



Multidisciplinary readings of photography

A new book edited by Carmel Borg and Raphael Vella from Malta presents over 150 photographs of contemporary Maltese society. Each photograph is interpreted in a short essay or story by an academic, practitioner or author from a different disciplinary background – the contributors, in fact, include artists, architects, sociologists, educators, anthropologists, writers, musicologists, journalists, philosophers, and poets. In this interview, journalist Teodor Reljic asks one of the editors, artist and academic Raphael Vella a few questions about the aims of such a collection of writings and images.

What prompted you to collaborate on the book?

The two co-editors (Carmel Borg and myself) work in the same Faculty of Education at the University of Malta. We had been discussing the possibility of a sort of cultural studies, cross-disciplinary approach to Maltese contemporary social life and imagery for quite a while. But the book definitely also benefitted from many discussions with several other people who contributed to this book in various ways.

The book seems to operate on a mix of reportage - perhaps with a slightly 'anthropological' bent - and a creative interpretation of contemporary Maltese society. How did you go about negotiating this balance?

We decided from the start that we did not want to locate the book very clearly within the parameters of a specific discipline. We wanted to show that there are different possible approaches to 'reading' photographic images and different approaches to interpreting society and social phenomena. In fact, we decided that literature should sit alongside other kinds of writing that are normally associated more with the social sciences. This is why we asked writers of literature like Immanuel Mifsud, Adrian Grima, Trevor Zahra and Clare Azzopardi to contribute short stories written specifically for the book 'Shooting Society'. Then, many essays were written by academics who belong to other fields, such as anthropology, philosophy, sociology, architecture, youth studies, education, fine arts, musicology and theatre studies. And, while the majority of the writers are Maltese, there are also a handful of international contributors who have dedicated at least part of their research to the study of Maltese society, such as Jon Mitchell, Gary Armstrong and Elise Billiard.

As for the photographs, we asked primarily for images of contemporary life in Malta, including some more unusual facets of smaller sub-cultures. Clearly, some photographers who work or have worked in journalism were particularly useful in building a good image bank because of the documentary nature of their work. But in the book there are also many images that have a more artistic or conceptual aim, as well as a few snapshots that were included mainly for their social significance.

What went into the selection of the photographers and writers? Did you have a brief in mind from beforehand or did you adjust your editorial approach as you went on foraging for contributors?

There are over seventy contributors in this book, so we can safely say that the book does attempt to be very inclusive! We started off by collecting many different images, then we tried to link specific writers to individual images. Writers occasionally asked us to see other images they could write about, and we obliged. As the essays started to pour in, we started to take note of areas that were still missing and contacted photographers and writers to help us out. Towards the end of this process, we could take editorial decisions about chapters and the general layout of the book. The chapters and chapter titles are not intended to 'pigeon-hole' essays or photographs, but to offer suggestions for possible mental or visual links between the works of different contributors. Hence, a chapter like 'Desire' could refer to sexual desire but can also refer to the fetishistic things we own or would like to own. A chapter like 'Spaces' includes essays by architects but also deals with the more political dimensions of public space.

What do you think the book says about Maltese society as a whole? Do you think it's at all possible to pinpoint any concrete, recurring cultural characteristics?

We hope that the book shows that it is becoming increasingly difficult to pinpoint a very specific, 'Maltese' identity. Malta is a rather dynamic and complex country, with established traditions that are evident in parts of this book (such as the 'festa', Maltese traditional song like 'ghana' and so on), but also more recent phenomena that different communities feel strong associations with, such as popular music, contemporary art and theatre. We also included references to Maltese communities abroad, in Australia, the USA and Canada, as well as groups that exist here yet are not well-integrated, such as immigrants. The book

also brings to light individuals' perspectives and narratives, to avoid simplifying things by treating them only at the macro level.

Do you think Maltese society is better poised for this kind of self-examination now than it perhaps may have been a few years ago? If so, why?

Yes, this is definitely the case. There are different reasons for this: globalisation, increased mobility, education (especially higher education), information technologies.