Council Malta and the National Skills Council are carrying out, the participants were divided into four different groups to discuss the following questions:

1. Is the arts sector experiencing a shortage of skilled workers? List those skills which are most urgent for the present and the immediate future.
2. Do you believe that the education and training systems available are preparing future artists and creatives for careers in the arts? If not, put forward suggestions.
3. With the digital transformation shaping jobs, what are the key skills required for these future roles? List relevant skills.
4. What skills and knowledge are required to follow sustainable practices?
5. What challenges do artists and creatives face in terms of the digital transition and sustainable practices?

In detail

Each group was invited to share the main points discussed. The first group highlighted a shortage of professional and technical skills and the absence of supportive roles for tasks such as billing, contracts, and budgeting—skills that artists often need but which are not covered in current education. Other missing skills included project management and grant application writing. The discussion touched on whether such administrative tasks should be outsourced, with most agreeing on the value of team collaboration. Andrew Borg Wirth stressed the importance of individual responsibility in carrying out this specific task, while Kathrin Reist-Van Gelder noted that education should incorporate these skills. The Opera Nova project, which is a vocal programme aiming to provide a holistic, high level of music education for classical voice students, was cited as an example of a holistic training programme addressing these gaps.

The second group pointed out the lack of technical and screen training in Malta. Similarly to the first group, they argued about the need for entrepreneurial and management skills, including knowledge of legal and taxation matters and social media use. Awareness of well-being factors, such as mental well-being, should also be considered. They noted progress in training but highlighted the absence of specialised programmes, suggesting the introduction of master's degrees in specific skills. The group also advocated for nurturing creativity from a young age and called for teachers to encourage risk-taking. Sustainable job structures and knowledge of fair practices were seen as essential points.

The speaker for the third group said that they mostly discussed the current situation in Malta. They talked about the "after-work" reality, where many artists hold other jobs and practice their art as a secondary pursuit. They commented about the culture of underpaid work and undervaluation. They added that this becomes a vicious circle, and that given this lack of appreciation, artists do not invest in their own skills. Mario Philip Azzopardi emphasised that discussions must align with Malta's unique context, advocating for a tailored approach. The group acknowledged positive examples of self-sustaining practices. The importance of considering international opportunities was also discussed. During this part of the conversation the importance and relevance of engaging with the private sector was mentioned, with this being noted as a skill in itself which should be part of mainstream education.

The fourth group discussed the multiple hats which need to be worn by artists and creative practitioners. They reiterated the challenges artists face, including underpayment and unrecognised preparation/research time. They called for enhanced financial literacy and better self-management training within education and training systems.

Nikki Petroni presented and explained the next exercise, which focused on careers. She presented the following set of questions which were then discussed with the participants:

1. How would the skills issues mentioned—skills shortage, new skills, green skills, digital skills—alter career opportunities?
2. Do you find that career guidance professionals are properly trained for the arts sector? Whom would you ask for career advice?
3. List three emerging careers, one in each: short (2 years), medium (5 years), and long (10 years) term.

The platforms targeting emerging artists and work at the Malta Dance Festival were referenced as an example of a good practice. A number of problematic aspects, however, still emerge. In dance, we are honing good dancers but there are no full-time dance conservatoires locally to support them and the craft of choreography is not sufficiently supported. Participants also referred to potential solutions, including the introduction of mentorships and shadowing, particularly in the form of international exchanges. In general, participants agreed on the need to leverage the power of internationalisation to continue pushing exchange to the top of the agenda. The Venice Biennale model was suggested as a best practice for broader application. The introduction of agents for artists was also mentioned as another possible solution to further support artists.

The conversation also focused on specialisation and how this, in general, needs to be further supported. Having to juggle multiple roles limits deep expertise. Another area to be further developed is writing and criticism, so as to provide feedback and bolster the arts ecosystem.

Petroni explained that this workshop is part of a longer-term collaboration with the NSC. ACM and the NSC are working together to determine where the cultural and creative sectors are at, and to establish what the needs are. Clayton Micallef Grimaud provided an overview of the NSC's role and their current initiatives, including the Skillscape project, which examines skill landscapes, and the Careerscape project, focused on Malta's career landscape. He added that the NSC has identified 40 emerging sectors, two of which are the cultural and creative sectors. He highlighted their tailored approach to addressing the needs of each sector adding that even though the sectors are all different, there are a number of similarities. Micallef Grimaud announced that a campaign focusing on emerging careers, including the arts, would be launched in 2025. Petroni added that ACM's ArtWorks campaign, spotlighting various professions in the creative industry, is also underway.

Micallef Grimaud pointed out that there is a certain level of complexity when addressing skills and related issues. He described the NSC's proactive approach, which includes the launch of their first career guidance network in December 2024 and the collaboration with human resources professionals, to ensure continued relevance. He pointed out that the notion of a single lifelong career has become obsolete, a reality reflected across various sectors.

Petroni referenced a visual map created during a roundtable at a Careerscape event earlier in 2024. This map highlighted key discussion points, such as skill shortages, emerging skills, digital expertise, and sustainable practices.

Micallef Grimaud emphasised the importance of “transversal skills”, cautioning against the term “soft skills”, which can undermine their significance. He argued for the prioritisation of these skills, taking critical thinking as an example, which should be present in all professional aspects.

Following this introduction, the participants were divided into four different groups to discuss the questions listed in the Summary (see above).

Petroni then invited each group to share the main points discussed.

Francesca Tranter, a dance professional, referred to an actual example from the Malta Dance Festival. As the festival’s artistic director, she proposes platforms for emerging artists and work. She added that the programme for 2024 was strong and many directors voluntarily expressed their interest in coming to watch the performances/artists. She remarked that networking is a highly important aspect and, thanks to that, the Malta Dance Festival is now on the international radar. She said that there are still many problematic issues, and that while they are honing good dancers, there are no full-time dance conservatoires locally to support them. She added that we are not supporting the craft of choreography enough. A lot more could be done to support this, especially by introducing the concept of working with dramaturgs who offers support and objectivity to the work. Because of these lacunae the work is good, but not good enough, she added. Francesca went on to state that mentorships could be a solution for anyone wanting to specialise in specific areas.

Ylenia Callus, of ACM, intervened and said that she wants arts management to feature more prominently and for further legal aspects on the visual, literature, and performing arts to be taught. She added that she would like to see government or private institutions dealing with artistic management/agencies taking off in the Maltese islands.

At this point of the conversation, Borg Wirth mentioned the ACM apprenticeship scheme and how this is very relevant for the industry. During the ensuing discussion, Rita Falzon, Head of Funding at ACM, mentioned that for this first round there were more hosts than apprentices applying, which offers further insight into the current status.

The conversation then focused on specialisation. Alex Weenink said that in theatre the concept of a dramaturg is gaining momentum but there is a general lack of creative producers. He added that there are many practitioners who are currently focusing on producing and directing, which is not necessarily negative. However, more specialisation is needed.

Julian Mallia pointed out that the pressure to juggle multiple roles limits deep expertise.²

The conversation returned to sustainability, and Tranter called for more writers and critics to provide feedback and bolster the arts ecosystem. There was a general consensus about this particular point.

Actor Antonella Axisa proposed incorporating internships and international placements within systems and to offer more opportunities for exchanges with international partners and collaborators.

Borg Wirth pointed out that maximising the potential of relationships with the diplomatic corps to achieve this is important.

In general, participants agreed on the need to leverage the power of internationalisation to continue pushing exchange to the top of the agenda. The Venice Biennale model was suggested as a best practice for broader application.

Parallel Session 3: Representation, Leadership, and Disability in the Performing Arts

Format: Thematic forum

Presenters: Angela Bettoni; Tyrone Grima; Ilona Baldacchino and Jo Butterworth (Opening Doors Association)

Summary

The presentation by Ilona Baldacchino and Jo Butterworth highlighted the achievements and mission of the Opening Doors Association, a Malta-based organisation dedicated to providing arts opportunities for adults with intellectual disabilities. Established 16 years ago, Opening Doors Association fosters inclusive practices that allow individuals with diverse needs to actively participate in creative arts, such as theatre, dance, and music. Reflecting on their progress, both of them acknowledged contributions from past and current artistic directors who shaped the organisation's inclusive model.

² The CCPS 2024 figures comparing 2019 to 2023 pertaining to the decrease in creators from 51% to 42%, that of performing from 19% to 17%, the increase in producers from 9% to 14%, with teaching and directing roles also rising, from 7% to 10% and 2% to 5% respectively, may be pertinent.

Opening Doors Association emphasises democratic, participant-centred training and approaches that value collaboration, communication, and active involvement. Artistic leaders, acting as facilitators, encourage members to explore their unique skills at their own pace. The organisation also promotes leadership through training, like the 'Train the Trainer' workshop led by founding director Lou Ghirlando, which covered essential skills for leading inclusive workshops.

Central to their philosophy is Penny Tenuto's article *Advancing Leadership: A Model for Cultivating Democratic Professional Practice in Education*.³ This article identifies five aspects of sharing purpose, data, expertise, leadership, and commitment in professional practice. This is applied to every level of the organisation. The words that are essential, they claimed, are community, collaboration, collegiality, empowerment, and commitment. Members of Opening Doors Association are now also involved in various roles within the organisation, including as board members and workshop leaders, showing the evolution of their responsibilities and engagement.

The presentation concluded with an appeal for further investment in inclusive arts, as Baldacchino and Butterworth see a growing interest in accessibility and community-based projects. They expressed hope for continued support to sustain and expand Opening Doors Association's impactful work.

Angela Bettoni's dissertation, presented under the guidance of her tutor Tyrone Grima, explores the integration of artists with learning disabilities in Malta's performing arts scene. Driven by her personal experience as a performer with Down syndrome, she examined how people with learning disabilities can counter ableism in Maltese arts. Through literature reviews and interviews with 18 stakeholders—including directors, performers, and ACM representatives—she identified both challenges and solutions in the following areas: education, training, professional practice, representation, emotional development, and awareness.

Key challenges include limited educational opportunities, resistance to adapt curriculums, societal prejudice, and a focus on technique over individual expression. Bettoni highlighted the need for equity over equality in education, creating inclusive spaces, and supporting educators to accommodate students with disabilities. Solutions focus on raising awareness, advocating for more representation, and providing tangible resources, such as support workers and funding for mixed-ability projects.

³ Tenuto, P. L. (2014). *Advancing Leadership: A Model for Cultivating Democratic Professional Practice in Education*, SAGE Open, 4(2). Available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014530729>.

Bettoni's recommendations include increased mixed-ability performances, wider dissemination of this research, and more training opportunities for performers with disabilities. She also noted her research's limitations, such as sample size and language barriers. Her interactive presentation culminated in a participant exercise to prioritise solutions, with the most popular choices focusing on training support, inclusive festival programming, and more visibility to this type of work in general.

In detail

The first part of this session consisted in a presentation by Opening Doors Association representatives, namely former artistic director Ilona Baldacchino and board member Jo Butterworth.

Their presentation provided some context about the association. Opening Doors Association is an arts organisation based in the Maltese islands that provides opportunities for adults with diverse intellectual needs, working for the active participation of adults with intellectual disabilities in creative experiences. In 2024, as the organisation was celebrating its 16th anniversary, Baldacchino and Butterworth wanted to reflect on the achievements of those whose careers demonstrate a deep interest in involving adults with learning disabilities in the performing arts, starting with a reflection on the different artistic directors who have led Opening Doors Association to its achievements and successes during these past years.

At this stage, they mentioned the availability of their edited book *Opening Doors to the performing Arts: Difference and Diversity*. This book contains two chapters by Lou Ghirlando, Opening Doors Association's founding artistic director who also initiated the theatre group and promoted international exchanges supported through European funds. Jo Butterworth then spoke about the artistic directors who followed Ghirlando, including Sandra Mifsud who introduced the dance group and who initiated integrated performances, Baldacchino, who led the team during the COVID-19 pandemic and introduced four inclusive productions, Sarah Amato, who added new dynamics through partnerships and collaborations, and Rachel Calleja, who has just become the new AD for the association as of September 2024.

As the only organisation of its kind in Malta, Opening Doors Association aligns with the ACM's mission to provide access to the arts for 'hard-to-reach' communities as well as those having different abilities. Through its programmes, the association strives to secure artistic projects for people with intellectual disabilities to participate in artistic and creative activities locally and abroad. Weekly workshops in theatre, dance, and music are offered to up to 50 participants, led by paid professional artistic leaders who work with paid assistants and volunteers. The artistic leaders all have professional skills, knowledge, and expertise in dance, music, and/or theatre.

To enhance the expertise of the creative team leading the Opening Doors Association members, the organisation initiated the Difference and Diversity: Leadership Training in the Performing Arts project in 2017, funded by the Creative Communities fund managed by Arts Council Malta. The primary aim was to find ways of developing expertise in leadership through a training and informal development programme.

This project led to an intensive symposium which was held at Spazju Kreattiv in Valletta, aimed at continuous professional development for staff, board members, and volunteers. The symposium featured lectures, workshops, and discussions led by international and local experts in disability and the arts, providing a platform to exchange knowledge on inclusive practices. The event brought different people with expertise in the field to share and exchange knowledge and good practice. Papers from the symposium were later published to document and share these insights. An important point which stood out was the relevance of sharing and engaging members in participative devising processes rather than sticking to old-school authoritarian and didactic approaches to teaching.

At this point of their presentation, Baldacchino and Butterworth focused on the fundamentals of inclusive practice in training and performance making, which emphasise the importance of collaboration, communication, and active participation. The approach may be defined as 'democratic', encouraging a two-way learning process and placing the performer at the centre where strengths, needs, personalities, and interests are acknowledged. These are the same principles which the artistic leaders at Opening Doors Association adopt throughout their work. In fact, the artistic team assumes the role of facilitators, taking a flexible and open approach in order to allow performers to develop their unique individual qualities, in their own time. 'Difference' as a concept should be central to all work. Inclusive practices embrace and understand the difference between the others. The presenters highlighted the key points for inclusive practice: a teaching approach based on democratic methods, active participation, knowledge of strengths and needs, methods of communication, time, repetition, adaptation and differentiation.

Baldacchino and Butterworth added that access to training for people with disabilities is also highly important. This is a fundamental first step which is then coupled by the frequency of such training. They then referred to the 'Train the Trainer' workshop organised in June 2023, led by Ghirlando, which explored the following important themes: the difference between being a performer and being a workshop leader, co-leading, working together on a planned structure, communication, responding to emerging needs of session participants, talking about disability, leading practices, as well as receiving feedback and reflection. Encouraging communication, openness and reciprocal understanding, this event led to a better understanding of the notion of leadership as a process of empowerment, nurturing, guiding and motivating.

The presenters mentioned how all the actions that develop at Opening Doors Association are based on the needs of the members. They make sure that the members are given the space to talk and discuss their needs regularly. They referred to a theory which is used as a main reference point for their work based on the aforementioned Tenuto article, the five tenets of which are applied to every level of the organisation. The words that are essential, they claimed, are community, collaboration, collegiality, empowerment, and commitment. This too is applied at every level of the association. As an organisation, they aspire to maintain these processes to work effectively and achieve common goals.

In their final part of the presentation, the presenters discussed the application of this conceptual model to Opening Doors Association artists in terms of their guidance, motivation, and empowerment. They questioned how this could support their skills development and provide them with the knowledge and confidence to teach or co-teach practical sessions, and to commit to shared responsibility. Jo and Ilona claimed that at this point it is important to acknowledge the social aspect as possibly one of the main motivators for attendance and commitment. Others might be more interested in engaging with the artistic aspect directly. The more the group grows, the more the needs change and vary. They also referred to the multiple roles which the association's members now have within the organisation: board members, writers, and workshop leaders.

Acknowledging the general growing interest in community projects as well as increased consideration for accessibility, Baldacchino and Butterworth claimed that Opening Doors Association has been involved in a number of outreach activities these past years, giving them the opportunity to share their practice. But this, they claim, is just the beginning. Their final remark is an active appeal for proper investment to support the continuation of this work in the long term.

The second part of the parallel session focused on Bettoni's dissertation, which she presented as part of her fulfilment of her Bachelor of Arts Degree at MCAST. Grima, Bettoni's tutor, made a brief introduction about the study and about his role in the project. He explained that Bettoni did her degree in creative arts, specialising in performance. As part of the module Critical Studies and Research Methods, students have to identify a focus area for their dissertation. Grima recounted how Bettoni was immediately set on an academic study about disability. She started her work by carrying out a literature review and then deciding to back up her knowledge further by carrying out interviews with a number of different stakeholders. She also felt that to further back up her study, she needed to juxtapose this literature with practices in the UK. Grima commented that Bettoni's work was not just excellent but highly relevant and should be taken further.

Bettoni described her motivation to take up her research. As a performer with Down syndrome, she wanted to explore training for young people with a learning disability, which is usually segregated. She remarked that it is not very common to have people with learning disabilities being represented on stage or TV in Malta. Her internships at Chickenshed Inclusive Theatre UK in 2019 and at Stopgap Dance Company in 2023 have further solidified her interest in the area and made her want to become an advocate for more inclusion and mixed ability on stage. Hence the research question: How can people with learning disabilities address and counter ableism in the performing arts in Malta?

The themes which surfaced during the literature review process were the benefits of inclusive arts, the current context in Malta for performers with intellectual disabilities, and challenges and solutions. In terms of challenges, Angela listed the following findings:

- A resistance to adapt to artists with learning disabilities in classes and to adapt the curriculum;
- Limitations due to the disability vs what is considered beautiful;
- Ignorance;
- Prejudice;
- Lack of knowledge;
- The perception that they are less artistically valid;
- The age factor (forced to stop when you reach a certain age);
- Perception, which means that in this case arts is practiced only for therapeutic reasons or for leisure;
- A general perception that resources are being wasted.

The solutions which were pointed out were as follows:

- Giving importance to the movement and quality of the performance, not the technique;
- People with disabilities need to be seen in a more holistic manner that transcends their disability;
- The need for awareness and change in attitudes;
- People with learning disabilities need to be recognised as capable professionals seeking and developing artistically in a career.

Bettoni described the methodology for her research which primarily consisted of a qualitative research study that included semi-structured questionnaires featuring a non-random selection of participants. She interviewed 18 stakeholders consisting of three theatre/dance directors, three artistic directors, five performers with a learning disability, six non-disabled performers, and a representative from ACM. She clearly demonstrated how she analysed the interviews and how these, then, led to themes being outlined. She proceeded to highlight the challenges and solutions for each theme identified.

EDUCATION**Challenges**

- Focus on equality, rather than equity;
- Very few opportunities for people with learning disabilities in higher education in Malta;
- Malta's education system does not empower people with disabilities.

Solutions

- Research project that includes people with disabilities as the researchers themselves;
- Education programmes for educators—how to teach students with learning disabilities in an inclusive way and provide for the needs of the students;
- Families need to be aware of opportunities;
- Education institutes can learn from the experiences of students with disabilities. This will help them realise what approaches are inclusive and how to make the educational system more aware of inclusivity.

"At the moment, it's very much an equality perspective if you see everyone as being the same. Actually, we really need to work from an equity perspective where we really meet people where they are according to their needs." – Julianne Schembri, Malta-based performer and dancer and Opening Doors Association Dance 2 tutor

TRAINING

Challenges

- At this stage, only Opening Doors Association caters for adults with disabilities. There is limited opportunity for mixed-ability experiences;
- High standards demanded in mainstream training programmes.

Solutions

- An approach based on equity. We need to make arrangements to accommodate students;
- Space for people with disabilities to be safe and supported in their training; giving them the time they need;
- Supporting teachers and access workers, as well as mentors;
- Raising awareness and educating other artists, practitioners and the general public;
- Constantly putting people with learning disabilities at the forefront, giving visibility.

"I think the curriculum per se of performing arts at school needs to be redone so it can accommodate the needs of people with different abilities and on different spectrums. Sometimes people struggle. Not every person with a disability can manage in one-size-fits-all scenario. That needs to be changed—also in performing arts schools. Maybe the possibility of also having learning support assistants as well." – Brandon Terribile, director and producer

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE**Challenges**

- Not enough opportunities for professional practice.

Solutions

- Incentives to produce more mixed-ability work;
- More specific funding schemes to increase accessibility;
- Persons with disabilities should also take the lead in creating performances in mixed-ability so they can become professional artists themselves;
- More theatre practitioners should take the initiative to be inclusive so there can be more mixed-ability performances being created and performed in Malta;
- Include persons with disabilities from the inception of the performance process;
- Professionals can create roles that are specifically for performers with learning disabilities.

“We need to increase the visibility of disabled artists in festivals, in mainstream programmes, on tour and in international collaborations. If we have under-represented minorities and under-represented genres, we have to take positive action to increase that visibility.” – Toni Attard, theatre director and creative industries specialist

REPRESENTATION

Challenges

- Not enough opportunities

Solutions

- Performing arts schools should be more welcoming for students with learning disabilities and integrate them;
- Representation should not just be there to tick a box—we need to make an effort with the casting.

“Get neurodivergent to take part in plays and musicals and so on. And get them to perform the one-act plays at MADC. And basically, they may take part in daily activities. I think people need to do musicals or plays that are purposely for neurodivergent people. Get them to take part in neurodivergent roles.” - Ann-Marie Buckle, young actor with autism

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Solutions

- Prepare the non-disabled cast members so they are more aware but encourage them to look beyond the label, to be a friend;
- More opportunities for non-disabled young performers to become exposed to performers with a learning disability;
- Create an environment that supports learning and development (safe, non-judgemental space);
- Non-disabled performers should be encouraged to be more accepting and willing to change their mindset.

“In an environment that best supports the learning and development of that person, I think that there’s never a limit on what can be achieved by anyone, actually. I believe that with solid work, commitment and encouragement and the constant stream of communication with each other, I think that anything can actually be achieved.” - Christian Brinklow, Senior Dance Artist and Artist Development, Stopgap Dance Company

SPREADING THE WORD

Challenges

- Not enough awareness amongst audiences about what mixed-ability shows have to offer.

Solutions

- More marketing and promotion of such shows and promotion by the performers themselves including the non-disabled performers;
- Presenting an inclusive piece in every festival (making this a norm in programming);
- To keep creating in different forms and by doing so inspiring new generations of artists with learning disabilities.

"We have to keep going. We have to keep creating and we have to create in different forms, not only festivals in theatres, but videos and photographs and advocating. We need to keep going and keep creating more of it and, in this way, we are going to inspire a generation of people with disabilities who see these performances and works and say, 'there's a place for me'. And we're gonna have a new wave, a new generation of artists. You know, it's going to keep growing." Rachel Calleja - choreographer, community artist and creative therapist

In her study, Bettoni also made some tangible recommendations for the future. In terms of research, she suggested interviewing a bigger sample of people and also including those without experience of mixed-ability performances. She suggested disseminating findings among funding bodies, theatre-makers, and performers. She also highlighted the need for more mixed-ability performing arts projects which include foreign collaborators to enable exchanges of good practice, providing more training opportunities for performers with a learning disability in Malta as well as plans to provide a support assistant or access worker if required. She also pointed out some of the limitations of her research, which included a limited and small sample, as well as not knowing the Maltese language and thus potentially excluding some people because of this factor or missing out on relevant documents in Maltese.

During the last part of the presentation, Bettoni proposed a short exercise inviting all participants to select the three most important solutions out of the solutions proposed. All those present were given some time to reflect on Angela's presentation and put their three stickers next to the three solutions they would prioritise out of all stickers.

The most popular choices were the following:

- Opportunities for performers with learning disabilities to train abroad, especially in mixed-ability companies. A support assistance/access worker should also be provided if required. (training);
- More marketing and promotion of mixed-ability and inclusive shows is needed, using both traditional media and social media and inviting other professionals (producers, directors) who can then share reviews (spreading the word);
- At every festival, organisers should try to make sure that there is at least one inclusive piece in order for this to become the norm (spreading the word);
- For representation to happen, it is essential that performers with learning disabilities are given the space and time they will need to learn and contribute (representation);
- More theatre practitioners should take the initiative to be inclusive, so that there can be more mixed-ability performances being created and performed in Malta (professional practice);
- We need to create more safe and non-judgemental spaces that support learning and development (emotional development).

Parallel Session 4: Valletta Liveability and the Uncommon

Format: Presentation and fieldwork

Presenters/Moderators: Graziella Vella and Valerie Visanich (Culture Venture)

The session took the form of a seminar led by Graziella Vella and Valerie Visanich. It addressed the question of how the communities of Valletta are being impacted by the recent acceleration in urban transformation of the city. Taking the impact of current change on Valletta communities, its shared spaces, and the city's cultural fabric as a starting point, the presenters introduced the concept of commoning and uncommoning, where resources such as public spaces that may have initially been considered as commonly owned are deducted from the common pool due to privatisation, resulting in the phenomenon of uncommoning. The introductory section of the session consisted of a five-part presentation: information about the urban context and its transformations; insights on the theoretical framework of commoning and uncommoning; an explanation of the methodological approach adopting a multisensory ethnography; notes on fieldwork efforts linked to this research; and reflections on research findings.

The commoning practices were presented as collective practices of the various communities inhabiting and making use of the city. Through dynamics characterised as uncommoning, these collective practices engage with a wider range of stakeholders and claimants of public space and resources. Through these encounters, contestation of place and tensions between different communities arise, manifesting a problematised multiplicity of interests.

On the methodological front, multisensory ethnography makes use of tools that engage with public space through walking, visuals, soundscapes, and related spatial interaction with the urban reality being researched. The research effort also opens up gaps and contrasts between the locals' observations and the tourist gaze of non-local visitors. Monitoring efforts as part of this research also indicate varying intensities of uses of the city and its spaces, depending on the predominance of the category of city users in specific times. The wider project consists of additional channels of research beyond ethnography, namely interviews, surveys, stakeholder meetings, and AI-assisted data capture.

The second and third part of the session invited participants of the seminar to carry out a brief fieldwork session with the aim of identifying commoning and uncommoning elements in the city streets and share the captured insights (mainly through photography) with the rest of the reconvened participants. In the discussion that ensued, participants shared their reflections on: streetscapes and the pervasiveness of vehicular presence; vistas and open panoramas that the urban space shapes from various points of view in Valletta, including the relation of the city to the sea; the presence and absence of biodiversity in the urban environment; the exercise of control of access to public access through various (para-)infrastructural interventions by both private and public agents; and the sanitisation and gentrification of sections of the city, predominantly for touristic consumption.

Parallel Session 5: Cultural Spaces: Enabling More Available, Accessible and Affordable Engagement

Format: Presentations and discussion

Presenters/Moderators: Marcon Borg Caruana; Andrew Borg Wirth (Office of the Archbishop's Delegate for Culture)

The session consisted of the presentation of two separate case studies, delivered respectively by Marcon Borg Caruana, focusing on her research on regional cultural engagement and technology, using the Valletta Design Cluster as her case study, and by Andrew Borg Wirth, focusing on the process of rethinking the role of the building housing the Catholic Institute in Floriana.

Borg Caruana started by introducing her research project which aimed at exploring the role of technology in fostering regional cultural engagement in Malta. Her findings include insights on how immersive technology can break barriers and increase access to cultural practice to a wider range of users. Concomitant to this effort, this approach advocates resource sharing and collaborative management of cultural resources. The role of digital tools is seen as contributing to facilitate access, opening opportunities for new experiences, and lowering the costs of access to these resources. There is here a direct link to commoning practices, mainly through the provision of shared resources and the creation of a community platform for the exchange of experiences and skills. The overall insight of the study led to an understanding of cultural spaces as commons, mainly viewed from the perspective of shared pools of resources, the emergence of an environment where collaborative creation can take place, the possibility to use such cultural spaces to address socio-economic challenges and disparities, and the enhanced opportunities for community participation.

The second part of the session consisted of a presentation of the initial work that creative director Borg Wirth has been engaged in vis-à-vis the repositioning of the Catholic Institute building in Floriana within Malta's cultural space. The assignment of this task was commissioned by the Office of the Archbishop's Delegate for Culture.

Borg Wirth introduced the project as a challenge on many levels. Divesting the venue from its associated uses over the years and the position that the activities and communities that made use of it gained in the cultural ecology of Malta, the starting point for this new positioning was identified as the bare existence of space as generative of agency. The building, erected in the 1960s, consists of around 6,000sqm of interior space. The engagement with this pure spatial value of the venue, which was (problematically for some) articulated as an occupation, is viewed as an opportunity to exercise a new form of agency within the national cultural sphere.

Given the nature of the space, the declared mission of its owners, and the commissioning interests for this initiative, it is inevitable that this mission also opens up questions relating to the Church's new role as a cultural player in a contemporary context. The speaker described the project brief as the creation of a space where people can experience beauty again.

However, this can be articulated further in more complex terms: how does one reconcile the clash of institutional and personal agendas inherent in such a commission? And furthermore, how does one fit the task of exploring the direction of institutional renewal with the possibilities for contemporary cultural practices that the space can offer, and this collocation within a globalised (and radically secular) cultural and artistic sphere. For now, the initiative has taken off without engaging so much with the building itself, using peripheral spaces and opening up smaller platforms to engage with practitioners with a view to gathering information, views, concerns, and perspectives on taking the project forward.

In the ensuing discussion with workshop participants, a number of questions were brought up on the commoning function of such cultural spaces. In the case of the Valletta Design Cluster, people felt that commoning practices might be better served by spaces and initiatives that are less tied to a controlling public entity and having facilities that address more optimally the specific needs of the various operators.

As regards the Catholic Institute, future efforts are envisaged to expand the brief to include exploring the use of the site's facilities, the devising of a dedicated programme, and activating the potential of people and networks coming together and putting life into the new vision. The discussion, in both contexts, picked up from a number of perspectives on the question of agency in the shaping of a common space. Participants also reflected critically on a number of facets of contestation experienced at such cultural sites, arising mainly from the confluence of private, public, and institutional interests.

Parallel Session 6: Moulding Connections in Clay: Rethinking Social Arts Practice through Play

Format: Clay workshop

Session leaders: Martina Camilleri and Raffaella Zammit (Gabriel Caruana Foundation)

“Clay responds to our stimulus. How do we affect it?”

The Gabriel Caruana Foundation, established in honour of the late Maltese artist Gabriel Caruana and his preferred medium of clay, highlights art’s role in fostering social connections. Based at The Mill in Birkirkara, it serves as an adaptive space where art engages with diverse groups, including artists, residents, and children. Grounded in the tactile experience of clay, the foundation uses art as both a method and a metaphor for cocreation.

A Metaphor for Community

Central to the workshop was exploring clay as a metaphor for community. Like community, clay is malleable, requiring care to take shape while retaining traces of every touch. This adaptability mirrors the evolving needs of social groups, highlighting resilience and shared vulnerabilities. The Moulding Clay project invited participants to embody this metaphor, shaping and reshaping collective ideas. As clay responded to their hands, it revealed the balance of individual expression and collective intention, encouraging deeper reflection on the interconnectedness of personal and communal identities. Through moulding clay—a medium that responds directly to touch—participants shaped and reshaped ideas, imbuing each piece with collective insights, concerns, and dreams.

Group Dynamics in Cocreation

The workshop’s emphasis on collaborative art making highlighted the complexities of group dynamics in co-creation, care, and community building. Participants navigated space, voice, and value, reflecting on how social constructs, such as gender, influence participation. Discussions revealed how dominant voices often shape group outcomes, prompting the exploration of strategies to ensure inclusivity. By engaging with clay—a medium that equalises through its tactile nature—participants found a shared language to address imbalances. Clay symbolised community: a malleable material, imprinted with each touch, reflecting shared vulnerabilities, resilience, and adaptability. The exercise emphasised listening and mindful sharing, fostering an environment where diverse contributions were equally valued.

Sustainability Challenges and Solutions

Sustainability emerged as a critical theme during the workshop, particularly in arts-driven social practice. Participants recognised the difficulty of maintaining meaningful, long-term relationships with communities when short-term funding cycles dominate the arts sector. Clay's reusability became a powerful metaphor, symbolising the need for adaptable, sustainable practices that evolve while preserving core values. Proposed solutions included cross-sector collaborations to diversify funding streams, enabling arts organisations to partner with industries beyond the arts. This approach could alleviate financial pressures and ensure continuity in community engagement. Clay's recyclability underscored sustainable social practice, as the material is remoulded, reused, and adapted to diverse contexts. By likening sustainability efforts to clay's cyclical nature, the workshop reinforced the idea that social practice must be flexible yet enduring.

Envisioning a Collective Future

The Wild Card table encapsulated the workshop's future-focused ethos, sparking discussions about Malta's potential as a leader in arts-driven social practice. Participants envisioned a cultural ecosystem prioritising inclusivity, adaptability, and long-term engagement. However, this vision was balanced by reflection: does Malta require a 'reboot' to build a truly inclusive arts sector? This question underscored the workshop's tension between aspiration and the realities of existing structures. The communal act of clay moulding became a microcosm for these broader discussions, reflecting the possibilities and challenges inherent in reshaping the sector.

Parallel Session 7: Cooperatives and Commoning: Empowering Transformation in Arts and Culture

Format: Presentation and discussion (workshop)

Speaker: Claudio Farrugia, Chief Executive Officer, Malta Cooperative Federation

The session explored the potential of cooperatives and commoning practices within the artistic and cultural sectors and how this can be applied to the Maltese context. It highlighted how cooperatives can improve the socio-economic status of creatives by fostering equity and community collaboration.

At its core, a cooperative is an autonomous association formed by individuals united to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs. Unlike traditional capitalist businesses that prioritise profit for investors, cooperatives focus on collective well-being and shared benefits. This model empowers artists and cultural workers, allowing them to harness their passions in a supportive environment.

Claudio Farrugia emphasised that in a world dominated by capitalist ideologies—exemplified by Milton Friedman’s assertion that a company’s sole aim is profit—cooperatives offer an alternative that prioritises community over competition. He illustrated this with the metaphor of the ‘big fish’ consuming the ‘small fish’, arguing that when creatives band together, they can compete effectively against larger entities.

He highlighted the resilience of cooperatives during the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that many cooperatives were less affected by job losses than traditional companies, showcasing their stability and community focus.

Historical Context and Ethical Principles

The cooperative movement traces back to the Rochdale Pioneers in 1844, who established a joint purchasing system to meet their needs. Their model generated profits that were reinvested into the cooperative and distributed among members, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment to the community.

Farrugia outlined the six ethical principles that guide cooperatives:

1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Member economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training, and information
6. Cooperation among cooperatives

These principles ensure that cooperatives remain true to their mission of serving the collective good.

Global Examples and Local Applications

Numerous cooperatives around the world show the potential of this model in the arts. For instance, the Smart Coop network (active in seven European countries with 40,000 members) supports artists by providing administrative assistance and ensuring fair payment practices. Currently, discussions are underway to establish a Smart Coop in Malta. Farrugia encouraged participants to get in touch if they were interested in joining this initiative.

Other examples are: Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative (Australia), The Actors Coop (USA), Coop Culture (Italy), ProNobis (Portugal) and Lilith (Finland). In Malta, two new art-oriented cooperatives are set to launch: No Barriers and Art Hive Cooperative.

How to build cooperatives in Malta:

1. Bring together individuals who share a common vision
2. Discuss the aims and desired outcomes of the cooperative
3. Evaluate whether the cooperative can sustain itself
4. Engage with the Malta Cooperative Federation: seek guidance and support for application processes and networking opportunities on various levels

Questions/ Comments

1. Britt Jürgensen: Is the federation looking at a housing cooperative?
 Claudio Farrugia: Not yet, but we're very keen to look into it as the housing situation is unaffordable, even for people who have a relatively decent wage. We're in discussions to do it but it is still in the early days.
2. Raffaella Zammit: Is the money that a coop makes reinvested in the cooperative or in any other type of market? How does it work?
 Claudio Farrugia: Cooperatives can adopt different models. Sometimes 50% is reinvested in the cooperative and the other 50% is distributed among the members. There's nothing stopping the cooperative from owning another one. Some social cooperatives don't distribute their 'surplus'. Cooperatives in Malta do not pay tax but a 5% contribution to the Cooperative Fund, which is then reinvested in the federations to help the dissemination of more cooperatives.
3. Raffaella Zammit: What about liabilities?
 John Mallia: It is just the same as companies. You are liable just for the assets of the body.

4. Alex Weenink: Coming from a theatre background, our services are different than that of a photographer or a designer. We create experiences. I'm trying to bridge the gap between the theatrical system and this.

Claudio Farrugia: A lot of people work on their own. If artists were in a coop, it will act as an agent and also take care of administration duties. Being in a cooperative doesn't mean it has to be your full-time job, but it can become so. It's about fulfilling your aspirations.

5. Raffaella Zammit: In Estonia, a lot of artists, ceramists, and designers are in cooperatives to access free healthcare. They also lobbied for space to be transformed into cultural hubs. The ceramics coop couldn't sell during COVID-19. So, they found a space, made a roster between themselves and started selling their work to earn an income. I believe cooperatives really work especially in the cultural sector. Can voluntary organisations or NGOs open a cooperative between them?

John Mallia: Currently, we are pressing hard to amend the current legislation so that voluntary organisations can also be owners of cooperatives as right now the legislation does not allow them to do business. The law was enacted in 2000, before the Voluntary Organisation Act had been enacted. However, the federation is there to make it happen and offers these services for free. It is also there to connect people who have the same intentions and help them join forces.

Parallel Session 8: Using Creative Thinking Methods for More Comprehensive Decision-Making and Problem-Solving

Format: Workshop

Session leader: Christine Seidu Xuereb

The workshop, facilitated by Christine Xuereb Seidu, introduced participants to Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats method. This structured approach to decision-making enables teams to systematically explore multifaceted issues by adopting specific modes of thinking, represented by six metaphorical hats. The method encourages collaboration by separating perspectives, reducing conflict, and fostering a balanced analysis of challenges and opportunities.

Participants applied the method to a hypothetical urban development scenario: the demolition of townhouses to construct high-rise flats. Divided into smaller groups, each representing one of the thinking hats, participants explored the scenario from distinct angles, demonstrating the method's practicality in addressing real-world issues.

The Blue Hat, representing process and organisation, set the parameters for the discussion. By establishing a clear framework and guiding transitions between perspectives, this group ensured the conversation remained focused on managing urban development in line with community goals. This highlighted the method's role in keeping complex discussions purposeful and structured.

The White Hat team examined facts and data, analysing the tangible consequences of the proposed development. They highlighted the environmental and infrastructural impacts, such as disruptions to ecosystems, reduced open spaces, and strain on local resources. This step underscored the importance of objective analysis in evidence-based decision-making.

Conversely, the Red Hat explored emotional responses, legitimising feelings like frustration over heritage loss and claustrophobia in denser urban spaces. Positive emotions, such as determination for civic engagement, also emerged, reflecting the power of activism in addressing unsustainable practices. This stage demonstrated the value of incorporating human perspectives into decision-making frameworks.

The Black Hat group focused on risks and potential pitfalls. They cautioned against profit-driven developments that could exacerbate social inequities, such as reducing access to affordable housing and nutritious food due to diminished farmland. This role illustrated the importance of anticipating challenges to ensure informed decision-making.

Balancing this, the Yellow Hat team emphasised opportunities. They explored how vertical construction could create multi-generational living options, maximise land use, and reduce maintenance costs. This optimistic perspective revealed the potential benefits of careful urban planning, showcasing how the method balances caution with positive thinking.

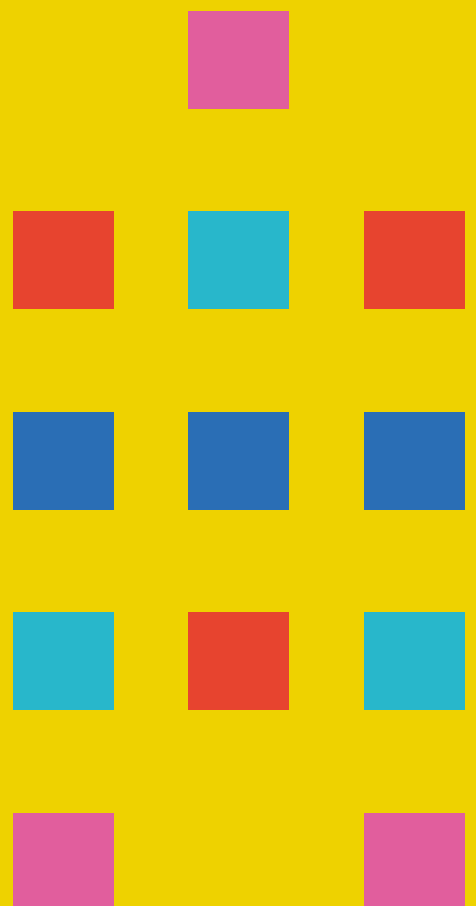
Finally, the Green Hat group generated innovative ideas, proposing sustainable solutions like underground parking, renewable energy integration, and green infrastructure to offset environmental impacts. Their creative input demonstrated how the method encourages actionable solutions that align with community needs.

The exercise culminated in a consensus: if high-rise buildings are unavoidable given the way current practices function, they must prioritise sustainability, aesthetics, and social equity while maintaining meaningful engagement with residents. This collective conclusion reflected the method's power to facilitate balanced, inclusive decision-making by integrating diverse perspectives.

The workshop revealed the Six Thinking Hats as a dynamic, adaptable tool for navigating multi-dimensional challenges. By isolating specific aspects of a problem and assigning them equal importance, the method fosters collaboration and mitigates biases. Participants noted its relevance not only to urban planning but to broader sectors requiring comprehensive, creative solutions.

In conclusion, the workshop demonstrated how decision-making processes that integrate creativity, caution, and collaboration can lead to sustainable and community-oriented outcomes. The Six Thinking Hats method equips teams to think holistically, ensuring decisions reflect the diverse needs and priorities of all stakeholders.

CONCLUSION



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Call to Action, Joe Gatt, Coeditor, Aphroconfuso

Joe Gatt has been, together with Lorraine Vella, the founder and coeditor of the online Maltese-language journal Aphroconfuso, since its launch in May 2023. Mr Gatt started by introducing the journal's ethico-aesthetic process of gestation. The emphasis on process, on maturation, on the implications of generative decisions that quickly sediment into genealogical legacies, and on radical open sourcing are indicative of the editorial stamp of the journal and of the self-conscious contribution of this relatively new online phenomenon. Incidentally, the first hardcopy anthology of works published over the first year of the journal's existence was due to be released in the days immediately following the Arts Council Malta symposium.

Sustaining the momentum of this effort defined the central call to action of this intervention. The sustainability of this initiative is essential for nurturing ideas that grow and evolve through dialogue among contributors and readers. The tools adopted in this effort built on familiar skills gained by the editorial team and its wider circle of collaborators over the years, and the technology adopted through open source serves as the platform for the website to be administered by the publishers-editors themselves. Taking an assets-based approach to the local literary scene, the editors thought not in terms of what is lacking but on what can be done at this stage, building on the available knowledge and practices present in Malta's publishing scene.

The effort builds in turn on reflections linked to the long process of privatisation and restricted use of commons (land/territory) in Malta, going back centuries, and leading to the familiar landscape of small parcelled privately owned land and its restrictions in terms of common use. Switching away from such naturalised decommoning processes takes time and effort. Reflection on the gradually restrictive historical unfolding of (de)commoning practices in Malta highlights the need for a greater awareness of the material conditions and contingencies of existing structures, with a view to exploring and enacting ethical counter-considerations to such entrenched tendencies.

The grafting of creative agency onto platforms that sustain, and are sustained by, commoning practices are multifaceted in the case of Aphroconfuso. The web platform for the journal skirts the major and dominant players and allows for self-hosted servers, with the avoidance of capitalist surveillance practices in terms of unsolicited digital harvesting of users' data. The journal's supporting software and hardware are also sourced from open and non-corporate environments. The editors are conscious of the proactive, generative contribution of their efforts, being in the process of sharing publication text and editorial methodologies, with a view to lowering the hurdles to newcomers in the field of digital publication. This in turn allows for the journal to benefit from collaborative open-source community engagement through augmented, improved, altered, and updated protocols, which can result in an improved experience for the users.

The greatest asset and raw material, pertaining intrinsically to the commons, is the language itself. Referencing philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's argument against the existence of private language, the editors affirm language as necessarily social, shared, and common. Through an understanding of language as a shared platform of exchange, and through the responsible access to translated works in an effort to affirm the dynamism of language as a living heritage, the journal opens a space for the joint and collaborative exploration of Maltese, including a space for the testing of technical terminology over time and in a community of interlocutors.

Beyond the use of terminology, the journal also features explorations of genre categories, allowing for form to take shape organically without stylistic pre-determination, and opening up a space for a collective struggle and collaboration with form and genre.



FINAL SYNTHESIS



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This report on the National Symposium 2024 on the State of the Arts highlights key trends, connections, and tensions in Malta's Cultural and Creative Sectors (CCS). Major trends to have emerged include the emphasis on commoning practices to improve socio-economic conditions for artists, and the focus on accessibility and inclusivity in the arts. Connections are drawn between community engagement and sustainable practices, showcasing how collaborative efforts can address systemic issues. Tensions arise from the socio-economic challenges faced by artists, including financial instability and burnout, and the struggle for recognition and support within the broader societal and political context.

The report also reveals divergences of thought on the effectiveness of support schemes for artists, with some participants highlighting benefits like risk-taking opportunities, while others noted stigma and isolation issues. Other divergences apply to the effectiveness of support schemes for artists, with some participants highlighting benefits like risk-taking opportunities, while others noted stigma and isolation issues. Additionally, there are differing views on commoning practices: while many see it as a solution to socio-economic challenges, some expressed concerns about its practicality and the need for more structured support systems. Approaches to inclusivity also varied, with some advocating for grassroots, community-led initiatives, and others emphasising the need for top-down policy changes and institutional support.

Furthermore, opinions on the role of technology in fostering cultural engagement were mixed: some saw it as a vital tool for increasing access and participation, while others were cautious about its potential to create new barriers or exacerbate existing inequalities. These divergences highlight the complexity of addressing the needs of Malta's CCS and the importance of considering multiple perspectives in policy and practice.

Significantly, one of the main legacies public events like the symposium deliver is asking oneself the question what, in tangible terms that may be followed up, will be the main outcomes. Even when consensus is not apparent, the divergence of perspectives, when harnessed, may inform long-sighted policy.

The main elements, consisting of themes, trends, and connections emerging from this symposium are collected below. Furthermore, they are contributing to the formulation of the upcoming strategy cycle of Arts Council Malta (ACM), Strategy 2030, by informing a series of action points, tasks, measures, initiatives, and KPIs, assessed against risk factor and cost, over the span of 5 years, namely between 2025 and 2030.

The key action points consisted of the implementation of the Charter of the Status of the Artist, identifying the best ways of addressing commoning practices, enabling effective communication through advocacy and nurturing a critical environment, contributing towards the sustainability of the CCS by balancing support towards the sector with enabling greater independence, and strengthening the efficiency and impact of funding.

Furthermore, supporting the Right to Culture, enabling further synergies between public, private, and civil society stakeholders, acknowledging the importance of the identities forming a particular ecosystem, making infrastructural and research resources more accessible, and extending a culture of empathy, ethics, and care to the way we engage with our social, natural, and digital environments, were some of the main threads that spun a common narrative that ACM has committed itself to following up.

In conclusion, the 2024 Symposium underscored the need for supportive policies, intersectoral collaboration, and public understanding of the arts' value to foster a resilient and inclusive cultural society.

Credits

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STATE OF THE ARTS

MALTA NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM 2024

